

Ongoing Issues of Concern

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Identifying issues of educational concern

Newspaper headlines such as “Grey wave creates disastrous situations for schools” or “Violence hits big-city schools” leave no ambiguity. According to the newspapers, schools are affected by a range of troubling issues. But what are the issues of most concern to pupils, parents, teachers and the general public? This question underlies the Education Council’s advisory report *Ongoing Issues of Concern*. The Minister of Education, Culture and Science’s request for advice on this subject ties in with the political trend to (better) gauge public opinion.

Public opinion and policy

The Education Council has charted the concerns of pupils, parents, teachers and the general public. These issues have been identified through various means. Pupils, parents and teachers have shared their worries through electronic meetings and parents have voiced their concerns on the discussion board hosted at the Council’s website. These and other sources, such as an international literature review study, provided the Council with ample data. 600 parents with children living at home were then invited to look in more detail at the issues identified by a questionnaire. In this way, the Council obtained a clearer picture of the educational concerns people are currently facing. All these efforts resulted in a public agenda for education.

The next obvious question was if and, if so, how schools, municipalities, the Ministry of Education and politicians address these concerns. Is there a gap between the public’s agenda and the educational policy agenda? In other words: how do policymakers address educational concerns and what improvements are required?

The public agenda for education

Pupils, parents, teachers and the general public each have their own perspective on education. They express their concerns from these perspectives. The Council holds the opinion that the Minister of Education, Culture and Science and other policymakers should take account of the public’s viewpoints in formulating policy.

Parents see education as a framework within which they have to make choices for their children. It is within this framework that they express their concerns, for example their dissatisfaction with parent-school communication. The general public tends to focus on the education system as such and is concerned about issues such as societal integration and problems with ethnic minority groups. Teachers see themselves as employees and are concerned about their working conditions. Pupils see things from a client’s or customer’s perspective and complain about outdated learning models. Despite the different perspectives, several concerns are shared by all four groups.

The following items have been placed on the public agenda for education.

- Concerns about teachers: teacher shortages; working conditions; inconsistent teacher quality; and the perceived reluctance to discuss the issue of poorly performing teachers.
- Concerns about pupils: behavioural problems; early school leaving; mismatches between the needs and interests of pupils and current provision; lack of personalised attention; and overcrowded classes and schools.

- Concerns about norms, values and discipline: lack of school rules; lack of respect for teachers; and insufficient attention to norms, values and integration.
- Concerns about the relationship between the school and the parents: the increasing number of educative tasks for schools; school-parent relationship problems.
- Concerns about educational innovations at the secondary level: the first phase (*basisvorming*) and the second phase (*studiehuis*).
- Concerns about the difficult financial circumstances of schools.

The educational policy agenda

Many public concerns are familiar to schools, municipalities, the Ministry of Education and politicians. There are, however, a number of areas in which the public agenda and the policy agenda diverge.

As regards communication, a language barrier has been found to exist between the public authorities and the public: the terminology used by the authorities impedes mutual understanding. For example, the issue of the increasing number of educative tasks for the school has been put on the national policy agenda in the form of support for initiatives such as the 'broad school'. The public, however, is unlikely to understand the term 'broad school' and will therefore not recognise the authorities' concern over the issue. In the area of communication, there is still room for considerable improvement.

A substantive issue on which the public agenda and the policy agenda diverge is parental concern over the reluctance to discuss the poor performance of some teachers. Politicians, the national and the municipal authorities do not yet recognise this as an issue of concern. The Council believes that this subject should be part of a national debate about the different perspectives on issues of concern. The issues inventory demonstrates that the time is ripe to discuss the extent to which schools should take on educative tasks. Which educative tasks should be the responsibility of parents and which tasks should and can be assigned to schools? Should schools be given additional powers? Where do we draw the line? Another subject that should be discussed is the current educational model. Does this model offer learning opportunities that are responsive to pupils' needs and interests?

This public debate may lead to increased awareness. The Minister of Education will be able to use the outcomes of the debate to decide the best course of action. Should self-organisation of specific groups be promoted? Should specific school-related bodies be activated? Or should solutions be developed by the national authorities? And how to ensure that the public is adequately informed of policy decisions on these issues?

Other remarkable findings and the Council's recommendations

Some other remarkable findings to emerge from the survey and the Education Council's recommendations:

The issue identification process should be enhanced. Independent research (that is, research conducted independently from the national government) using a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods is an absolute must. Not only should public opinion be surveyed, but also people's actual behaviour. There is, after all, often a discrepancy between theory and practice. For example, it turns out that parents are indeed reluctant to send their children to so-called 'black' schools although they deny this when the question is put to them.

Some 60 per cent of the surveyed parents indicate that there is no platform for their concerns or do not know if such a platform exists. This raises two questions: Are informal arrangements such as school-parent consultations effective? And how meaningful are formal

procedures such as parental participation and complaints arrangements? Perhaps the time has come to develop new platforms on which the public can discuss issues of educational concern.

The advisory report devotes special attention to the issue of educational freedom. The freedom of school choice as it exists in the Netherlands is a highly prized asset. Parents are able to select the school that best suits them and their children, thus preventing any feelings of dissatisfaction. However, this educational freedom is threatened by a number of developments. The issues surrounding societal integration and large-scale schools are at odds with the freedom of school choice. Educational freedom is at risk in the big cities. Increasingly, at the primary and secondary levels there are waiting lists as well as lottery systems and -according to some people- there is unfair selection. Submission of an enrolment form to a chosen school no longer guarantees a place. Private education and home-based education are on the increase, a signal that the current provision does not always accommodate parental wishes.