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## *“The Lerndesigner-Network as Professional Learning Community of Change Agents”*

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### **Introduction**

#### **The Change Agent Initiative “Lerndesigners” in Austria’s Lower Secondary School Reform**

The Austrian school reform initiative “New Secondary School” (NMS) which began in 2008 in 67 pilot schools has since led to a mandated school reform, which will be completed in phases by 2018. The initial goal of the NMS pilot was to foster innovative learning environments and increase equity in the lower secondary. An external consultant group for guiding the pilot phase (NMS-EB: *NMS-Entwicklungsbegleitung*) was hired by the Ministry in 2008. The NMS-EB initiated and implemented networks and communities of practice on all system levels, whereby the focus was on school principals and Lerndesigners a new teacher leadership role which should provide leverage for school reform, i.e. the role of change agent. The rationale was clear and focused: school reform must be addressed on the school level to be effective and change agents require networking and communities of practice.

Each NMS designates a member of the teaching staff to be the Lerndesigner, who attends national and regional network meetings and qualification programs (*Lernateliers*) as well as local networking events. The role of the *Lerndesigner* was a massive system intervention in a school system in which schools have a flat hierarchy and the autonomy-parity pattern (Lortie 1975) dominates. At the same time, the *Lerndesigners* were and are important change agents for school reform. Each *Lerndesigner* created his or her own role in the context of his or her school through processes of role-taking and role-making. To strengthen the role and foster innovation, school principals were also invited to a national network meeting each semester in which they could address their own leadership issues and shared leadership with the new *Lerndesigners* as a change strategy on the school level.

In April 2012 the NMS was mandated by the Austrian Parliament and a new phase of reform implementation begins with the 2012/13 school year. To sustain positive change and foster learning environments which are equitable and challenging for all NMS lower secondary pupils, the Ministry of Education, Culture and Arts has implemented a National Center for Learning Schools (CLS).

The primary objectives of the CLS are to:

- sustain and foster school networks and communities of practice,
- develop change agents through qualification programs, symposia and networking,
- integrate findings from current learning research in the NMS environment to development strategies,
- disseminate next practice insights and examples online and in print,
- support change processes in teacher education to meet the goals of the NMS,
- exploit system-wide synergy potentials,
- provide support for policy and program development.

### Questions to be explored

The purpose of this submission is to explore the two primary reform strategies of the NMS, *Lerndesigners* as change agents, and the national NMS School Network. The overall question guiding this submission is —How can innovation be sustained as the reform pilot phase moves into the implementation phase?|| Specific questions include:

- How can the quality of national qualification programs and networking events be sustained and improved when transferred to system partners (*Pädagogische Hochschulen*)?
- How can the NMS school networks be strengthened?
- How can change agents be kept up-to-date and linked with the community of practice on the national level?
- How can the impact of change agents at the school level be assessed?
- How can shared leadership as a strategy for quality development be fostered?
- How can the role of the *Lerndesigner* be secured in the system?

## 1. Aims

The fundamental aim of the *Lerndesigner*-Network is to foster the development of effective learning environments at each school, driven by the principle of school-specific reform (Marzano 2003) and focused on the goal of equity. The strategy lies in qualifying teachers to become teacher leaders, thereby enabling them and their schools to realize effective shared leadership. DuFour (2002) argues that the central task of school leaders is to foster the disposition and structure of Professional Learning Communities. More than ever before, school leadership needs to focus on student achievement and foster a culture of learning throughout the school. Barth (2005) points out, however, how complex and demanding the concept of “learning schools” is:

*“Our school is a ‘community of learners!’ How many times do we see and hear this assertion, now so common in public schools? This is an ambitious promissory note, indeed. The promise, is, first, that the school is a ‘community’, a place full of adults and youngsters who care about, look after, and root for one another and who work together for the good of the whole - in times*

*of need as well as times of celebration. I find that precious few schools live up to this mantle of “community”. Many more are simply organizations or institutions. As if ‘community’ were not enough to promise, a ‘community of learners’ is much more. Such a school is a community whose defining, underlying culture is one of learning. A community of learners is a community whose most important condition for membership is that one be a learner - whether one is called a student, teacher, principal, parent, support staff, or certified staff. Everyone. A tall order to fill. And one to which all too few schools aspire, and even fewer attain.”*

In addition to teacher leadership, the qualification program for *Lerndesigners* developed and refined over three years in response to pilot schools’ needs comprises six development areas deemed essential for fostering change in the learning culture realized in each subject, in each lesson of the NMS:

- mindfulness of learning (Schatz 2009)
- difference and diversity
- competence orientation
- “backwards design”, curriculum development (Wiggins & McTighe 2005, 2007, Tomlinson & McTighe 2009)
- differentiated instruction (Tomlinson 2003, 2010)
- assessment

*Lerndesigners* attend a two-year national qualification program, which enables them to gain theoretical and practical insights in the six areas, to develop with one another the knowledge and skills necessary for them to be effective in their own schools as teachers and teacher leaders, and to network with other *Lerndesigners*.

