

OECD Reviews of Evaluation and Assessment in Education

Denmark

MAIN CONCLUSIONS

Claire Shewbridge, Eunice Jang,
Peter Matthews and Paulo Santiago



This summary of main conclusions is drawn from *OECD Reviews of Evaluation and Assessment in Education: Denmark*. The full report is available on the project's website: www.oecd.org/edu/evaluationpolicy.

ORGANISATION FOR ECONOMIC CO-OPERATION AND DEVELOPMENT

The OECD is a unique forum where the governments of 34 democracies work together to address the economic, social and environmental challenges of globalisation. The OECD is also at the forefront of efforts to understand and to help governments respond to new developments and concerns, such as corporate governance, the information economy and the challenges of an ageing population. The Organisation provides a setting where governments can compare policy experiences, seek answers to common problems, identify good practice and work to co-ordinate domestic and international policies.

The OECD member countries are: Australia, Austria, Belgium, Canada, Chile, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Iceland, Ireland, Israel, Italy, Japan, Korea, Luxembourg, Mexico, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Poland, Portugal, the Slovak Republic, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Turkey, the United Kingdom and the United States. The Commission of the European Communities takes part in the work of the OECD.

This work is published on the responsibility of the Secretary-General of the OECD. The opinions expressed and the arguments employed herein do not necessarily reflect the official views of the Organisation or of the governments of its member countries.

Executive Summary

The major responsibility for the quality of compulsory education in Denmark lies with the school providers – the 98 municipalities for the public schools (*Folkeskole*) and parent-elected boards for the private schools. An evaluation and assessment framework, therefore, plays a key role for central authorities to promote and monitor sufficient quality and focus on improvement. Denmark holds high ambitions to improve student outcomes and deserves credit for gaining broad agreement from all major stakeholders in efforts to stimulate an assessment and evaluation culture in compulsory education. Over a short period of time, Denmark has introduced new national bodies to monitor and evaluate quality in compulsory education, new national measures on student outcomes in compulsory education and requirements for municipalities to produce annual quality reports on their school systems. However, the suite of compulsory measures does not yet form a coherent framework for evaluation and assessment. In developing a strategic plan to complete the evaluation and assessment framework, the evaluation of teaching and learning quality should be at the core. Top priorities are to:

- **Integrate teacher and school principal appraisal in the framework.** Teachers are trusted professionals who increasingly work in teams and benefit from the support of special advisors. However, there is no shared understanding of what counts as accomplished teaching in Denmark and teacher appraisal is not systematic. A framework of teaching standards would provide a common basis for both teacher appraisal and a career structure for teachers. An external certification process would determine both teachers' career advancement and professional development plans. Danish teachers are generally keen to receive feedback for their professional development, but while some school principals hold a formal dialogue with teachers on an annual basis, it is not wide-spread practice for school principals to observe teaching. School principals should be held accountable for providing adequate developmental teacher appraisal and such appraisal should be linked with both teacher professional development and school improvement.
- **Refine key elements in the framework and clarify their purposes.** The Common Objectives that 'teaching should lead towards' in compulsory education provide a common basis for the evaluation and assessment of student learning progress in all schools. However, teachers and schools report difficulty in translating them into instructional and assessment plans. Refining these and developing performance standards against them would promote more consistent implementation and a more active engagement of students in their own assessment. At the same time, it would be important to review the purpose, procedures and content of the final examinations in Grade 9 to ensure they reflect both the breadth of outcomes and the type of skills desired at the end of compulsory education. The common set of indicators in the municipal quality reports does not sufficiently

address the quality of teaching and learning. Developing an agreed set of formal research-based criteria of school quality would make the internal and external evaluation of schools more coherent and relevant to school improvement. Further, at this pivotal stage it is critical to clarify the monitoring purpose of the national tests, further validate these and to develop a strategy to complement them with broader measures of outcomes, including stakeholder views on the quality of teaching and learning.

