

Vigorous supervision of education

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“Supervision is fine, especially when it involves someone else”. Less supervision is primarily desirable when people themselves are the object of the supervision. Rather than having someone look over their shoulder, they aim to learn by doing.. However, the context can change as well. Parents still want to know whether the school they have in mind complies with certain minimum quality standards, whether the teachers are qualified, and what results the school has achieved. Society can benefit from spending public resources on education that produces results, in other words certificates that reflect a certain level, and pupils or students with knowledge and competencies. Sometimes it is necessary to take action tactfully, discretely, professionally and, above all, powerfully and vigorously. In the event that an institution clearly fails to meet the mark, students or parents have nothing to gain from a customer-friendly, demand-oriented approach on the part of the inspector.

What is the problem? What is the objective?

The Minister has asked the Education Council to outline a view on the future of supervision. How must supervision of education be structured? Can parties other than the government supervise education? And what measures and instruments are then required?

Vigorous supervision is necessary because it is a way of monitoring the boundaries, for example the boundaries of freedom of education, the boundaries of what educational institutions do with the public resources at their disposal, and what is appropriate. These are public interest boundaries based on norms laid down by the democratic legislator. Supervision is always linked to norms, as well as to authority and power. On the basis of his authority, the supervisor has certain instruments at his disposal to correct those he supervises. Supervision is, therefore, not the same as giving account or carrying out an internal audit.

What is the tenor of this recommendation?

The tenor of this recommendation is that all those who are involved in education (parents, pupils, students, teachers and instructors, administrators and politicians) want to acquire an insight into the way education functions. That insight has to be based on independent information and has to be summarised in the form of a manageable number of norms, so that all those involved can ascertain what state education is in. The Council's objective is for information-rich and, at the same time, straightforward norms to guide the actions of the different parties involved. In other words, clear norms which have plenty of content and which are easy to enforce.

The Council is of the opinion that the need for such norms has not decreased but rather increased. Schools have become more differentiated, society is becoming increasingly fragmented, and parents want to know where the best education can be found. In such a situation, a limited range of norms provides a foundation which we are going to need badly in the future. Structure is required more in uncertain times than in predictable situations. The Council's view is that those involved in the supervision of education can operationally formulate such norms on the basis of information and can also enforce them whenever necessary.

Points of departure and recommendations

The Education Council wishes to draw the attention of the Minister (and her Inspectorate) to three main points of departure for future supervision. These entail emphasising and distinguishing between the unique tasks of the Inspectorate, stimulating simplicity of supervision and ensuring more diversity in supervision per education sector. These points of departure are linked to a number of recommendations. The most important of these are referred to below. In addition, it is up to the institutions to establish clear lines of accountability and draw up agreements.

1. *Emphasising and distinguishing between the unique tasks of the Inspectorate*
Informing

- In addition to the current “customers”, such as school heads and the Minister, Inspectorate information must also be relevant to new categories of people such as Supervisory Boards, local authorities and participation councils. The newly opened *Supervision Portal* with combined information from the Cfi (Central Funding of Institutions Agency), the Inspectorate and audit services should also be accessible to the parties involved as referred to.
- The information supplied by institutions must continue to be audited, for example by means of random checks by a supervisor (the Inspectorate or the NVAO [the Accreditation Organisation of The Netherlands and Flanders]).

Assessing

- Clear supervision is only possible using clear norms. Clear norms must be developed in a number of core areas which are not open to negotiation. These could relate, for example, to the minimum amount of teaching time (39-40 weeks in secondary education), the number of authorised teachers, and result norms as the minimum standards for language and arithmetic which (90% of) pupils in a certain age category have to achieve.
- The primacy of the legislator also applies. The setting of norms has now been delegated in secondary education. The transparency and the legal securities must be safeguarded if independent administrative bodies or private institutions draw up policy rules or criteria.

Enforcing

- In order to encourage vigorous actions on the part of the Inspectorate, more diversity must be generated as regards the range of available sanctions. These must include warnings (the yellow card), ultimatums (a result-oriented agreement to realise improvements before a certain date) and ultimately the appointment of a school administrator and/or the closure of the institution. There should be no hesitancy when it comes to taking action in the event of serious and long-term failure on the part of the school board (for example administrative chaos, financial misappropriations, or poor education results over a longer period), or in the event of acute problems.

2. Stimulating simplicity of supervision

The stacking of supervision, quality assurance procedures and institutions solves very little. The creation of a new Education Authority does nothing to enhance clarity. Some of these problems are caused by the transfer of Inspectorate tasks to other players in the field, such as a higher education accreditation organisation and a quality centre for examinations in the vocational training and adult education sector. The Council believes that the various procedures must be interconnected more effectively and, above all, more systematically, and that they must link up better.

- Supervision on existing guarantees, such as the examination and competence requirements applicable to teachers, must be intensified. The Inspectorate could focus its supervision more on intensifying the supervision of examinations at the teaching training institutions. This links up with the point of departure that the government’s primary task is to guarantee high-quality compulsory education. The starting point is the quality of the prospective teacher.
- The Inspectorate must take responsibility for monitoring the level of the final examinations in secondary education.
- No additional external supervisory institutions should be involved (so no new, separate Education Authority). Instead, existing supervisory bodies must cooperate and exchange information more effectively.

3. Ensuring more diversity in supervision per sector

More supervision is necessary in (compulsory) primary and secondary education than in higher education. At all levels, however, there is a need for an external supervisor who takes action when necessary. In compulsory education a supervisor is needed who actually visits the schools. The vocational training and adult education sector is in a midway position. The extent and the professionalism of the institutions justify an orientation towards the principles of supervision in higher education (a greater focus on market forces, European developments). However, the position, age and background of the participants and the limited freedom of choice in some regions demand a lasting and strong commitment on the part of the Inspectorate.

- Developments in the education sectors must be monitored and evaluated. What are the side-effects of scaling down government supervision? Has the intended objective of more space for the professional and the institution been achieved? What consequences has this had for the position of the pupil or student? It is advisable to take account of experiences which have been acquired, for example, in higher education and the healthcare sector.

Future supervision and the institutions

In conjunction with the recommendation entitled *Sound Educational Administration*, it is sensible to look for ways in which internal supervision can be strengthened. Information and norms are essential to internal supervision as well. The inspectorate reports are an important internal supervision source.

In addition:

- The Council advises the Minister to work on vigorous internal supervision and internal quality assurance within the framework of properly arranged groups of schools and boards. Visits by colleagues, certification, the granting of quality marks (for example for international curricula) and (sector) codes can contribute to the development of quality assurance and sound administration. Issues must be clearly defined. Adequate internal supervision, within an institution or within a sector, is dependent on a number of preconditions, such as a limited number of institutions, a high level of professionalism (both as regards attitudes and the systems) and effective control by means of “naming, shaming and blaming” or concrete sanctions (for example banishing from a sector organisation).
- At the same time, the education world must be vigilant as regards excessive embellishment in the form of protocols, codes and systems. This can produce results which are entirely the opposite of what is desired, namely more rules, less space for professionals, less attention for the primary process and less of a guarantee of good education as far as parents, pupils and students are concerned.