While a profile for the role of the *Lerndesigner* is distributed to school principals, the actual nomination for the role is not formalized, in large part due to the fact that the function is not yet secured in the system. As a result, teachers come to this teacher leader role more or less informed, more or less personally motivated and more or less with the mandate of the whole school. Nonetheless fluctuation is relatively low (under 10%), possibly indicating that the selection process itself is most effective when handled according to a school’s specific needs and culture.

The lack of formalization is primarily due to the fact that although it is considered by all to be essential and it receives the support of the local school authorities the role of the *Lerndesigner* is not firmly established in the national and local salary schemes. Solutions for paying *Lerndesigners* for their work vary according to the state province (*Bundesland*) and the school. The willingness of school principals and local authorities to ensure payment varies significantly and the Federal Ministry can only do so to a limited extent without the agreement of teacher unions to reform salary schemes in such a way that teacher leadership roles are acknowledged. This is an open issue which has yet to be satisfactorily resolved. Nonetheless, the Ministry has attempted to provide modest supplementary payments for *Lerndesigners* by revising regulations regarding which functions qualify.

## 2. Leadership and Partners

The main leadership of the *Lerndesigner*-Network was the Minister of Education, Dr. Claudia Schmied, who initiated the NMS school reform, and Dr. Helmut Bachmann, who was the NMS project leader and has since become head of the Department for Secondary School I and Polytechnic Schools at the Ministry. The implementation of the strategy was initially in the hands of the external consultancy team NMS-EB and has since been transferred to the newly created National Center for Learning Schools, established to ensure continuity in system development now that the new school form has been mandated. Partner institutions from the beginning included local school authorities, university colleges of teacher education (*Pädagogische Hochschulen*), Thomas Nárosy of Education Group, the Leadership Academy in Austria, and the University of Innsbruck.

The NMS project is carefully linked with other education initiatives in Austria, including the implementation of standards (“BiSta”) under the leadership of Mag. Augustin Kern, Deputy Director General of Directorate I, and school quality development for compulsory schools (“SQA”) led by Mag. Edwin Radnitzky as well as diversity and equity measures in various areas including gender, integration and special needs under the leadership of Dr. Rüdiger Teutsch at the Ministry. Close cooperation with Mag. Helmut Stemmer has ensured that strategies for online community-building and learning have strengthened individuals and networks, while cooperation with Mag. Silvia Wiesinger, responsible at the Ministry for continuing education resources at the *Pädagogische Hochschulen*, has ensured a smooth transition of the *Lerndesigner* qualification program to these institutions, despite its nature of prototype.

An extensive evaluation of the NMS pilot was planned for school year 2012/13, in order to attain data for evidence-based political decision-making. Because the new school form was mandated earlier than expected, the data from this evaluation will be used to improve development efforts during the implementation phase. This evaluation will be conducted as planned by BIFIE (*Bundesinstitut für Bildungsforschung, Innovation & Entwicklung des österreichischen Schulwesens*), the testing and assessment organization responsible for standards development and testing in Austria. Each year of the NMS pilot, smaller, qualitative studies were conducted by BIFIE’s research center in Graz, Austria, headed by Dr. Werner Specht up to 2011, succeeded by Mag. Erich Svecnik, in cooperation with the Evaluation Committee (*Evaluationsverbund*) comprising representatives from local school authorities in all state provinces. The studies are conceptualized with the committee so that they can be oriented to their development questions and provide desired data. A qualitative survey of *Lerndesigners* was conducted on behalf of the committee by BIFIE in spring 2012 and the data are currently being analysed; a report is expected by November 2012.

