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Moving towards more
school autonomy in Austria:
Refocusing the role of
school supervision

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**MOVING TOWARDS MORE SCHOOL AUTONOMY IN AUSTRIA:
REFOCUSING THE ROLE OF SCHOOL SUPERVISION**

**Background and Lessons from the Strategic Education Governance (SEG) Learning Seminar
in Vienna, 17-18 April 2018**

OECD Education Working paper No. 200

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Abstract

Prepared for a CERI (Centre for Educational Research and Innovation) Strategic Education Governance Learning Seminar, this working paper analyses an ongoing reform in Austria to change the traditional sector-specific “supervision” of different school types to a system of quality management of all schools in the region and to introduce a new external school evaluation body. The paper identifies four pertinent areas for lasting success of the reform: a new focus on quality management and monitoring; a restructuring of existing sector-specific school supervision bodies; creating a shared vision of quality and educational goals; and ensuring reliable and useful knowledge. Employing a complexity perspective to governance, the paper highlights that long-term sustainability of the reform requires a compelling narrative clarifying how school supervision supports education improvement and how supervision fits into wider education policy. The analysis further underlines the principle of co-creation in developing quality frameworks and establishing the methodology for the new external school evaluation body; and also for school leaders and school supervisors to drive the development of their new professional identities. Finally, to provide useful knowledge for schools and the system, the new external evaluation body should focus on the improvement of teaching and learning.

Résumé

Élaboré dans le cadre d'un séminaire de formation sur la gouvernance éducative stratégique du CERI (Centre pour la recherche et l'innovation dans l'enseignement), ce document de travail analyse une réforme en cours en Autriche qui vise à changer la traditionnelle « surveillance » sectorielle de différents types d'écoles, pour mettre en place un système de contrôle de la qualité de toutes les écoles de la région et introduire un nouvel instrument d'évaluation externe. Ce document identifie quatre domaines pertinents pour permettre une réussite durable de la réforme : mettre l'accent sur la gestion et le contrôle de la qualité ; restructurer les instruments de surveillance sectorielle des écoles ; créer une vision commune d'objectifs éducatifs de qualité, et assurer un savoir utile et solide. En vue de la complexité de la gouvernance, ce document souligne que la viabilité sur le long terme nécessite des arguments convaincants montrant comment la surveillance des écoles soutient l'amélioration de l'éducation et s'inscrit plus largement dans le cadre des politiques éducatives. De plus, l'analyse souligne le principe de co-crédation : en développant des encadrements de qualité ; en installant une méthodologie pour le nouvel instrument d'évaluation externe des écoles ; et en permettant aux directeurs et superviseurs des écoles de mener le développement de leurs nouvelles identités professionnelles. Enfin, afin de fournir un savoir utile pour les écoles et le système scolaire, le nouvel instrument d'évaluation externe devrait se concentrer sur l'amélioration de l'enseignement et l'apprentissage.

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1. Introduction

In April 2018, the Federal Ministry of Education, Science and Research, Austria, hosted a Strategic Education Governance (SEG) Learning Seminar. This work sits within the Centre for Educational Research and Innovation (CERI) in the OECD. The Learning Seminars are one strand of SEG work that aims to continuously update knowledge on effective governance processes and apply the accumulated body of knowledge to concrete governance cases. The Learning Seminar engaged different stakeholders from the Austrian school system and international participants from Denmark, Flanders, Ireland and the Netherlands. Participants – over a day and half – worked together to analyse the main governance question of how to create a sustainable change in supervision and school inspection in Austria. Sections 2 to 4 of this paper present material prepared to support this collective analysis; Section 5 presents the output of the learning seminar, that is, the insights or “lessons learned” generated collectively by participants.

The first part of this paper introduces complexity thinking in education and provides insights from OECD research. As argued in Section 2, change in complex education systems is facilitated by forming a long-term shared vision and ensuring a continuous and rich flow of knowledge to help actors to align, adapt, learn and improve. Accountability, or supervision and inspection more particularly, should be viewed as part of a broader feedback machinery (Section 3). Learning from feedback when integrated into daily actions and decisions of actors (teachers, school leaders, policy makers) is what is really meant by a “culture of evaluation”.

The second part of this paper focuses on school supervision in the Austrian school system (Section 4). Noting the dynamic of a reform journey started in November 2015, it describes the state of play in Austrian education governance (as of April 2018), as well as the main characteristics of the intended reform (*Bildungsreformgesetz* 2017). The reform is comprehensive and aims to increase school autonomy, develop school clusters, change the position of schools in human resources policy, improve quality assurance, and merge two administrative bodies into one education administration at the provincial level. This simplification of governance at the intermediate level would include refocusing the role of school supervision, moving away from all kinds of operational tasks towards strategic quality development and quality assurance. Additionally, the government envisages the establishment of a separate school inspection, a function currently exercised by the supervisors. As an underlying condition, the federal ministry is also working towards a comprehensive monitoring system which integrates several data sources and is made easily accessible to all responsible actors in the school system.

Applying insights from OECD research with careful consideration of the Austrian context, participants in the SEG Learning Seminar collectively worked on several questions in addressing the sustainability of the reform. Participants focussed on the question of how to create a sustainable change in supervision and school inspection, serving the promotion of a culture of systematic, data-driven quality development and evaluation in autonomous schools and provinces. Particular attention was given to the new roles and job identities that different actors will need to develop, and what that means for the implementation of the reform. The output from this collective analysis is presented in Section 5.

2. Insights from OECD research: Complexity and education governance

2.1. What do we know about complex systems?

Education systems are complex systems, and have become more complex over the last decades, due to a combination of developments: decentralisation of responsibilities, a growing number of stakeholders in education (both individuals as well as organisations and institutions), and the proliferation of data and information, to highlight a few. Complexity theory departs from the observation that “very large numbers of constituent elements or agents are connected to and interacting with each other in many different ways” (Mason, 2016^[1]). These many actors and many interactions create uncertainty, or as it is described in complexity theory, what structures and behaviours will emerge from the interactions. This means complex systems do not develop in a linear way; the outcomes resulting from multiple interactions vary across the system, are sometimes unpredictable and, to a certain extent, volatile. Here we see that “complex” is not synonymous with “complicated” (Glouberman and Zimmerman, 2002^[2]). Complex problems are like raising a child – each child is unique, so applying the same parental strategy to different children may produce very different results! It follows that in complex problems, while expertise is important, applying formulas may not always work or may not work at all. This is in contrast to solving a complicated problem. For instance, in rocket science, although complicated, once a rocket has been built, it is reasonable to expect to do this again applying the same formula and expertise.

2.2. What are the lessons for governance?

Complexity theory offers many lessons for governance (Snyder, 2013^[3]). Pertaining to change theory in particular, one of the most important insights is that to overcome inertia and change the status quo in a complex system requires sufficient momentum across the multiple components (Mason, 2016^[4]). To succeed, policy and reform require simultaneous and sustained interventions at as many parts of the system as possible. In systems with multiple poles, this requires a sense of shared responsibility and joint action to move towards the stated objectives for the system overall. Effective governance emphasises collaborative dynamics rather than hierarchical relationships between different parts of the system. It builds on strategic thinking, collaboration and trust – in contrast to centralised decision-making, supervision and control, which have been traditional forms of governance in many systems (Osborne, 2006^[5]).

Second, governance needs flexibility and adaptive capacity. On the one hand, addressing complex issues implies being able to respond to varying local conditions and needs. On the other, it requires being aware of and prepared for potentially diverging and even unexpected effects of policy interventions. A crucial condition for flexibility and adaptability is feedback – information from a variety of sources, reflecting a rich array of perspectives, and delivered regularly and quickly, tailor-made to the needs of users.

2.3. What are the practical implications for governance in education?

Education systems are complex as we noted above. While some OECD countries have a long tradition of decentralised responsibilities in their education systems, others have decentralised control over the last few decades trying to respond more directly to citizens’

needs. This means that policy making takes place at different levels of the system. At the same time, parents and other stakeholders are more involved in decision-making. This is facilitated by access to education performance data, which is now widely gathered and made available to a broad range of actors.