- **Invest in evaluation and assessment capacity development at all levels.** While there have been both central and municipal efforts to promote evaluation and assessment activities, implementation varies among schools and municipalities. Developing evaluation and assessment capacity throughout the compulsory education system includes further efforts to: build teacher assessment competencies, by ensuring adequate attention to this in initial teacher education, providing sufficient professional development and making more use of specialised evaluation advisors at schools; develop competency profiles for school principals and municipal education directors; engage schools in more systematic self-evaluation, by training school leaders to implement an authentic evaluation of teaching and learning, feedback and objective setting at their schools and preparing senior school staff for particular evaluation responsibilities; replenish central evaluation expertise to support capacity development at the municipal level; build on successful municipal partnerships to develop evaluation capacity; and strengthen the monitoring of municipal evaluation frameworks and ensure these include an evaluation of the quality of teaching and learning.
- **Promote and support the optimal use of evaluation and assessment results.** The new national tests offer a powerful pedagogical tool to teachers, and efforts should continue to promote the use of results by teachers to adjust teaching strategies and the possibility for teachers to re-administer the tests to follow up on student progress in the discrete areas tested. Similarly, national test results and the Individual Student Plans should be key elements in teachers' communication with students' parents. Outcome data and evaluation results should form a core part of the municipal monitoring system and discussion and follow-up with schools for improvement. Well led schools benefit from effective use of central or municipal self-evaluation guidelines, plus the rapid availability of results from the national tests. Devising an optimal system to feedback key results held at the national level to municipalities for their monitoring purposes will limit the repetition of basic statistical tasks at the municipal level. In general, the reporting and analysis of information from the national monitoring system could be further exploited to inform system improvement.

Assessment and Conclusions

Education system context

The vast majority of Danish students follow compulsory education in public schools and municipalities are responsible for their quality

While the Ministry of Education sets the legal framework for compulsory education providers and the overall objectives for compulsory education, the decentralised Danish system places the major responsibility for quality assurance with the providers. For public schools (the *Folkeskole*), the 98 municipalities are responsible for the overall quality of their schools and for setting local objectives and conditions, including the goals and scope for school activities, as well as the supervision of the *Folkeskole*. For private schools, parent-elected boards are responsible for school quality, in particular for ensuring that educational content matches academic standards in the *Folkeskole*, plus they are supervised by the Ministry of Education.

Political urgency to improve student learning outcomes in compulsory education and proposal for reform

The Danish Government's competitiveness strategy, in tandem with political and public debate on the 'mediocre' performance of Danish students on international assessments, has increased policy focus on improving student learning outcomes. While Denmark is proud of international evidence that its students are leaders in terms of civic knowledge, recent results from the OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA 2009) confirmed Denmark's average academic performance at the end of compulsory education and, importantly, a shortage of Danish students at the highest performance levels. Largely influenced by a review of the *Folkeskole* commissioned by the Prime Minister in early 2010, the government proposes a reform aiming to strengthen academic performance by giving more freedom to schools in return for an increased focus on results, in particular, the publication of national test results for schools.

An increased focus on evaluation, assessment and accountability since 2006, including new national bodies and quality assurance systems

The OECD in 2004 emphasised the importance of establishing an evaluation culture (following its review of the *Folkeskole*) and the revised 2006 *Folkeskole* Act aimed to stimulate this and to introduce an element of accountability to compulsory education providers. The raft of new national measures included the requirement for municipalities to draft and publish annual quality reports on the schools in their jurisdiction, the

introduction of national tests with a provision to publish a national performance profile on average performance in these tests, plus the introduction of mandatory Individual Student Plans to document student learning progress. The final examinations in Form 9 were made mandatory and the publication of these results by school and municipality was assured by the 2002 transparency law. Further, new national bodies were created to monitor and evaluate compulsory education. As of 1 March 2011, these comprise: the Quality and Supervision Agency (administering national and international assessments, producing quality support materials and supervising public and private providers); the School Council (an advisory body with authority to commission official evaluations); and the Danish Evaluation Institute (conducting both officially commissioned and independent evaluations).

Strengths and challenges

Political support and focus on outcomes has stimulated the development of an evaluation and assessment framework, but it is incomplete

Denmark holds high ambitions to improve student outcomes and deserves credit for gaining broad agreement from all major stakeholders and stimulating an assessment and evaluation culture in compulsory education. Over a short period of time, Denmark has introduced a suite of compulsory measures of student learning, a system of quality reporting involving municipalities and schools, and a national structure to monitor outcomes and evaluate priorities in compulsory education. Further, these measures for student assessment, school evaluation and system evaluation were largely designed as a coherent set and a process of ongoing dialogue and evaluation seeks to maximise their effectiveness and adjust them where necessary. However, they are not yet fully developed and do not yet form a coherent framework for evaluation and assessment. Importantly, the framework does not include the key components of teacher and school principal appraisal. Further, the private sector is not fully integrated.