In addition, the Center for Learning Schools is advised informally by Dr. Carol Ann Tomlinson of the University of Virginia and is closely linked with the University of Innsbruck’s Center for Learning Research with its international network of research partners. Learning research conducted by the University of Innsbruck in NMS Generation 2 schools<sup>1</sup> is integrated in the qualification program for *Lerndesigners* and methods for working with so-called —vignettes|| were developed within the *Lernateliers* and published as protocols for Professional Learning Communities (Schratz et al, 2012). Two

<sup>1</sup> “Personal Development Processes in Heterogeneous Classrooms”, funded by FWF || P 22230-G17, <http://www.lernforschung.at/?cont=prodetail&id=%2031>

CLS staff members (Tanja Westfall-Greiter and Birgit Schlichtherle) are doctoral candidates in the above-mentioned research project. The CLS also integrates research interns working toward Master degrees at other institutions. A study of *Lerndesigners'* learning in the *Lernateliers* based on the vignette methodology developed at the University of Innsbruck was conducted in 2012/13 by Michael Kahlhammer, a CLS staff member, who is currently analyzing the data as part of his master thesis at *Pädagogische Hochschule St. Gallen* (Switzerland).

Further, the curriculum developed for the *Lerndesigner* qualification program (*Lernateliers*) has been recognized by the Development Board of Teacher Education NEW (*Entwicklungsrat zur PädagogInnenbildung NEU*), a joint board of the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Science, headed by Dr. Andreas Schnider, and has formed the basis of new Master degree programs and the new curriculum guidelines for lower secondary teacher education at university colleges of teacher education (*Pädagogische Hochschulen*). These new curricula to meet the needs of the new school form are to go into effect in 2013/14. The recognition and integration of the six qualification areas for *Lerndesigners* in these broader contexts has led to synergetic strengthening in all reform efforts. In the same spirit, connections and synergies among the three primary reform initiatives of the Ministry in the lower secondary – standards, school quality development and NMS, are being identified and communicated to all actors in the system to enhance effectiveness and impact.

### 3. Strategies and activities

The qualification program for *Lerndesigners* lasts two years and is designated with 12 ECTS. The qualification occurs parallel to the implementation of the new school reform at their schools sites. The program consists of national and regional *Lernateliers* for networking and qualification purposes as well as self-study which is conducted on-line and includes practice-based tasks for exploration in school-based Professional Learning Communities, which the *Lerndesigners* initiate. As of the 2012/13 school year, this program is a joint effort between CLS on the national level (responsible for national *Lernateliers*) and the *Pädagogische Hochschulen* (responsible for regional *Lernateliers*). The network meetings initially designed for school principals only, have been replaced by joint national *Lernateliers* with the *Lerndesigners*. This “dynamic development duo”, as it has come to be called in the diction of the reform project, has been recognized as key for the *Lerndesigners* to become effective change agents. The strategy of inviting “duos” to network meetings, first trialed in the 2011/12 school year, has proven more effective in strengthening shared leadership between school principals and *Lerndesigners*, confirmed by participants’ positive feedback.

In addition, a strategy for maintaining the NMS network with Generation 1 and 2 schools, whose qualification programs had concluded on the national level, was first piloted in January 2012 in the form of two symposia. *Lerndesigners* were invited with their school principals (dynamic development duos) to attend a two-day symposium in which they could update their information and attend workshops related to NMS goals and development topics. The participants’ feedback was overwhelmingly positive and these symposia will be offered in December 2012 for Generations 1-3. Due to the size of the target group, three symposia for roughly 250 participants each will take place in eastern, central and western Austria.

Beyond face-to-face events, communication and feedback are conducted primarily online, a strategy which has been developed closely with Thomas Nárosy of Education Group, a private company contracted by the Ministry to provide digital infrastructure and system development initiatives in the field of eLearning, digital media and online networking. The NMS development is supported by an online platform, comprising over 300 eduMoodle courses. In addition, an online NMS-library is being developed and will be implemented by December 2012. The *Lerndesigner* qualification program will also be conducted partly online at the Virtual Campus of the university colleges of teacher education.

Because the NMS-EB culture and those responsible at the Ministry have focused especially on relationship-building, individuals from NMS schools, local school authorities and *Pädagogische Hochschulen* are also in direct contact via Email with members of CLS and the NMS Project Team at the Ministry when questions or problems arise. This is at once a strength and a weakness. Personal relationships enable targeted support, but a lack of staff makes it difficult to manage, particularly in phases where new information and requirements lead to a wave of individual questions. National meetings with school authorities, regional development teams and programme developers of the *Pädagogische Hochschulen* also take place biannually. Cooperation for the development of the qualification programme for *Lerndesigners* is established with responsible programme directors and takes place face-to-face as well as online.