This complexity poses challenges for education governance. Central education authorities remain responsible for ensuring high-quality and equitable education. However, relationships between stakeholders and decision-makers are dynamic and open to negotiation. Effective governance means juggling this dynamism and complexity at the same time as steering a clear course towards established goals (Burns, Köster and Fuster, 2016^[6]; Burns and Köster, 2016^[7]).

The presence of multiple actors in decision-making turns policy issues into “wicked problems” (Klijn and Koppenjan, 2014^[8]). Multiple actors, such as policy makers, parents, and teachers have varying perspectives on the system’s problems and how to solve these. Interpretations of reality differ, and so do expectations and preferred solutions. Even when information is widely gathered, this is subject to diverse interpretations, which leads to distinct and sometimes conflicting bodies of knowledge and policy agendas.

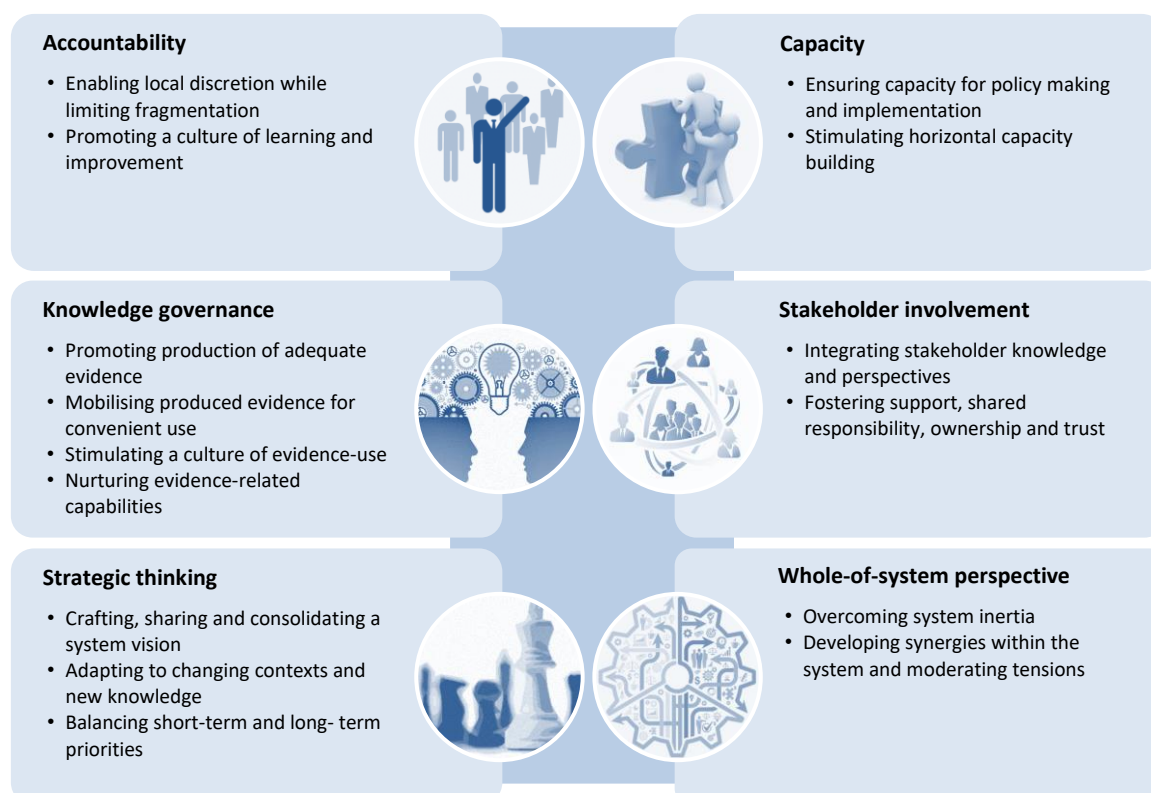
Education governance has been pictured as a matter of *so much reform, so little change* (Payne, 2008^[9]). Looking at it through a complexity lens might be a key step in changing such a view. More effective policy making and implementation embraces complexity, by seeking to:

- Align roles and balance tensions. Forming a long-term shared vision supports the development of a whole-of-system perspective able to align the system’s elements, overcome power games, and address short-term urgencies while keeping on track towards long-term aims. It is also necessary to foster co-operation among stakeholders and work towards aligning policies, roles and responsibilities to improve efficiency and reduce potential overlaps.
- Be flexible and adaptive to cope with specific contexts and unexpected events. Actors in the education system may react differently to a single phenomenon depending on their circumstances and views. Unpredictability means that the exact effects of an intervention cannot be known. The use of experimental approaches in policy making can help to discover and test changes in the education system in a controlled, ethical, efficient and transparent way (Blanchenay and Burns, 2016^[10]; Burns and Blanchenay, 2016^[11]).
- Identify and address individual, organisational and systemic capacity gaps. This is a key to effective policy and reform. In this sense, just as important as knowing where to go is knowing how to get there (Fullan, 2010^[12]).
- Underline the important role of knowledge and the governance of knowledge. A continuous flow of information combining descriptive data, research results and professional knowledge is necessary to inform all actors about developments (to be able to respond), activities (to be able to align) and results (to be able to learn and improve).

The OECD Strategic Education Governance (SEG) project uses an organisational framework (Figure 1) to promote the identified elements that support a more strategic governance of education. It is organised in six domains containing different key areas and incorporates a range of considerations: empirical findings in previous work on education governance, country priorities in traditional areas of education governance, as well as

recent research and new empirical evidence of effective governance processes emerging from the SEG work. It brings together the analytical lens of the complexity paradigm – systems are interconnected, exhibiting properties that cannot be anticipated – with practical considerations to maximise the ability to guide improvement efforts. It is meant to stimulate reflection and guide strategic decisions of practitioners and policy makers when facing the intricacies of what complexity entails for education policy and reform.

Figure 1. Strategic Education Governance Organisational Framework



Source: adapted from OECD (2019^[13]), *Strategic Education Governance - Project Plan and Organisational Framework*, www.oecd.org/education/ceri/SEG-Project-Plan-org-framework.pdf.

3. Insights from OECD research: Complexity, supervision and inspection in education

What can be learned from complexity thinking specifically for the design of supervision and inspection, or accountability and evaluation more generally, in education governance? In answering this question, insights will not only be applied to the substance of the reform, but also the reform process itself. Lessons are grouped together under four strands:

1. **Sufficient momentum and alignment.** To bring about change and to overcome system inertia and break through entrenched routines, sufficient momentum is needed. Sufficient momentum requires alignment of policies, institutional arrangements, instruments, roles and responsibilities.
2. **Engagement and ownership.** To bring about sustainable change requires engagement and ownership at all levels, of all relevant stakeholders.
3. **Feedback and learning.** Complexity increases unexpectedness. This requires fast feedback and a learning attitude of all actors. Supervision for compliance is not enough, it should also contribute to learning: a continuous cycle of test, learn, adapt, both at the school and system levels.
4. **A culture of evaluation.** For supervision and inspection to be effective, they need to rest on a broader culture of evaluation in schools and at all levels of the system.

3.1. Sufficient momentum and alignment

To generate sustainable change in complex systems in general, intervention at more levels at the same time is required. This implies a ‘whole-of-system’ approach, with different components of a system closely attuned to each other and roles and responsibilities well aligned (Burns, Köster and Fuster, 2016^[6]).

A whole-of-system approach calls for collaborative leadership – a guiding coalition of key players from different positions in the system to guide and communicate the reform (Burns, Köster and Fuster, 2016^[6]). Specifically for supervision and inspection, this means that they cannot be treated as isolated components, but should be taken as part of the accountability and evaluation arrangement as a whole.

