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A portrayal of School quality.

Proposals for the responsible publication of data on the quality of schools

Summary

The Education Council is an independent advisory body, set up by the act of 15 may 1997 (the Education Council act). The council advises, whether requested to or not, on the main features of the policy and legislation in the field of education. The council advises the ministers of Education, Sciences and Cultural Affairs and of Agriculture, Nature Management and Fisheries. The upper and lower chambers of the states general can also request recommendations from the council. Local authorities can, in special cases of local education policy, call on the services of the Education Council. The council consists of nineteen members who are appointed in a private capacity.

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A portrayal of recommendations with regard to school quality. *Proposals for the responsible publication of data on the quality of schools* issued to the Minister of Education, Sciences and Cultural Affairs.

Recommendations issued by the Education Council dated 20 October 1999. Order number 990487/368.

A PORTRAYAL OF SCHOOL QUALITY
proposals for the responsible publication
of data on the quality of schools
Summary

Background to the recommendations given
The background to the request for recommendations from the state secretary for education is the increased interest of parents, pupils, schools, government and society as a whole in the quality of education. In response to the publication of school results in *Trouw* [Dutch daily newspaper] and other media and the resulting phenomenon of the public assessment of schools, the Inspectorate issued so-called 'quality cards'. These developments gave rise to a variety of questions on the theme of "the publication of school results". The theme focuses on the question of the objective, by whom and in which manner data on the achievements of schools can be made public.

Answer to the problem formulated
The following problem is central to the recommendations entitled "a portrayal of School quality":
how can the needs of those involved for data on the quality of schools be fulfilled in a responsible manner and what is the role of the national government in this process?

In order to answer this question the Education Council has formulated a number of different *sub- questions*:

1. What data portrays the quality of a school and what are a school's 'core characteristics'?
2. Which characteristics of schools do those directly involved in education, namely parents and pupils, schools and national government, consider important and what do they want to know on the subject?
3. What quality data on schools should be available, given the answers to questions 1 and 2?
4. Who is responsible for the publication of the data in question?
5. What undesirable side effects can result from the publication of data on the qualities of schools and (how) can these be avoided?
6. How can the publication of quality data fulfil the criteria of validity, reliability and accessibility?

Answer to sub-question 1
The concept of the quality of a school or school quality has been interpreted broadly in these recommendations. Quality is a container concept, that is it can mean different things to different people. However, the quality of a school has to be demonstrated in some way or other. That is why the assessment of the quality of a school is primarily based on the school's results. A school may be expected to realise, as much as possible, the educational objectives which are partly laid down by law and can partly be determined by the school itself. The effectiveness of a school, that is the extent to which a school succeeds in realising the educational objectives with regard to pupils, provides an important indication of the quality of a school. In addition, a school's efficiency will also have to be considered during the assessment.
A school's results depend, to a considerable degree, on the starting level of the pupils at the school. That is why the starting level of the pupils should be taken into account when assessing a school's results. This means that a school's added value has to be determined.
Results, in the sense of data on the effectiveness and the efficiency of schools, can therefore be regarded as core characteristics of school quality, provided the added value of the school is also taken into account. In other words, a good school is one that educates a lot of pupils to at least the achievement level that can be expected on the basis of their starting level without a lot of pupils having to repeat years or dropping out in the process.

An assessment is then carried out as to whether, in addition to result characteristics, process and organisation characteristics of schools can be distinguished which can also be regarded as crucial for the quality of a school and as indicators for quality. For a variety of reasons, The Council believes that these characteristics, despite the fact that

reasonable empirical evidence exists for certain characteristics, cannot (for the time being) be regarded as being core characteristics.

Answer to sub-question 2
Characteristics which *national government* regard as being of crucial importance for the basic quality of schools are laid down in the form of standards of quality. The Council has analysed the content of those standards of quality which are directly relevant to the content and organisation of education. These standards of quality can be subdivided into three categories. They concern general objectives and preconditions, educational content and justification documents. By virtue of its constitutional responsibility, the national government's task is to know a great deal on the state of education. In recent years, this has primarily taken the form of assessing policy and emphasising the focus on schools' results.

Parents and pupils appear, above all, to attach importance to 'soft' characteristics such as atmosphere, school climate, teaching methods and pastoral care. Results are considered to be important to a lesser extent. Past data shows, however, that parents are becoming more and more interested in results. As far as information needs are concerned, it is assumed that parents and pupils wish to receive information on all the characteristics of a school which they consider to be important.