#### 4. Resources

It is impossible to provide exact data regarding the financial resources which had a direct impact on the establishment of the *Lerndesigner* network, because the resources of many existing organizations and institutions in the education system were dedicated to specific aspects of the project. Technological resources for national networking via the NMS eduMoodle platform were provided by Education Group using already contracted resources. In addition, local school authorities and *Pädagogische Hochschulen* dedicated staff and professional development funds within their system resources for the NMS pilot.

Financial data available on the national level showing funding directly related to the development of the *Lerndesigner* network and qualification program indicate an investment of EURO 990,000, the costs from 2008-2012 for the external consultancy NMS-EB. Included in this amount is not only the *Lerndesigner* network. The NMS-EB also created and fostered networks of other change agents in the system, including local school authorities, staff at *Pädagogische Hochschulen* und school inspectors on the district level. Also not included are overhead costs as well as travel and accommodation for participants at networking events and *Lernateliers*.

#### 5. Development over Time

The pilot reform began in the 2008/09 school year after a year of preparation on the part of the Federal Minister of Education, Dr. Claudia Schmied, and her team. Although initially the plan was to make a

political decision regarding its viability as a school reform in 2012/13, the reform was mandated in April 2012. Table 2 below shows the growth of the project through Generation 5, which begins in 2012/13. As of 2012/13 there are 698 NMS sites, over half of the lower secondary.

The Ministry hired an external consultancy (NMS-EB) for guiding system development during the first reform pilot year. This structure existed for the first four years. In February 2010, the decision was made to take strategic action to ensure continuity in system development and the National Center for Learning Schools (CLS) was established. The CLS structures and activities were defined during the 2011/12 school year so that it could begin in full on September 1, 2012, when the contract with the NMS-EB ended.

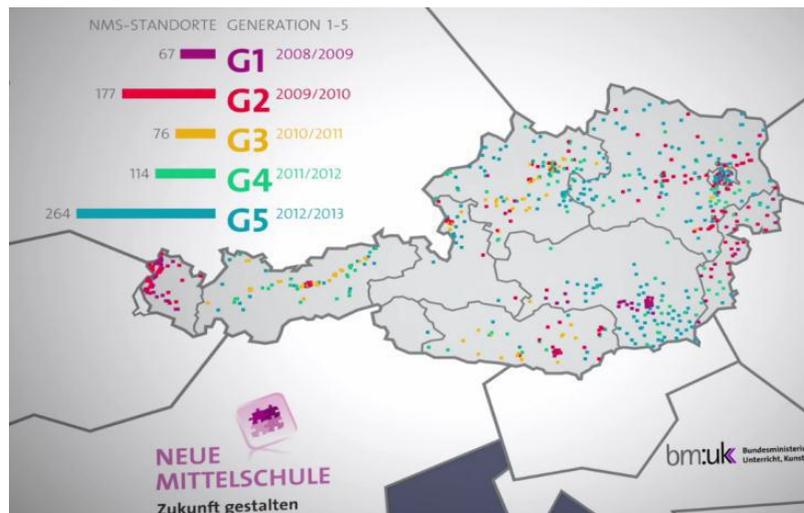


Table 2: NMS-sites and their geographic distribution, Generations 1 – 5

## 6. Evidence of effectiveness and efficiency

An informal survey of Generation 2 and 3 *Lerndesigners* June 2010 revealed how the role was developing (Westfall-Greiter & Hofbauer 2010). Second and third generation *Lerndesigners* were asked to write a one-minute essay on the question, “What does a *Lerndesigner* do?” Responses were clustered and revealed their roles as that of teacher leaders acting in shared leadership with school principals as well as that of change agents:

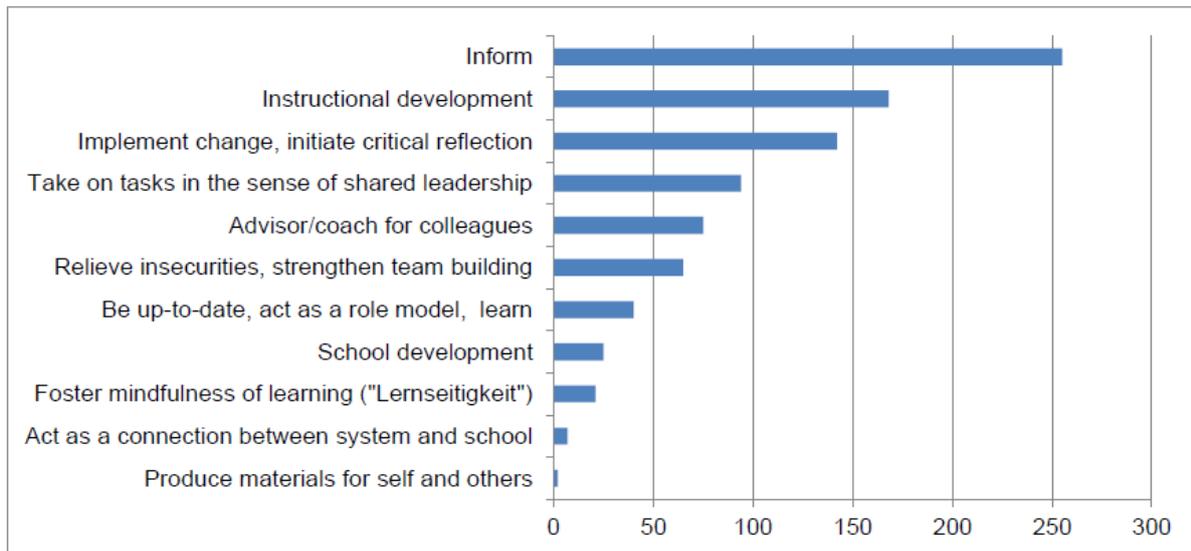


Table 1: What does a Lerndesigner do? (Westfall-Greiter & Hofbauer 2010, our translation).

As one *Lerndesigner* of Generation 2 put it, “The *Lerndesigner* prepares the soil upon which the seeds of the new learning culture and assessment are planted.” At the same time, the newness of the role brought with it uncertainty. By the end of the second year of the reform pilot, *Lerndesigners* had become important partners in school for asking questions and solving problems. As a *Lerndesigner* in Generation 3 at the beginning of the qualification programme advised others: “Listen when colleagues come with problems, Try to find solutions. Don’t give up or get tired of asking questions. (Has something changed for the better? If not, why? – How can that work?)”

Nonetheless, the new role was not easy for some *Lerndesigners*, as a Generation 2 teacher indicated: “The *Lerndesigner* is a difficult role at my school. I see my role in being a good example. Slowly the term is no longer being laughed at. Slowly the colleagues see that I do things differently. Slowly even questions are being asked – ‘How do you do that...?’” (Westfall-Greiter & Hofbauer 2010, our translation).

As indicated above, the results of a qualitative survey conducted by BIFIE are expected in November, as well as insights gained from the research project conducted by a master degree candidate. There is evidence that the “creative disturbance” created by the *Lerndesigner* role enhanced innovation and there is system-wide acceptance for their work. Nonetheless, to be effective change agents it is essential that their role continues to be strengthened, their qualifications recognized and their networking sustained so that new NMS sites have access to the experience and innovation of the first generations.

## 7. Success Factors

The NMS initiative has a long political history in Austria, driven by the issue of equity in the school system, which has also been the focus of development recommendations in OECD national reports on Austria. The success of the NMS project is due to the political commitment of the Federal Minister of

Education, Dr. Claudia Schmied, and the NMS Project Team at the Ministry. The success factors of the reform pilot are, on the other hand, difficult if not impossible to identify. In part, the time was ripe for many teachers and school principals in lower secondary. The Minister also personally travels to each state province at regular intervals for dialog events with system players, which have a positive integrative impact and serve to strengthen the determination to reform the lower secondary sector. NMS coordinators were nominated by the school authorities in each state province; regular meetings between them and representatives of the Ministry as well as their close integration in setting up guidelines for development work across the country and a high degree of transparency created a strong sense of commitment and identification with a common goal. This commitment remained steadfast despite various disturbance factors from opponents to the structural reform process towards which reform efforts were oriented. In addition, the parents' network which emerged after a survey of parents as to their contentment with NMS pilot schools in 2009/10 has been strengthened through newsletters and an online platform as well as a Hotline service run by the NMS Project Team at the Ministry.

The power of national networking and change agents are generally seen as keys to the success, but these claims have yet to be supported by data. The NMS-EB focused on networking on all system levels, so that by the second year of the pilot the reform project gained significant momentum and it became clear by the third year that the reform spirit could not be dampened. This seems to have been one reason why the school reform was mandated earlier than planned, a year before the planned evaluation of the NMS reform pilot.