In the synthesis report of its evaluation and assessment reviews, the OECD concluded that a holistic approach should be one of the priorities. The various components of assessment and evaluation should form a coherent whole to generate synergies, avoid duplication and promote consistency (OECD, 2013^[14]). Strategic thinking is needed to create such a whole, starting with formulating a clear rationale for evaluation and assessment and a compelling narrative about how they contribute to the improvement of education (OECD, 2013^[14]; Burns, Köster and Fuster, 2016^[6]).

In the realisation of the strategy all components should be aligned: student assessment, teacher appraisal, supervision, inspection, school quality assurance and system evaluation. In the work on complexity in education governance, the OECD focussed particularly on two areas of alignment in accountability regimes: vertical and horizontal accountability, and external and internal evaluation.

3.1.1. Vertical and horizontal forms of accountability

Accountability systems include traditional hierarchical mechanisms to supervise that actors across the system comply with laws and regulations set at the central level (*regulatory accountability*). Regulatory accountability has been gradually supplemented with mechanisms of school *performance accountability*, as non-governmental actors have been involved in education governance through decentralisation reforms such as increased school autonomy and parental choice. Standard setting and testing are the most prominent characteristics of this shift towards a more evaluation-centred role of the state (Hudson, 2007^[15]).

Both regulatory and performance accountability are systems of vertical accountability. In the former, the central level steers decision-making through input steering mechanisms, such as detailed school pedagogical and organisational instructions and overseeing mechanisms. In the latter, steering works through a focus on outputs, such as standardised testing and the publication of its results.

Table 1. Vertical and horizontal forms of accountability in education

Vertical	Regulatory school accountability: Compliance with laws and regulations; focuses on inputs and processes within the school. Mechanism: reporting to higher levels of school authority.
	School performance accountability: Periodic school evaluations. Mechanisms include: 1) standardised student testing 2) public reporting of school performance and 3) rewards or sanctions.
Horizontal	Professional school accountability: Professional standards for teachers and other educational staff. Mechanisms: Credible, useful standards and the creation of professional learning communities.
	Multiple school accountability: Involving students, parents, communities and other stakeholders in formulating strategies, decision-making, and evaluation.

Source: Hooge et al. (2012^[16]), “Looking Beyond the Numbers: Stakeholders and Multiple School Accountability”, *OECD Education Working Papers*, No. 85, OECD Publishing, Paris, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/5k91dl7ct6q6-en>.

Governmental actors are still responsible for ensuring high-quality, equitable education systems, and performance accountability mechanisms are a necessary component of steering education policy in decentralised systems. However, as the OECD observed in 2011, increased autonomy of schools or local decision making bodies is in many countries accompanied by increased accountability (OECD, 2011^[17]).

Some education systems have increasingly moved towards the incorporation of additional, flatter forms of accountability to broaden the range of perspectives involved in holding education providers accountable. Horizontal accountability mechanisms involve, on the one hand, how schools and teachers conduct their profession (professional accountability), which may entail the establishment of professional standards for teachers and the creation of professional networks. On the other hand, they relate to how schools and teachers inform and involve multiple stakeholders (multiple accountability) and are held accountable by them with regards to school objectives and development plans, decision-making, strategy implementation and results in terms of the quality of education provided (Hooge, 2016^[18]; Hooge, Burns and Wilkoszewski, 2012^[16]). A constructive accountability system combines vertical and horizontal forms of accountability productively.

3.1.2. External and internal evaluation

Several case studies in the context of the Governing Complex Education Systems project showed the value of aligning external and internal evaluation processes especially for

establishing a culture of evaluation in schools (Burns, Köster and Fuster, 2016^[6]). In the Dutch case, the Inspectorate assessed if schools are at risk of becoming very weak based on performance indicators. The label ‘very weak’ had substantive consequences; it could ultimately lead to school closure. The case study showed that some schools were surprised by the Inspectorate’s assessment. This might mean that the inspection worked mainly as a summative process; the process of learning and improving only started after the judgement had been pronounced. “Putting greater emphasis on transparency and complementing performance indicators with ongoing knowledge exchange, including perspectives from stakeholders and the school community, appears a promising avenue to lessen the disconnect between external and internal evaluation processes” (Burns, Köster and Fuster, 2016, p. 112^[6]).

The Polish case revolved around the introduction of a new school supervision system resting on two main elements: autonomous self-evaluation by teams of teachers in schools, and external evaluation conducted by inspectors trained in evaluation. The external evaluation should be based on the results of the self-evaluation, but should also include perspectives of other stakeholders, all in the framework of government set standards. A key aim was the participation of school staff in the evaluation process. The case study indicated that clearly communicating and engaging with the aims and underlying concepts of the new supervision system were crucial for its effectiveness, particularly in creating a culture of collaborative evaluation in schools. This required moving beyond a long-standing culture of distrust in supervision, which proved to be hard in some schools (Mazurkiewicz, Walczak and Jewdokimow, 2014^[19]).

These and other cases clearly demonstrate that building a common understanding of the aims and rationale of a particular policy is crucial for alignment. This requires a two-sided, genuine exchange of perspectives, and taking the concerns of stakeholders seriously in all stages of the development and implementation of the new supervision regime. A common understanding could lead to a common framework for external and internal evaluation, based on nationally agreed and research-based criteria for education quality.

3.2. Engagement and ownership

For effective supervision and inspection, schools and teachers must perceive them as legitimate and fair. Schools, teachers and other stakeholders should trust the assessments of supervisors and inspectors in order to take ownership of the actions deriving from inspections. This calls for engaging stakeholders in the further development of the reform itself. After the new supervision and inspection functions have been established, stakeholders need to be continuously involved in the ways of working, and eventually also in the evaluation of the supervision and inspection function. Integrating stakeholders into accountability relationships could also result in the enrichment of accountability by integrating varied forms of knowledge and feedback (Burns, Köster and Fuster, 2016^[6]).

Ownership starts with a clear understanding of goals, underlying concepts and expectations of roles and responsibilities of relevant stakeholders. Clear communication is a necessary condition, but not sufficient. Again, stakeholders need to be genuinely involved in the making and further working of accountability mechanisms, particularly if they are notably different from previous ways of working (Burns, Köster and Fuster, 2016^[6]).

Furthermore, several cases showed that the capacity to take up new roles is crucial for a reform to succeed. This is about both the capacity of supervisors and inspectors as the capacity of schools and teachers to fulfil the new tasks and meet the high expectations of

their ability to self-evaluate and to act on the external assessments of their performance. Capacity refers also to leadership and willingness to accept new roles. For example, in Norway school leaders played a decisive role in the uptake of formative assessment practices. School leaders that succeeded in establishing collaborative ways of working in their schools were more successful in the implementation of a new assessment regime (Burns, Köster and Fuster, 2016^[6]).

Transparency proved to be a basic condition for stakeholder involvement. For ‘bottom-up accountability’ the democratic control of institutions by citizens – either directly through elections or indirectly through civil society organisations or the media, schools or sub-central authorities, but also external evaluators of schools – should make their reports publicly available (OECD, 2017^[20]). This also holds true for horizontal accountability – the reporting to peer schools and teachers, and to groups of stakeholders as students, parents and communities. In an earlier report, the OECD highlighted the importance of systematic follow-up of school evaluation results by evaluators to promote the use of evaluation results.

The OECD also pointed to the usefulness of providing nationally collected data to schools to facilitate self-evaluation. It is important to publish contextualised information about the performance of schools, allowing the meaningful interpretation of data with reference to school population and contextual characteristics, school policies, past performance and comparisons with other schools (OECD, 2013^[14]).

3.3. Feedback and learning

In complex systems accountability, or supervision and inspection more particularly, should be viewed as part of a broader feedback machinery. In a multi-layered, multi-governed and multi-actor system, a continuous flow of information is needed to inform all actors about developments (to be able to respond), activities (to be able to align) and results (to be able to learn and improve).