There is a common basis for evaluation and assessment and capacity building efforts, but activities vary among schools and municipalities

Binding national Common Objectives specify the skills and knowledge that ‘teaching should lead towards’ by the end of compulsory education in a given subject (end objectives) as well as at different stages of compulsory education (form-level objectives) and must be used in all schools. These form a common basis for the evaluation and assessment of student learning progress. Further, central and municipal efforts to promote evaluation and assessment activities include centrally developed tools for teachers, schools and municipalities, training for municipalities on drafting quality reports, plus conferences and partnerships to share and build municipal efforts. However, the implementation of the Common Objectives varies due to limited detail in some subjects and a lack of assessment exemplars beyond those for the final examinations. Further, the level of municipal oversight and support to ensure that schools achieve these varies significantly and quality reports include no information on this apart from student results in the final examinations.

Students experience a wide range of assessment methods in their classrooms, but criticise the final examinations in Form 9

Teachers and students report using an admirable mix of different assessment methods. As such, there is very strong potential for effective formative assessment practice, *i.e.* the use of frequent assessments to identify learning needs and adapt teaching. However, the reported lack of clarity of the Common Objectives makes it difficult for teachers and schools to translate the content into instructional and assessment plans. Teachers carry the major responsibility for student summative assessment at the end of compulsory education allowing a broad overview of student achievement. In Form 9, all students must complete a mandatory project assignment in addition to written and oral standard examinations. Common marking guidelines and moderation procedures provide an equitable way to judge whether students have achieved the Common Objectives. However, the final examinations are criticised by students and others as being ‘outdated’ and students are not able to sit examinations in all subjects that they study.

National tests are powerful diagnostic tools for teachers, but not all teachers use these effectively

The rapid feedback (next day) of student results on the computer-based national tests fosters their use by teachers to adapt teaching and allows teachers to track performance of different student groups and classes. Teachers can even re-administer the test to monitor student progress. Further, results provide a very accurate diagnosis of student performance within discrete areas of the Common Objectives, as each student answers different questions adapted to his/her ability level. However, there is a need to engage some teachers in the effective use of national test results due to a lack of familiarity with the tests and analytical tools, the current debate on their potential use to hold schools accountable and the initial implementation issues in administering the computer-based tests.

Teachers are trusted professionals who draw on the expertise of advisors, but ‘accomplished teaching’ is not defined

Teachers are given considerable scope to exercise their professionalism and benefit from good levels of trust among students, parents, and the community. Schools increasingly structure their work around teaching teams sharing responsibility for organising and planning instruction and engage special support advisors, including, in a minority of schools, evaluation advisors. However, teacher appraisal is not systematic and depends on the ethos of the school or municipality. Further, there is no shared understanding of what counts as accomplished teaching in Denmark. Therefore, there is little opportunity for formal recognition and Danish teachers report that appraisal and feedback has little impact.

Teachers are keen to receive professional feedback, but there is no guarantee of pedagogical leadership

Danish teachers are generally keen to receive feedback for their professional development. Centrally developed tools for teacher appraisal are available and some feedback practices are starting to emerge, *e.g.* peers visiting classrooms or teachers

seeking feedback from students via surveys. Although some school principals hold a formal dialogue with teachers on an annual basis, there is no guarantee that teachers receive feedback for improvement. Crucially, it is not wide-spread practice for school principals to observe teaching and according to teacher reports this has much less importance in Danish teachers' appraisal than on average internationally. Where teacher appraisal happens, it does not appear to be adequately linked to professional development or school improvement in general.

National initiatives have helped to stimulate school evaluation, but there is no shared idea of what makes a good school

The national requirement for municipalities to produce annual quality reports and to publish these on their websites has been accompanied by central efforts to build municipal capacity by documenting and sharing municipal approaches and offering training to municipal officials. The School Council evaluates that such efforts have stimulated school evaluation in compulsory education. The quality reports include a common set of centrally specified indicators, as well as locally relevant indicators specified by municipalities. However, the common indicators do not sufficiently address the core processes of the quality of teaching and learning and leadership. At this stage, there is no common understanding among stakeholders in compulsory education as to what makes a good school.