Factors related to the success of the *Lerndesigner* network are more easily identifiable:

- The online platform for *Lerndesigners* enables easy communication and exchange of ideas and innovations across the country
- Regular networking events in which qualification is embedded build identity, professionalism and confidence
- Personal support and easy access to expertise build trust

## 8. Tensions and impediments

The primary success factors for the development and implementation of the *Lerndesigner*-role as well as the creation of a strong school network were:

- the financial commitment of the Ministry to enable national network meetings and qualification programs
- cooperation and commitment of key players in the Ministry to ensure the linking of development strategies with other central reform projects, initiatives and institutions
- an independent external consultancy which focused on system development and initiated system interventions from outside following the strategy of “presencing the future” (Scharmer 2009)
- the personal commitment and relationship skills of the consultants

There were many challenges to successful introduction of the intervention, in particular acceptance and cooperation on the part of system partners at all levels. The *Lerndesigner* role and establishment of shared

leadership was a voluntary matter; if schools chose not to participate, nothing could be done because the external consultancy had no formal authority. The partnerships and support of the local school authorities were invaluable in this regard; their strong recommendation and in some cases mandating of participation within the scope of their local competence led to a high participation rate on the part of the schools. Trust on the personal level had a clear impact on this aspect of success.

Strong partnerships with *Pädagogische Hochschulen* developed and are still developing over time. This is in large part due to the fact that a year prior to the introduction of the NMS pilot, university colleges of teacher education had undergone a complex restructuring process that fully engaged much of their resources. Nonetheless, all of the publicly funded colleges were allocated special funds for providing continuing education programs to support the NMS pilot. This earmarking of resources was a primary success factor for ensuring that local continuing education programs and school development resources were available to support the needs of NMS pilot sites. In some cases, the content was not necessarily coherent with the national networking content, which led to tension and confusion on the part of schools.

Earmarked budgeting and a tight reporting system governing the funding of the university colleges on the part of the NMS Project Team in the Ministry plus the setting up of regional development teams consisting of representatives from local school authorities and from the university colleges of teacher education in the province have improved coherency and effectiveness. Staff and school developers are becoming more and more integrated in the reform work on the national level. In addition to local meetings and orientation sessions on the institution level, the CLS is currently building a trainer and staff developer pool and developing a qualification program for those already active in or interested in school and instructional development at NMS. The target group has already shown significant interest in the qualification program; recruiting of new staff will take place through the *Lerndesigner* network.

A further challenge was the integration of schools which were already members of other innovation networks from past initiatives. As these innovation projects came to an end, some actors perceived NMS development events as competition rather than compliment to their innovation efforts. Integrating these through Open Space blocks of time during events helped to some degree, but the transition was largely unmanaged and led to tensions among small network groups. Efforts are currently being made to foster integration of these networks more effectively in the NMS community. For example, “child-parent-teacher conferences” developed in the NET1-Project which has come to a close are now mandated in the NMS. Developers from the NET1 project are integrated in developing practice guidelines for all NMS schools.

Education in Austria is highly politicized. While political will and support is generally strong in the Ministry, this varies significantly on the local level, further exacerbated by the strong federalism which marks Austrian politics and decision-making. A rigorous orientation to quality issues focused on school effectiveness and academic achievement of the learners is essential. These matters go beyond political preferences and party lines and focusing on them is the only effective strategy for proactively accommodating such political tensions without engaging in political, ideological debate.

Finally, the lack of security in salary schemes for *Lerndesigners* means that a role exists, but a function does not. While all but one of the nine local school authorities have reached consensus regarding the importance of the *Lerndesigners* as change agents and advocate connecting the function to the qualification program, until such a function exists they can only strongly recommend that schools comply. Other reforms, most notably the reform in teacher education (“*PädagogInnenbildung NEU*”), are expected to

strengthen the role and lead to the creation of the function in the long-term. Negotiations with trade unions regarding labor regulations for teachers are currently taking place, but the outcome is unknown.

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<http://www.bmukk.gv.at/ministerium/organigramm.xml>

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NMS-Plattform: [www.nmsvernetzung.at](http://www.nmsvernetzung.at)

NMS-Parent-Plattform: [www.edumoodle.at/nmseltern](http://www.edumoodle.at/nmseltern)

Center for Learning Research at the University of Innsbruck: [www.lernforschung.at](http://www.lernforschung.at) , Grant-funded learning research project at NMS: <http://www.lernforschung.at/?cont=prodetail&id=%2031>

Online Campus: [www.virtuelle-ph.at/](http://www.virtuelle-ph.at/)