It should be acknowledged that “policy changes do not always produce intended, linear outcomes, and that an ongoing process of learning, innovation and reflection is required to bring about long term social change”, and to react flexibly and swiftly on unexpected events (Rouw, 2016, p. 50^[21]). In this sense, accountability should be shifting its focus from compliance to quality. In terms of the two main functions of accountability and supervision, the learning and improvement function should be carefully balanced with the compliance and justification function, preventing that high stakes and high visibility justification hinder the developmental function (OECD, 2013^[14]).

Three aspects of the organisation of accountability are crucial in keeping the balance. First, the use of a broad array of performance measures, information sources and stakeholder perspectives to avoid the excessive emphasis on particular measures. Second, the quality criteria and performance measures should be perceived as fair by schools and teachers. Third, it should be clear that supervision and inspection serve the underlying goal of enhancing student outcomes. Supervision and inspection should be meaningful primarily to schools and teachers, but also to other stakeholders, as students and parents.

Having sufficient evaluation capacity at all levels of the system is crucial for the success of an accountability reform, particularly if it changes or even disrupts long-standing routines. Therefore, building capacity, or even better professional learning, should be an integral part of any reform. In the case of accountability for schools, it is about the capacity to self-evaluate in a systematic way, for the formative assessment of student performance, and for

teacher collaborative learning. School leaders specifically should be able to guide and organise collaborative learning processes, to relate internal evaluation to external evaluation and to a diversity of stakeholder accountability forums, and to respond to multiple accountability pressures (OECD, 2013^[14]).

In many countries, the use of data for self-evaluation proved to be a challenge particularly at the level of schools. More than often systems struggle with non-use, misuse and even abuse for several reasons: high-quality data may be missing; systems to collect data, link to other sources and disaggregate at the appropriate levels might be lacking; and advanced capacity to interpret an overwhelming amount of data from various sources might be underdeveloped. Although data use should be one of the priorities in professional learning, capacity building is more than a technical affair, more than providing particular skills and knowledge.

As engaging with the underlying aims and concepts proved to be crucial for realisation, an essential part of capacity building is connecting to the motivations of teachers and school leaders [see for example (Rouw, 2016^[21])]. This applies also to supervisors and inspectors. Research into the introduction of a new inspection regime in Poland, for example, showed that for a sustainable change more was needed than training. The researchers recommended a more comprehensive capacity building strategy, including the allocation of sufficient resources and providing guidance (Mazurkiewicz, Walczak and Jewdokimow, 2014^[19]). Based on its work on evaluation and assessment the OECD also pointed to the need for an active support strategy at the central level, building up a knowledge base and providing tools and guidelines to facilitate schools and other stakeholders (OECD, 2013^[14]).

3.4. A culture of evaluation

For evaluation and learning to take root it really needs to be integrated in the daily actions and decisions of actors, in other words it should become a part of the daily routines at schools and in decision making rooms at all levels. This is what is meant by a culture of evaluation: a continuous cycle of trying, learning and adapting as a systemic feature of the acting of teachers, school leaders, school administrators and policy makers.

Leadership, at different levels, plays a significant role in establishing such a culture as the study on a German initiative to stimulate local learning clearly showed. The researchers observed that to overcome anxieties capacity building in educational monitoring needed to be accompanied by creating a culture of accountability and evidence-based policy making that promotes the use of different types of knowledge and is open to the contribution of a variety of stakeholders (Busemeyer and Vossiek, 2015, p. 53^[22]).

What can governments do to promote a culture of evaluation? The OECD-work on governing complex education systems points to several interventions, some already mentioned earlier: transparency on quality indicators, and understanding and ownership of aims and quality criteria. Additionally the OECD suggests uncoupling monitoring from accountability to avoid blame games and pointing fingers. In the German case referred to above this was achieved by involving an independent research institute that provided fast feedback to schools, but also to the central level aimed at improving local processes and the overall policy design at the national level (Burns, Köster and Fuster, 2016^[6]).

Trust proved to be an essential ingredient of a culture of evaluation. As trust cannot be enforced, only given, creating trust requires trustworthy behaviour and repeated interaction between stakeholders (Burns, Köster and Fuster, 2016^[6]). Interestingly Busemeyer and Vossiek in their study of the German “Learning locally”-programme, also observed the role

of politics in creating a culture of evaluation. According to them “a certain political discursive culture” (p. 47_[22]) recognising the benefits and limitations of monitoring, is needed to support a genuine and open culture of evaluation. Characteristics of a favourable political culture would be the valuing of a variety of sources and combinations of different types of knowledge to judge progress, the capacity to provide sophisticated analyses of education issues, and the awareness that decision-making is an activity in its own right, although based on sound knowledge provided among other ways by evaluators (Busemeyer and Vossiek, 2015_[22]).

4. Austria: Transforming school supervision to support sustainable quality development

This section presents a summary overview of the status in April 2018 of key issues regarding the ongoing transformation of school supervision and external evaluation in Austria. It was prepared to support the discussion by national stakeholders and international peers in the SEG Learning Seminar in Vienna. While the value of an international analytical approach to governance challenges is the point of departure, the issues presented in this section include many details of a specific national story. This reflects the fact that an education system’s complexity arises partly from the unique national context in its historically grown constellations. Without considering national context, there would be a risk of missing the key problems arising from complexity. This is especially the case in situations where it is not so much debatable what the intended future situation could be, but where the challenge is transition and continuity. How to design the transition from the current complex constellation to new ones? How to recognise the limits for a new system arising from tradition and history? The reform activities in Austria take place in a complex environment that reflects a historically highly segmented landscape of governance, school types and rich regional traditions.¹

Selected key issues of reform are introduced here², focusing on supervision. Each of the sub-sections “Status quo and recent developments” introduce the current situation and recent developments. For most issues the current situation can already now be perceived as being in a dynamic situation, since it is shaped by ongoing reforms that either have been introduced very recently or still are not fully implemented. Therefore, an overarching issue is how to manage the successful implementation of a new school supervision and

¹ This section draws substantially on a number of papers on school inspection and reform in Austria, notably Altrichter (2017_[28]), Kemethofer, Gustafsson and Altrichter (2017_[27]), Bruneforth et al. (2015_[23]), Lassnigg (2016_[26]), Nusche et al (2016_[24]), and Seel (2010_[25]). The analysis presented here reflects the state of play in April 2018.

² The sequence of issues does not reflect any priority but is simply chosen to help readers to build an understanding the Austrian governance that is needed to understand issues presented later in the paper.

accountability architecture in a context of multiple and parallel reform and in a complex policy arena.³

A key motivation for reforming school supervision is to support increased school autonomy, which is the central aim of the 2017 school reform. Its success depends, therefore, on the successful and concurrent implementation of the school autonomy reform with: School leaders gaining greater responsibilities for quality development, including recruitment and supervision of teachers, and for organisational and staff development; and schools enjoying greater flexibility in the organisation of instruction time, including the allocation of teaching staff.

4.1. Setting the scene: Joint federal and provincial responsibility for school quality

The governance of Austrian schools is characterised by a complex division of responsibilities between federal and provincial authorities, laid down in the Austrian federal constitution. This is reflected in the parallel existence of federal and provincial schools, notably at lower secondary level (see Issue 4) and an interlocked federal and provincial school administration, executed by federal and provincial authorities. This division of legal capacity (competences) follows the idea of balancing the influence of the federal and provincial governments on the school system and is the result of a historical compromise between federalists and centralists when the Republic of Austria was constituted a century ago.

4.1.1. Status quo and recent developments

Figure 2 presents the distribution of federal and provincial responsibilities in school education in 2018. The Federal Ministry of Education, Science and Research holds the overall executive authority for school education and develops and proposes legislation for both federal and provincial schools. It is responsible for the administration of federal schools [Gymnasium at lower secondary and upper secondary level, and most of the vocational education and training (VET) schools].

In each of the nine provinces (Länder), there is a federal executive agency, the Provincial School Board (PSB), which executes federal responsibilities. The Board undertakes the administration of federal schools. It also conducts school inspection and supervision for both federal and provincial schools. School supervisors (*Schulinspektoren*) undertake the core tasks of pedagogical supervision over school leaders, the implementation of education policies and pedagogical quality assurance (inspection). However, while by law the PSB is a federal agency, its governing council is composed of provincial representatives and its president is the provincial governor.