The quality characteristics that *schools* consider to be important do not differ very much from the characteristics put forward by parents and pupils. However, the characteristic of atmosphere is less pronounced and more emphasis is placed on characteristics that relate to the educational content and the organisation of education at the school. Within the framework of internal quality assurance, schools need plenty of data on the way they function. In addition, schools need information in order to give an account to the government and parents. Data on results and (process) data relating to a variety of other areas are important to the school in this context.

Answer to sub-questions 3 and 4
The third sub-question can be answered on the basis of the analyses carried out in order to answer the first two sub-questions, namely: what quality data on schools needs to be available? This question is answered in connection with the fourth sub-question relating to the actor responsible for publishing the data.

Provided the differences in pupil starting levels are taken into account, data on the effectiveness and efficiency of schools constitutes an important indication of the quality of a school. National government, schools and, to an increasing extent, parents too are interested in data on school results. In addition, this data can, in principle, be measured and compared. The Council therefore supports the publication of this data.

The data on the effectiveness of schools entails a distinction being made between data that concerns the effectiveness with regard to statutory objectives and data on the effectiveness with regard to school-specific objectives.

The council considers the publication of data relating to statutory objectives to be the responsibility of national government. The same applies to data on the efficiency of schools.

The effectiveness with regard to *statutory objectives* can, in secondary education, be deduced to a large extent from schools' central exam results. This is not possible in the case of primary education due to the absence of a final exam. In this context the Council proposes testing the extent to which schools succeed in realising (part of) the core objective with regard to pupils, on the basis of the so-called learning standards. Other recently published recommendations by the Council, entitled *Zeker weten. Leerstandaarden als basis voor toegankelijkheid* (1999) [Knowing for sure. Learning standards as the basis for *accessibility*], explain what learning standards are and what function they can fulfil when testing crucial core objectives.

In addition to data on effectiveness and efficiency, the government needs to publish data on the added value of schools.

The data which falls under the responsibility of the government can be published in the form of quality cards, both for primary and secondary education.

The school is held responsible as far as the effectiveness with regard to *school-specific objectives* is concerned. The acts pertaining to primary and secondary education include regulations relating to giving account of the educational objectives and results. However, there are no regulations on giving account as to the extent to which schools achieve objectives they have selected themselves. Whether schools actually pay attention to this in practice is not sufficiently known at the moment. The Council proposes that additional research be carried out on this matter when evaluating the school prospectus and the school plan with the regulations being amended or supplemented in relation to this point as necessary.

Other school quality characteristics provide a direct indication of quality to a lesser extent and are often difficult to measure and compare. Parents and pupils are, however, interested in those other quality characteristics, such as the atmosphere, or the individual supervision of pupils. The Council is of the opinion that schools should be free to formulate these characteristics in so far as they are not laid down in standards of quality. The school is itself responsible for making data on these characteristics available. It should, however, be considered whether it is necessary for schools to pay more attention to these matters when informing and giving an account to parents and pupils. It is conceivable that it could be prescribed in law that the school prospectus provides information on a number of the characteristics referred to. In this context too, the Council considers it necessary to wait for the evaluation of the school prospectus and the school plan.

Answer to sub-question 5
The fifth sub-question refers to undesirable effects of the publication of data on the qualities of schools. What effects can be expected on the basis of experiences abroad and (how) can these be counteracted or prevented?

The answer to this question is based, to a considerable extent, on a study carried out, as commissioned by the Education Council, by Karsten, Visscher and The Jong (1999). Undesirable effects which can, in principle, also occur in the Netherlands concern an increase in selection phenomena, a more pronounced focus on exams and on 'borderline' pupils, demotivation among teachers and a decrease in the willingness of schools to cooperate.
The Council regards such effects as unacceptable and proposes the following measures to avoid and/or counteract these effects:
- the publication of data on the added value of schools;
- the publication of data on efficiency;
- broad accessibility of the publications;
- further research into the phenomena of selectivity and possible adaptation/expansion of the set of indicators;
- the publication of data on results in addition to data on other quality characteristics;
- the publication of usable information providing schools with a direction.

Answer to sub-question 6
The sixth and last sub-question reads: How can the publication of quality data fulfil the criteria of validity, reliability and accessibility?