Municipal quality reports should lead to positive action for school improvement, but there is a need to embed follow-up by municipalities

Municipal quality reports are intended to be the basis of further action in managing the system at the level of the municipality. First, they provide an agenda for dialogue between the municipality and the school principal and an opportunity to set aspirational targets which, replicated on a large scale, could contribute to the improvement of educational performance nationally. Second, municipalities are required to produce action plans for schools that are underachieving, which should be an important lever for school improvement provided the school has the capacity to take the necessary steps. However, the degree of follow-up by municipalities varies and is not always rigorous and objective. Without adequate follow-up of schools' subsequent action, the municipal quality reports can have little impact on school improvement.

Schools benefit from the availability of more information and tools for self-evaluation, but need to develop expertise to use these effectively

The self-evaluation guidelines and other tools offered by the Danish Evaluation Institute, Local Government Denmark and some municipalities are valued by some school principals who feel empowered to be more accountable for the effectiveness and performance of their schools. Similarly, the rapid availability of results from the national tests is welcomed by teachers in well-led schools as a way to reflect on teaching strategies. However, in general there is limited evidence of school self-evaluation or observation-based appraisal of teachers. The predominant culture lacks the discipline

involved in arriving at an assessment of the quality or impact of practice through the collection of relevant evidence and analysis against a framework of principles, criteria or benchmarks for school improvement.

Denmark has developed much-needed national measures on outcomes, but these need to be further developed and complemented

Since 2001, the publication of final examination results in Forms 9 and 10, alongside teacher-awarded final grades, serve as the major national indicators of overall quality in Danish compulsory education, as they cover the *Folkeskole* and the majority of private providers. These complement international measures (e.g. PISA), to inform debate on the overall productivity agenda. The introduction of the national tests also offers monitoring information on the *Folkeskole* at different stages in compulsory education and the first real opportunity to reliably monitor progress in educational outcomes over time against the national Common Objectives. However, the lack of inclusion of the private sector limits their national monitoring value. Plus a lack of clarification of how results will be used to hold schools accountable runs the risk that results will not reflect real progress in outcomes, but rather just increased focus in instruction on the discrete areas measured in the tests. Further, it is not clear to what extent current national measures are assessing higher-order thinking skills and cross-curricular competencies – a serious concern if they are to signal the expected outcomes of compulsory education. Also, there is a lack of information on the quality of the teaching and learning environment, e.g. views of students, teachers and parents.

There is a strengthened national structure to monitor compulsory education, but no overview of municipal quality assurance systems

The Quality and Supervision Agency has the mandate to monitor, evaluate and promote quality in the Danish school system, including monitoring school providers. In addition, the School Council has introduced a more systematic evaluation of the *Folkeskole* by commissioning high-quality evaluations on a large scale in different priority areas. However, there is no comprehensive overview of municipal quality assurance systems. Currently, the Quality and Supervision Agency limits monitoring to a compliancy check on the content of the municipal quality reports, plus a focus on sustained underperformance in particular schools (as evidenced by their Form 9 and 10 results).

Pointers for future policy development

Develop a strategic plan to complete the evaluation and assessment framework

Building on the national student assessment, school and system evaluation measures, there should be a strategic plan to complete the evaluation and assessment framework, including the evaluation of municipalities and school principal and teacher appraisal. A successful framework will allow proper articulation between the different evaluation components (e.g. between school evaluation and teacher appraisal) and include the

evaluation of teaching and learning quality at the core. This indicates that school evaluation should comprise the monitoring of the quality of teaching and learning, possibly include the external validation of school-based processes for teacher appraisal (holding the school principal accountable as necessary), and school development processes should explore links to the evaluation of teaching practice. In the context of school self-evaluation, it is also important to ensure the centrality of the evaluation of teaching quality and the feedback to individual teachers. Priority should be given to ensuring that there is heightened consistency among municipal quality assurance systems and that these focus adequately on the quality of teaching and learning.