The nine provincial authorities (Länder) are responsible for implementing legislation for and administration of provincial schools (all primary schools, roughly two thirds of lower secondary schools and vocational schools in dual VET). They have provincial government offices that execute the administration of provincial schools. These offices are in charge of the provincial school network and recruit and employ teachers for provincial schools.

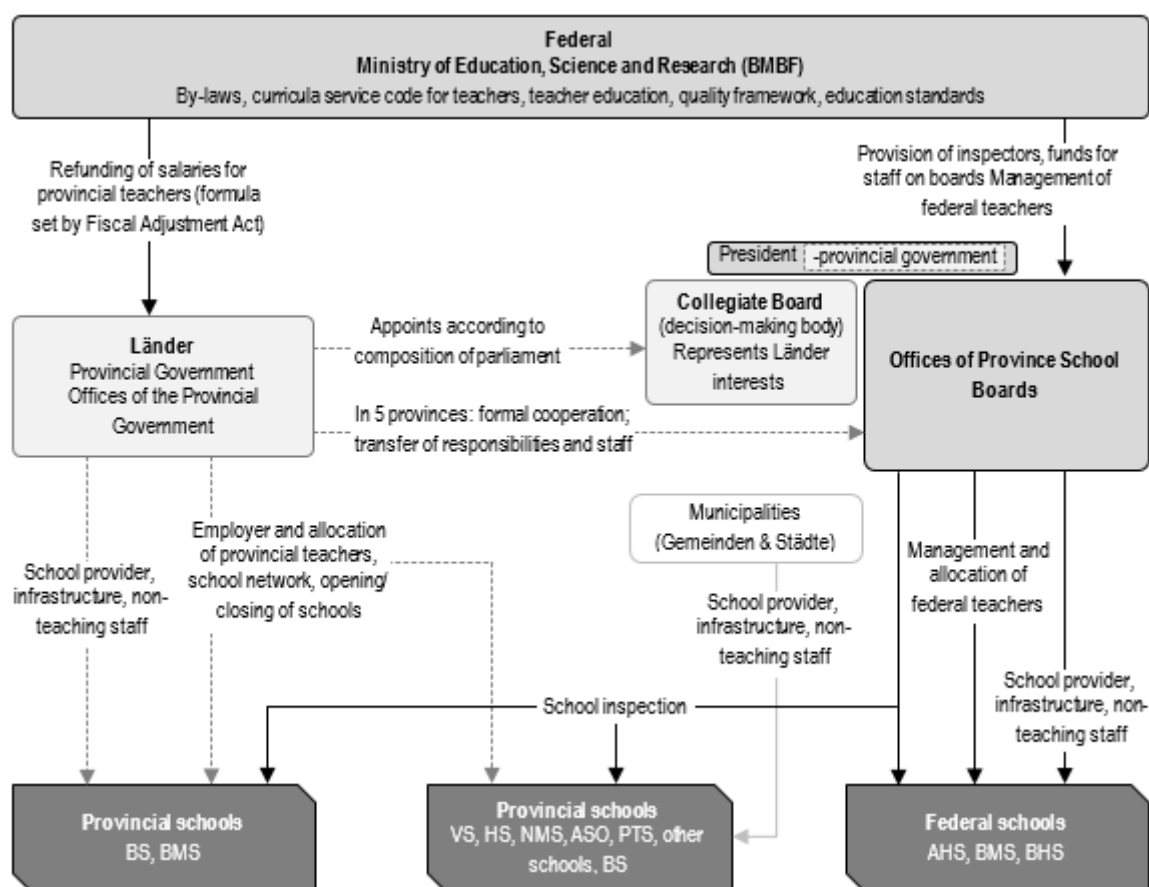
³ Some reforms are mentioned here. More reforms are discussed in Bruneforth et al. (2015^[23]), such as the reform of the regular provincial lower secondary schools (NMS-Reform), reform of teacher training institutions, reform of teacher service code, and new central examination of upper secondary education.

While the provincial government offices administer funding for all teaching resources in provincial schools, the funding originates from the federal government. Further, the municipalities are responsible for the maintenance of provincial schools; and five provinces have delegated most of their responsibilities for provincial schools to the Provincial School Boards (PSBs).

4.1.2. The complex and differing role of school supervisors in the status quo

In all nine provinces, school supervisors have gained a role that goes far beyond their core tasks of pedagogical supervision over school leaders, the implementation of education policies and pedagogical quality assurance (inspection). They have become a switching point in managing all sorts of problems around schools, including e.g. dealing with parents' complaints, approval of teachers' continuing professional development, dealing with legal issues and decisions, etc.

It is important to note that currently the organisation of the Provincial School Boards varies across provinces. In four provinces, these have the traditional federal responsibilities and they stand alongside a separate Provincial Government Office. However, in five provinces the delegation of provincial responsibilities to the PSB has added a further layer of complexity. The PSB has incorporated most of the responsibilities of the Provincial Government Office. It is mainly in these five provinces that school supervisors have also assumed responsibilities for allocating teaching resources to schools and have thus become pivotal actors of school administration in Austria.

Figure 2. Distribution of federal and provincial responsibilities in Austrian school education 2018

Notes: Federal responsibilities in medium-grey; provincial responsibilities in light grey. School type abbreviations are shown with a given school provider when providing more than 10% of schools of a given type. AHS: Allgemein bildende höhere Schule (Academic secondary school); ASO: Sonderschule (Special needs school); BHS: Berufsbildende höhere Schule (Colleges for higher vocational education); BMS: Berufsbildende mittlere Schule (Secondary technical and vocational school); BS: Berufsschule, duale Ausbildung (Part-time vocational school/ apprenticeship, dual system); HS: Hauptschule (General secondary school); NMS: Neue Mittelschule (New secondary school); PTS: Polytechnische Schule (Pre-vocational school); VS: Volksschule (Primary school).

Source: adapted from Bruneforth, M. et al. (2015^[23]), *OECD Review of Policies to Improve the Effectiveness of Resource use in Schools: Country Background Report for Austria*, Bundesministerium für Bildung und Frauen, Vienna.

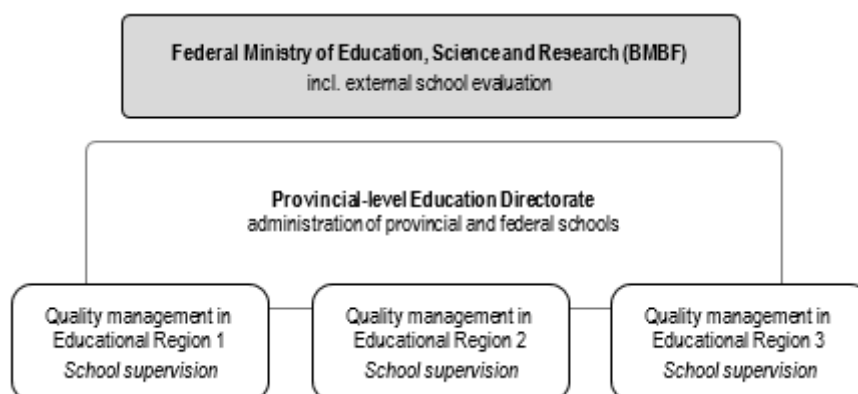
4.1.3. Next steps with the 2017 reform

At the end of 2018, the responsibility for the administration of both federal and provincial schools has been transferred to a new type of federal-provincial authority, the Education Directorates (*Bildungsdirektionen*). These new authorities will encompass all competences for school administration presently held by the Provincial School Boards (PSBs) and the offices of the provincial government – as it is already today the case in five provinces. This aims to enforce the same model of school governance to all provinces and clarify and harmonise organisational structures and processes.

While the current division into federal and provincial responsibilities for schools will remain in place, their administration under a common “roof” aims to increase transparency

and efficiency and is supposed to streamline also the tasks of school supervision, controlling and quality management as a federal responsibility.