For a valid assessment of a school's effectiveness it is essential to determine the school's added value. A condition that applies In this respect is that data has to be available on the pupils' starting levels. This data will be available in the future if a preliminary test and learning standards are introduced. It will, however, be some time before these new instruments can be used for this objective. Until that time, a second best solution will suffice for the determination of the added value, with primary school results being corrected in line with pupil background characteristics and those of schools of secondary schools being corrected in line with a mix of primary school recommendations and background characteristics of the school populations. The Council also believes that, in addition to corrected data, uncorrected data must also always be supplied.
The reliability of the data published can be increased by stimulating and standardising information systems in schools and by carrying out careful checks of the data. The publication of long-range overviews which allow corrections to be made for incidental fluctuations in result figures also increases reliability.
Accessibility can be stimulated by including publications in the education charter and/or school prospectus. The clearest possible form of presentation will have to be determined in consultation with parents (and parent organisations). With regard to the presentation of data, attention will also have to be paid to the way in which schools can use data on results in their activities aimed at improving quality.

Recommendations
The Council hereby makes the following recommendations on the basis of the answer to the sub-questions:

Data to be published by national government and the school
1. The government (i.c. the inspectorate) should publish data on the *effectiveness* of primary and secondary schools with regard to the *statutory objectives*.

2. This data can be acquired via a test based on *learning standards* (which concern crucial core objectives) and via *exam results*.

3. A valid measurement of the concept of effectiveness requires a measurement of the *added value* of a school. To enable this to take place, it is necessary to determine pupils' starting levels. In the future, this can be done using a preliminary test and learning standards. For the time being, a 'second best' solution can be used with schools' results being corrected for characteristics which provide an approximation of pupils' starting levels.

4. The government should also publish data on the *efficiency* of schools. Efficiency can be deduced from figures on (interim) dropout rates, transfers to higher and lower levels of education and on the number of pupils repeating years.

5. The school itself bears the responsibility for publishing data on *the achievement of the school-specific objectives*. The same applies to data on various *process and organisation characteristics* of the school. The relevant regulations have partially been laid down already since the introduction of the quality act. The extent to which further government regulations on this matter are essential should be ascertained when the school prospectus and the school plan are assessed.

Conditions for a responsible publication

6. Data on results must be presented together with *data on other quality characteristics*. This can be done by making it obligatory to include data on results in the school prospectus and/or education charter.

7. Information on school results must be *understandable and easily accessible*. That is why, In addition to data on the added value of schools, 'rough' school figures should also be published. The clearest possible form of presentation will have to be determined in consultation with parents (and parent organisations).

8. Information that is published must justify the *efforts of teachers* and must be easy to use by schools in the context of the *quality policy*. This is enhanced by revealing the added value of schools by presenting data on results together with data on other quality characteristics of schools and by informing and/or supporting schools in the use of data on results.

9. A lot of schools still make too little systematic use of data (on results) or do not yet collect this data systematically. The government should, in consultation with those in the field, realise (preconditions for) a *standardisation of information systems*.

10. The *reliability* of data that is published can be increased further by carrying out careful checks on data and publications of long-term overviews.

Policy for the medium term

11. It is desirable to have *research* carried out into (indirect) selection practices which are used in Dutch education and into the way in which the publication of data on school results plays a role. One should consider whether further measures are desirable depending on the results.

12. The expectation is that the amount of *empirical evidence for certain process and organisation characteristics of schools* will increase. If general agreement then exists on the necessity of these characteristics, one can consider whether these characteristics should be elevated to become requirements for good quality. If characteristics are laid down in law and if requirements that are applicable to all schools can be conceived, publication thereof by national government would be in keeping with these recommendations.

13. In recent years, the government has increased the level of attention for the evaluation of policy and the extent to which schools focus on results. However, it is not always clear what minimum the schools are expected to comply with and what school results should be regarded as being substandard. There is, therefore, a need for clear and operational *rating points*. The Council regards the introduction of learning standards as an important step in this context.

14. *At the moment there is still plenty to discuss with regard to the publication of data on schools.* The information needs of parents and pupils are, partly as a result of the increased provision of information, subject to change and there is still too little known on the consequences of publishing quality data in the Netherlands. A lot of discussion is still going on with regard to the methods to be used to compare and assess

school results. It is therefore important to monitor all these developments properly, certainly those related to selection phenomena and to apply measures wherever necessary.

A background study, Handle with care! Experiences abroad with the publication of school achievement data, *has been published to accompany the* Portrayal of school quality *recommendations. This study can be obtained from the Education Council, order number ISBN 90 34 637 255 (NLG 20.00).*

Recommendations issued by the Education Council can be viewed and downloaded from the website: www.onderwijsraad.nl
*recommendations can be ordered by transferring the corresponding amount to girobank account number 113000 in the name of S*ecretariaat Onderwijsraad, *stating the order number. Review copies can be requested by telephone from B.C.M. Nout (information officer), tel +31 (0)70 310 00 15*