Prioritise evaluation and assessment capacity development, clarify evaluation purposes and refine and update central measures

Now that the major centrally-designed evaluation tools have all been introduced to the *Folkeskole* (and mandatory examinations to private schools), there is considerable need to strengthen central support to ensure that these tools are linked to effective classroom practices. The top priority is to significantly invest in capacity development across the compulsory education system to ensure the effective use of these and other evaluation and assessment measures by stakeholders. The effectiveness of the overall evaluation and assessment framework depends to a large extent on whether those who evaluate and those who use evaluation results at the different levels of the system have the appropriate competencies. Further, it should be clearly communicated that the purpose of such evaluation tools is to improve educational outcomes and that stakeholders should actively use these to develop strategic improvement or action plans at all levels. In going forward there is a need to refine and expand the Common Objectives including a set of performance standards to make them a powerful basis for student assessment and school self-evaluation, to define evidence-based teaching standards, and to further develop central evaluation and assessment tools, e.g. making quality reports relevant to school self-evaluation and ensuring the final examinations reflect the knowledge and skills expected at the end of compulsory education. The *Evaluation portal* remains vital and should be expanded to offer more evaluation tools that are aligned with the Common Objectives.

Develop performance standards, engage students in assessment and review the final examinations

The Common Objectives articulate the knowledge and skills that ‘teaching should lead towards’, but not what students are expected to learn at key stages in each of the main subjects. Common Objectives with specific performance standards could guide instruction and assessment more effectively. As such, there is room to further refine and expand the Common Objectives, develop a set of specific performance standards against these and provide relevant support materials for teachers to mobilise the performance standards. It is important to build on democratic traditions and to ensure that students are actively involved in assessment. Specifying what will be assessed and how is the key to this and teachers can use performance standards to develop specific scoring rubrics with students and to stimulate student self- and peer-assessment processes. At the same time as clarifying the Common Objectives, there should be a review of the content of the final examinations to ensure they are adequately aligned with expected outcomes and

performance standards set in the Common Objectives. Further, if the final examinations are to carry higher stakes for students' entry into upper secondary education, then current procedures should be reviewed, including the moderation of oral examinations and the coverage of subjects offered in the final form levels of the *Folkeskole*.

Further develop national tests and develop teacher assessment competencies to maximise their pedagogical value

It is important to continue efforts to validate and further develop the national tests by ensuring that all Common Objectives and subject areas are given certain forms of attention and the tests are adequately aligned with the Common Objectives and include performance tasks. It is critically important to engage teachers in working effectively with the national test results as one means to diagnose student learning needs and to adjust their teaching strategies accordingly. In general, teachers need to be actively involved in developing data-driven professional learning communities where assessment data are used in non-threatening ways and teachers develop assessment competencies. This takes time and it is crucial that assessment literacy is adequately covered in initial teacher education. Further, professional development will play a pivotal role in realising a paradigm shift so that teachers view assessment as an integral part of their teaching and not as an additional burden on their teaching responsibilities.

Develop teaching standards as a basis for a career structure with progression determined by certification

Developing a framework of teaching standards as a reference for teacher appraisal is a top priority. A clear and concise profile needs to reflect the sophistication and complexity of what effective teachers are expected to know and be able to do and should be based on the objectives for student learning (the Common Objectives), be informed by research, and benefit from the ownership and responsibility of the teaching profession. Such standards should provide the common basis to organise a career structure for teachers, expressing different career stages, such as competent teacher, established teacher, and accomplished/expert teacher, with distinct roles and responsibilities in schools associated with given levels of teaching expertise. Access to each of the key stages could be associated with formal processes of appraisal through a system of teacher certification. New teachers should only access the first stage after successful completion of a mandatory probationary period. The absence of career opportunities for effective teachers undermines the role of teacher appraisal. Teacher appraisal for certification would aim to hold teachers accountable for their practice and determine both their career advancement and professional development plans.