Figure 3. The envisaged new structures in each province and broad responsibilities



Note: Shared provincial and federal responsibilities in white; federal responsibilities in medium-grey. The number of Educational Regions within an Education Directorate will vary according to what makes organisational sense for the given Province. It is envisaged to establish a new body for external school evaluation, which would assume responsibilities for school inspection as currently held by school supervisors (see Issue 4).

Key points

- Schools in Austria can be considered as entities that are part of the bureaucratic system of school administration. A tight regulatory framework builds the foundation of school governance and compared to other OECD countries school autonomy is relatively limited (Nusche, 2016^[24]).
- The federal constitution aims to balance provincial and federal responsibilities in school governance and results in intertwined responsibilities, notably at the lower secondary level. While in four provinces, there are parallel structures of school administration for federal and provincial schools, five provinces have delegated their responsibilities to the federal administration “Provincial School Board”.
- All responsibilities for school governance, whether currently assigned to federal or provincial administrations, will be transferred to new federal-provincial authorities, the Education Directorates. This aims to harmonise governance and to increase the transparency and efficiency of school administration.

4.2. Four major issues linked to transforming Austrian school supervision

4.2.1. Issue 1 – Focusing school supervision on quality management and monitoring

For more than two decades, a growing focus on educational outcomes and quality has been a strong driver of education reform in Austria. First initiatives to establish formalised quality management in vocational and general schools go back to the middle of the 1990s. Quality management systems have been introduced first in vocational education and training and then in general education (Box 1).

Box 1. School quality management systems in Austria

Since 2005/06, the comprehensive Quality Initiative for Vocational Education *QualitätsInitiative Berufsbildung (QIBB)* works in a systemic way and comprises all levels of the vocational education and training (VET) system – from the ministry to the Provincial School Boards (PSBs) and from school supervisor officers to VET schools. QIBB relies on yearly development plans, VET school self-evaluation, and school management reviews.

For general education, quality management took shape some years later. Since 2012, the initiative School Quality in General Education (SQA) is the central quality management process of school supervision. With SQA, school development and self-evaluation have been made compulsory.

The 2012 reform of the Federal Law on School Inspection gave a legal foundation for the key elements of QIBB and SQA and the changing role of school supervisors (*Schulinspektoren*).

With the gradual development of quality management systems as the backbone of school supervision and inspection, the role of school supervisors changed, with the focus no longer on the traditional school inspection functions, that is, control of compliance with rules and regulations and the identification of deficiencies in schools. School supervisors were increasingly charged with the role of superordinate quality managers for schools, sharing responsibility for school quality with the school leaders. They also became responsible for shaping regional quality development. This changed the interaction between school supervisors, schools and school leaders substantially.

In 2012, these functional changes were given a legal basis (see Box 1) officially moving the focus away from external school evaluation (inspection) to quality management processes, including school self-evaluation, development plans and periodic agreements between school leaders and their school supervisor ('target and performance agreements', based on dialogic leadership to induce a culture of trust, feedback and commitment). External school inspection is now limited to cases where such an intervention is deemed necessary to enforce education policy or the legal framework. Periodical school inspections as they exist in many OECD countries are currently not an instrument of quality assurance in Austria. Even though school supervisors still formally carry the job title *Schulinspektoren* (school inspector), today their role differs starkly from that of school inspectors in other OECD countries. To reflect this change, the term "school supervisors" is used here to refer to Austria's *Schulinspektoren*.

Next steps with the 2017 reform

With the 2017 education reform, the basis for the work of school supervision further changes. While the new law will continue developments initiated by the current quality management processes, the role of supervisors shall evolve further to quality managers with a stronger focus on outcomes.

School supervisors will become more committed to the implementation of central level policies and quality criteria in their regions. National policy targets should be translated to regional policy targets and outcome-oriented implementation must be complemented by evidence-based evaluation and monitoring. School supervision will resume stronger

responsibility for the quality of the regional education offer and its further development, across levels and types of schools, rather than for individual schools. The joint use of evidence from external evaluation by supervisors and school leaders will become the basis for quality development. The dialogue between schools and school supervisors will contain stronger elements of accountability.

While the role of school supervisors and their interaction with schools has been in a process of evolution for some time now, the ongoing reform will formalise existing processes, increase transparency and the focus on outcomes and adjust these to a new institutional context. A key challenge will be to support smooth transition processes for all actors in schools and school supervision, since they come from different traditions and job identities (different by school sector but also by province and region).

Key points

- Quality initiatives have evolved slowly over the past two decades, with distinct systems and traditions in general and vocational education.
- The role of school supervisors is gradually being transformed from one of inspectors to that of super-ordinated quality managers of schools (school supervisors), sharing responsibility for quality with the school leaders.
- Quality management will be more strongly tied to elements of shared accountability and a focus on outcomes.

4.2.2. Issue 2 – Restructuring school supervision bodies for regional management with a system-wide approach to quality

A strong diversification of programmes and pathways of general and vocational education characterise the Austrian school system. This is reflected in a historically grown diversification of institutions including the school supervision and can be seen as an obstacle to coherent regional school planning. Quality development takes the perspective of institutions or groups of institutions while a regional or system-wide approach to quality is limited by a lack of co-operation across supervision for different school types.

Rooted in a more than two century old tradition of distinguishing between “advanced” schools (middle and higher general and vocational schools) and “common” or “lower” schools, today referred to as compulsory schools⁴, the responsibility for schools is today still divided into two separate streams of school administration: federal schools and provincial schools. Both streams are further diversified in general, vocational and pre-vocational schools at secondary level. Supervision and administration follows these distinctions in a complex distribution of responsibilities.

Reflecting institutional traditions, the operation of the supervision is not only segmented by nine Provincial School Boards (PSBs), but also by school types and a hierarchy of supervisors. For primary and general lower secondary education supervisors are located in regional offices co-ordinated by a senior supervisor at the PSB. All other secondary schools including VET report directly to a senior supervisor.

⁴ “Advanced schools”: *Das höhere- und mittlere Schulwesen*; “common” or “lower” schools: *das nieder Schulwesen (Pflichtschulen)* (Seel, 2010, p. 200).

Next steps with the 2017 reform

The education reform 2017 emphasises a harmonised vision of quality for all schools and school types and aims to direct the planning of the school offer and quality management towards regional co-operation. Thus, the current structure of regional branches of the PSBs will be adapted to address the whole landscape of schools. Regions of education will be responsible to establish, on the basis of a common vision of quality, regional policy targets and development plans. The aim is to overcome a structure of school supervision segmented by type of school to improve transitions of pupils between levels of education, provide a coherent school offer responsive to regional needs, and also foster peer learning between levels and types of schools.

Key points

- The Austrian school system has a long tradition of segmentation in different groups of institutions with different administrative structures.
- School supervision in Austria was structured along the same divisions as the institutional segmentation. Planning across institutional borders was weak, especially in sub-provincial regions, and hampered transitions of pupils between levels and types of school.

4.2.3. Issue 3 – Creating a shared and universal vision of quality and educational goals

The development of quality standards and frameworks was part of recent education reforms. Previous activities to define quality were loosely connected but not formally co-ordinated, and some descriptions of quality and outcomes lacked consistency.

In 2014, legislation was introduced to base school supervision on quality management linked to a national quality framework. Over the following years, although no formalised single national quality framework was established, both initiatives, SQA and QIBB, made progress in the definition of quality documents, which are the current basis for quality work. However, the extent to which these quality documents shape the work of school supervision and school education plans is not yet evaluated.

Box 2. National assessment of education standards in Austria

In 2008/09, education standards for mathematics, German and English were introduced, and they define the skills and competences students should typically have acquired by the end of primary and lower secondary education. Since 2012, a national assessment tests how well students perform against these standards on a five-year cycle. Each school receives detailed feedback on its success in teaching the national education standards (as judged by how well its student group performs). While, the primary objective is to give feedback to schools to stimulate self-evaluation and momentum for school development (a low stakes approach), the standards set achievement targets against which schools can be held accountable.

Next steps with the 2017 reform

The education reform 2017 reemphasises the need for a national quality framework to guide school quality development of increasingly autonomous schools and puts it at the centre of evaluation and monitoring. A common reference framework for all types and levels of school education shall link definitions of quality to quality criteria, indicators and benchmarks. With the explicit use of criteria, the reform aims to strengthen the link between quality definition and evaluation and controlling (see Issue 4). The framework guides as such also the quality work of school supervisors in their role as regional quality managers.

Key points

- Increasing school autonomy requires a harmonised and well accepted vision of school quality, enshrined in a national quality framework, and a new focus for school supervision in Austria.
- The legal requirement in place before 2017 did not lead to a national quality framework but sector-specific frameworks were established in parallel.
- Education standards have become a strong and accepted framework to describe desired outcomes of regular education.

4.2.4. Issue 4 – Ensuring reliable and useful knowledge

In parallel to the evolution of quality management systems and the definition of education quality criteria, notably by implementing education standards, the systems of education statistics and monitoring were further developed. The increasing availability of objective and standardised data coupled with knowledge generated by schools (internal evaluation) changes also the work of school supervisors. The supervisor is not the main source of knowledge on the quality of individual schools anymore. On the other hand, most school level statistics are not yet easily accessible for use by school supervisors and school leaders. Generally, the wealth of new data that has become available in the last ten years is underused and contributes too little to quality management.

In Austria the system of school statistics was strongly improved with the establishment of a nationwide enrolment register in 2006 (*Bildungsdokumentation*). The register allows the monitoring of the educational career of all individual students. Since 2012, the regular nationwide assessment of the education standards provides a wealth of data on learning outcomes, student background variables and school contexts. Schools and their supervisors

are provided with detailed feedback on the competences students have achieved by the end of primary and of lower secondary education. These data aim to provide feedback to schools on the quality of education they deliver.

Within the two existing school quality management systems (Box 1), internal evaluation by schools is strongly emphasised. While VET schools have already embraced a culture of internal evaluation, general schools are lagging behind.

With the increased availability of standardised external data, traditional school inspection visits were further reduced and the current legal framework requires inspections as such only on an ad hoc basis with a focus on enforcing pedagogical quality goals and school laws. There are no standardised, periodical external school inspections in the Austrian school system and evidence from inspection visits is thus not systematically available. Experiments with more standardised inspections, e.g. team inspections in the Land of Styria, were suspended again after piloting.

Next steps with the 2017 reform

The education reform 2017 reframes the responsibilities for educational governance at the regional and sub-regional level, notably by strengthening school autonomy. This goes hand in hand with the need for a clearer definition of roles of the actors responsible for quality management, school supervision and monitoring. One important element of the reform is to establish a coherent system of educational monitoring across the country and all levels of decision-making.

A key aspect of change will be the replacement of the current ad hoc school inspection visits by a new instrument of assessment, i.e. systematic, standardised external school evaluation which will be based on a national quality framework, indicators and benchmarks. Separated from the school supervision and its focus on quality management, external evaluation will be established at central level as a new profession applying empirical methods to provide schools with an external view on the state of their quality.

The simple existence of a new actor will already have impact on the current governance regime and relations between schools and school supervisors. Making it effective will require new capacities by school leaders and school supervisors to use and interpret externally generated data and to deal with external feedback. Education system monitoring should ideally be integrated with quality reporting.

Key points

- The education system in Austria has ever more quality data available. Yet, data are underused and not sufficiently processed for effective use by schools and supervisors at regional level.
- The regular reporting on education standards established feedback systems for all schools on learning outcomes.
- The current, occasional inspection visits by supervisors will be replaced by a more standardised, systematic and transparent process of external evaluation. To this end a new professional body for external evaluation will be established in functional and organisational separation from school supervision.

5. Austria: Identifying conditions for sustainable reform

This section presents a summary of key insights or “lessons learned” at the Strategic Education Governance Learning Seminar. Collectively formed by both Austrian and international participants, these draw on practical experience from other systems, but adapt to embrace the complexity of the Austrian school system. The four issues described in Section 4. were the point of departure. Participants discussed the question of how to refocus the role of school supervision in Austria, both to support new autonomy at the school level over school organisational aspects and a new regional quality development approach, while also thinking of the role that a new external school evaluation agency may play.

The participants were asked to develop a checklist for sustainable supervision and inspection reform in Austria. To this end, they were asked to consider: what action would be needed to bring about lasting change; which stakeholders would need to be involved and how to take advantage of their motivations and interests; and how to address weaknesses and risks.

Anchored in the SEG organisational framework, that applies key insights from OECD research on how to promote effective governance processes, participants in the Learning Seminar collectively developed the following observations, analysis and suggestions. The section sets off with the overarching reflection on reform in general, followed by discussing approaches related to the four issues described in Section 4.

5.1. Conditions for sustainable reform

5.1.1. Strengthening and communicating the narrative for the reform

A very clear observation shared by participants was the need for the ministry to work on and promote the narrative for the reform. During various points of the Learning Seminar, questions were raised on “why” the supervision system was being reformed. To strengthen the narrative on the motivation for the reform, participants underlined the value in joining up the different parts of ongoing reforms and detailing where the supervision and inspection reforms would sit in this broader context. This was felt to be of key importance to reach out to all necessary stakeholders. In particular, the story needs to be told on how these reforms will impact the quality of teaching and learning in Austrian classrooms. What are the expected benefits for greater autonomy for schools over key aspects of the organisation of teaching and learning?

5.1.2. Building momentum and capacity with a long-term perspective

Participants stressed the importance of being pragmatic in the approach to this ambitious reform, by taking a long-term perspective and embracing an “experimental” approach. It is wise to accept that this will develop at different pace throughout the system. Some schools are more ready to undertake new responsibilities (greater autonomy), for example, those who have requested to “opt out” of legal requirements over recent years; others are reportedly heavily supported by current “school inspectors” with problem solving and administrative tasks. This underlines the need to focus adequate and continued attention on building capacity and meeting related professional development needs.

Strategic thinking, while keeping a focus on the long-term perspective, also recognises the need to demonstrate quick wins. The ministry has identified a group of “school inspectors”

who can see the benefit of the proposed reform and can work with these important allies. This is a good illustration of identifying ambassadors for the reform. Going forward, it is important to think of ways that the ministry can best organise, connect and support them.

Key points

- A compelling narrative makes clear why the reform of school supervision supports the improvement of education and how it is embedded in overall policy.
- Strategic thinking combines a persistent focus on the long-term perspective with the pragmatism of quick wins and the creation of supportive coalitions.

5.2. Capacity and identities of school leaders and school supervisors (Issues 1 and 2)

Participants discussed the new roles of school supervisors and school leaders (Issue 1) in tandem with considering how to introduce a regional focus to quality management, as an important aspiration for the new role for school supervisors (Issue 2). Participants recognised that previous reforms in the Austrian system had triggered the development of co-operative quality management in many parts of the system and that the current reform to school supervision aims to build on this momentum. At the same time, the ambition is to introduce a regional planning perspective to quality management. As such, participants contemplated how to strike a balance between the new roles and responsibilities for school leaders (for quality management at the school) and those for school supervisors (strategic regional leadership and quality assurance).

At the core of this are the new professional roles and responsibilities for both school leaders and school supervisors. As the schools become more autonomous, school leaders will need to take up more responsibilities, changing the distribution of tasks between school leaders and school supervisors. With respect to the school supervisors, there is also a need to consider the existing hierarchical set up of these professionals and their focus on specific institutions. The reform aims for the supervisors to strengthen their quality management role, developing a strategic, regional and cross-sectoral perspective.