Strengthen developmental teacher appraisal and link this with professional development and school improvement

There needs to be a stronger emphasis on teacher appraisal for the continuous improvement of teaching practices in the school (*i.e.* developmental appraisal). This would be an internal process carried out by line managers, senior peers, and the school principal (or members of the management group). The reference standards would be the teaching standards but with school-based indicators and criteria reflecting the school

objectives and context. The process should be firmly linked with teachers' professional development and school improvement. The main outcome would be meaningful feedback on teaching performance as well as on the overall contribution to the school which would lead to a plan for professional development. To be effective, appraisal for improvement requires a culture in which there is developmental classroom observation, professional feedback, peer discussion and coaching opportunities. Municipalities should ensure there are effective developmental appraisal procedures in place and hold school principals accountable for this. School principals could build capacity in appraisal methods at the school level by preparing members of the management group or accomplished/expert teachers to undertake specific evaluation functions within the school, including a stronger role for evaluation advisors.

Define formal criteria of school quality and make the quality reports more useful for school self-evaluation

The internal and external evaluation of schools, including the municipal quality reports, should be based on an agreed set of formal criteria of school quality, *e.g.* the quality of teaching and learning, teacher professional development, pedagogical leadership, school curriculum, vision and expectations, plus the assessment of student learning progress and outcomes. Without this, the school evaluation framework lacks coherence. The quality reports should be further developed in ways which encourage and take greater account of school self-evaluation and teacher appraisal, and that put the quality of teaching and learning at the heart of the process. A requirement for schools to produce an annual quality report would be a stimulus for many schools to further their self-evaluation practices and holds strong potential for school improvement, if the process adequately engages the school community and the report is based on sound school quality criteria. School principals are pivotal in developing a school self-evaluation culture. This argues for a shift in the role of school principal from one who administers and manages the school and organises its staffing, students and programmes, to one who is the pedagogical leader of the school.

Strengthen municipal and school follow-up on school evaluation results and support school evaluation capacity development

The school evaluation culture will not be endemic until evaluation is shared, followed up and reviewed to see what difference it has made both internally by schools and externally by municipalities. Outcome data and evaluation results should form a core part of the municipal monitoring system and discussion and follow-up with schools for improvement. In particular, nationally comparable information, including national test results, transition statistics and student final grades in Form 9, provide comparative information across schools that can be used by municipalities most constructively to identify improvement and share best practice among schools. Municipalities and schools need to go further to ensure constructive use of these outcome data and strive to complement them with other measures. To promote internal and external school evaluation capacity, it would be useful to establish an authoritative centre for school evaluation at arm's length from schools and municipalities to develop evaluation frameworks and criteria and model good practice. Given their key influence in furthering

the effective internal and external evaluation of schools, there should be competency profiles for both municipal education directors and school principals.

Develop broader measures of outcomes at the system level and carefully review the monitoring role of national tests

It is important to develop a strategy to complement existing national monitoring information with broader measures of outcomes, including stakeholder views on the quality of teaching and learning. There is strong support among key stakeholders to develop broader measures of student learning, *e.g.* creativity and innovation, and it would be useful to take stock of current efforts to develop such measures at the municipal level and to evaluate to what extent these could be supported and extended throughout the system. The current national tests could be developed to measure the progression of a given cohort through compulsory education and to include open-ended questions. Longer-term efforts could include administering a light monitoring sample survey to provide stable trend information on a broader range of student knowledge and skills. Critically, there should be a careful review of strategies to maximise the monitoring potential of the national tests at the system level, in particular the proposal to publish national test results at the school level. The priorities would be to continue to validate the national tests and to go further in supporting and promoting capacity building to ensure the effective use of national test results by school principals and municipal directors as a core part of their quality monitoring systems.

Strengthen efforts to both monitor and promote municipal evaluation capacity

Clearly formulated objectives and performance management at the municipal level together with strong school leadership has proven to be an effective partnership for improvement in Denmark. Therefore, central monitoring of municipal evaluation capacity should be strengthened, as it is of key importance to identify municipalities where real progress is being made in student outcomes and to share this knowledge throughout the system. In subsequent years, one helpful indicator will be student progress as measured in the national tests and it will be important to invest in efficient systems to report and analyse this to feed results into the central monitoring of municipalities. It is of critical importance to devise an optimal feedback system of key results held at the national level to municipalities for their monitoring purposes, so as to minimise the repetition of basic statistical and reporting tasks at the municipal level. At the same time, there is room for further central and municipal collaboration to build municipal monitoring capacity, including the effective use of national test results and other performance indicators, and also to design ways to further stimulate horizontal collaborations among municipalities.