At the seminar, it became clear that this change of roles is not an instrumental shift alone, but goes as deep as the professional identity that particularly school supervisors derive from their current jobs. For both school leaders and supervisors this requires redefining and building their profession anew. In collaboration with the ministry, school leaders and school supervisors must engage in and drive the redefinition of their professional identities. Interestingly, the participants noted a possible tension between the need for clear job profiles and expectations, and the need for flexibility and discretion for individual school leaders and school supervisors to define their jobs. Clear job profiles are essential to specify the expectations and the ways these have changed, strongly framed in the narrative of the reform. Flexibility and adaptability will most probably promote ownership of the new jobs by school leaders and school supervisors.

The seminar participants emphasised the crucial position of school leaders for the reform to succeed. They identified many opportunities for managing the change to school leaders' new roles and responsibilities, building on existing strengths within the system and the proposed new regional focus. Participants underlined the urgency of further strengthening the professional development of school leaders. Embracing a broad approach to professional support and development for school leaders could help to promote a regional perspective, for example with school-to-school co-operation.

More generally it was recommended at the seminar to promote networks of school leaders and establish strong professional communities, to share expertise and good practice, but also to develop a shared perspective on their profession (again in support of building a new professional identity). Existing school supervisors, with their stock of experience and objective insights to different schools, are in a strong position to support school leaders in developing capacity to undertake their new roles. This will be a natural continuation in the ongoing transformation of the school supervisor role to ‘quality managers’, which participants noted had already taken root in parts of the system.

The seminar participants also identified several potential pitfalls that the ministry will need to navigate. Given the varied capacity legacy within the system, the lack of capacity among some school leaders and school supervisors, at least in the transition period, could slow down the advancement of the reform. The ministry would also have to deal with potential negative perceptions that some of the existing school supervisors may have about their new roles, including that they may be losing some power and prestige and have less room to manoeuvre. Given a strong identity with a specific institution, some school supervisors may fear that a regional and cross-sectoral perspective may lead to a decrease in their specialist knowledge and skills, making them less effective counterparts for school leaders.

In tandem with the efforts to engage school leaders and school supervisors in leading the redefining of their new professional identities, participants also underlined the need for a well-developed transition strategy. This would consist of a ‘training landscape’, tailored training options for different target groups, and possibilities for redeployment for incumbent school leaders and school supervisors.

Key points

- Taking a broad approach to professional development for school leaders can also help build a regional approach to quality management.
- School leaders and school supervisors must engage in and drive the development of their new professional identities.
- A well-developed transition strategy addresses capacity legacies with tailored training and possibilities for redeployment of staff.

5.3. A common reference framework for school quality (Issue 3)

The main question was how to ensure system-wide shared understanding of and commitment to a common reference framework for school quality (Issue 3). The participants saw it as a strength that the Austrian education system already has a set of quality management instruments in place, both in vocational and general education. These systems focus also on self-evaluation at schools as the key to quality assurance, supported by the school supervisors at the provincial level. Furthermore, reliable data on student performance can feed into the quality assurance cycles at various levels. As already noted, it is not clear, however, to what extent these systems are actually guiding the work of schools and school supervisors.

At the seminar, several participants presented their experiences with creating and implementing common frameworks. The important role of co-creation was emphasised, the active involvement of relevant stakeholders, such as school leaders and teachers in the actual design of a quality framework. According to these participants, the gain of trust and ownership of the users outweighs the possible loss of time. Taking time also allowed for a

more organic, step-by-step and trial and error approach, rather than the top down rolling out of a preconceived design.

In one of the participating countries, the quality framework both for internal evaluation as well as external evaluation was developed through a collaborative effort of representatives of schools and of the external evaluation body. The minister approved the outcome of this exercise and presented the framework to the parliament.

Another observation was the need for compromises to get all stakeholders on board initially to work with the quality framework. After a few years of using the framework it could be adapted and improved. Indeed, it is important to review periodically the framework and to integrate updated knowledge on the system from both research and findings from the external evaluation process. This calls for shaping the design and implementation of the framework as a developmental process, deliberately creating room for learning and adapting.

Key points

- Co-creation proved to be crucial for developing a common and supported framework that guides both internal and external evaluation of schools.
- Using the framework is a dynamic process, leaving room for adaptation along the way.

5.4. Establishing a new body for external school evaluation (Issue 4)

The reform introduces a new body for external school evaluation. A major aim of the new body will be to provide reliable and useful knowledge (Issue 4). This raises the question of how to establish it in such a way that it is accepted by school leaders, teachers and other stakeholders, including the current school supervisors. It was generally felt at the seminar that to promote trust, and even ownership, stakeholders should be engaged in building the new body, particularly in the strategic discussions about the aims and ways of working. Besides trust, time is needed, as several participants emphasised. These points are elaborated below.

Participants discussed several important aspects related to ensuring the reliability of knowledge generated by the new external evaluation body. Transparency on procedures for the new body are of core importance. A key element to strengthen reliability is to develop a common reference framework for school quality (see section 5.3). Here, participants emphasised the need to take the necessary time to develop this collaboratively. One of the participants shared the experience of preparing with stakeholders the framework for external school evaluation over a three year period, while in another case it took one year. Also after establishing the body and its procedures, time proved to be needed for trialling, learning and adapting, both for the external evaluators as well as teachers, school leaders and school supervisors. Take time for an “explorative implementation”, as it was called in one of the countries.

Participants also underlined the need to carefully select and provide specific training for the new “external school evaluators”. In one system, new recruits to external school evaluation receive training in core competencies such as judgement, communication and empathy. Common training and approaches are a key way to heighten the reliability of knowledge generated from school external evaluation throughout the system. Participants underlined the need to continually develop and update external evaluators’ capacity.

While considering how to ensure that external evaluation provides useful knowledge, participants emphasised that it would need to be meaningful to the daily work of teachers and school leaders. It should be clear that external evaluation serves the improvement of teaching and learning, either directly or indirectly by strengthening quality assurance processes within the school. This focus on teaching and learning is also key to building trust and acceptance for external school evaluation within schools. One system provided an example of the recruitment of (former) teachers to the external school evaluation body. Due to their inside knowledge of teaching, former teachers can be perceived as highly credible to give meaningful feedback to teachers during external school evaluation. However, in this case it is essential to provide specific training in external school evaluation competencies (see above).

Participants also offered examples of how tailoring external school evaluation to specific school needs can strengthen its usefulness to schools and the system overall. For example, a mechanism of follow-up to external school evaluations, for evaluators to check after a specified time whether the school had applied possible recommendations and whether teaching and learning had actually improved. In several systems different models of external school evaluation coexist, with varying intensity of external evaluation depending on the level of school performance and/or key leadership aspects, such as the level of policy-making capacity at the school. However, participants pointed to the need for meaningful knowledge at the system level, and this would mean that external school evaluation also provides insight to processes in higher performing and/or higher capacity schools. On this latter point, this was also linked to a concern to maintain a breadth of knowledge for those undertaking external school evaluation – too narrow a focus on only underperforming schools could lead to impoverished judgement capacity of external school evaluators.

Participants also discussed how to find a balance between formative and summative use of available data by the new external evaluation body and other actors. Most of the participating countries had chosen a low stakes approach to external evaluation – low stakes in terms of the publication of results and the formative use of external evaluation outcomes, for example in a dialogue-based design. Sometimes, the external evaluation body balanced this by actively involving students and parents in the evaluation process. This puts some pressure on teachers and school leaders. As a general point, the choice on the overall balance between formative and summative aspects may evolve over time as the external evaluation system matures. In one of the systems, the external evaluation body had started publishing reports on schools, although they only contain qualitative information. Another system is considering the introduction of more serious consequences of external school evaluation, such as school closure.

Key points

- To create trust and acceptance, relevant stakeholders should be involved in developing a new external evaluation body and its methods.
- Transparent procedures heighten reliability of the knowledge generated via external evaluation.
- The selection and training of evaluators is key for reliable and credible external school evaluation.
- To provide useful knowledge for schools and the system, external evaluation should focus on the improvement of teaching and learning.
- Building trust in external evaluation takes time and requires a careful balancing of formative and summative aspects.

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