

Bringing local and regional education policies up to date

Agenda for a national debate on the role of local authorities in education

7 September 2017

Formally, Dutch municipalities play a limited role in education and their role has been restricted to a limited number of tasks set by Acts of Parliament. Education policies are a concern of central government together with more or less autonomous school boards. Most schools in the Netherlands are privately run and most schools run on behalf of public authorities have been removed from direct control by municipalities. In recent years, however, both local authorities and schools have acquired wider responsibilities regarding the raising and development of children and adolescents. Decentralisation programmes pertaining to social policy – especially youth care, long-term care and income support – have also prompted more and more municipal authorities to begin looking at education as well. Based on their local mission, individual municipalities are developing education policies of their own.

In practice, this discrepancy between increased responsibility and action on the one hand and the limited formal role of municipalities on the other is generating tensions in areas where education, youth welfare and labour market come into contact. For example, school boards find themselves confronted with what they see as an intrusive municipality or, by contrast, with a local authority, which is nowhere to be found when, support or mediation is needed. Municipalities, for their part, perceive a lack of willingness by schools to help in achieving local ambitions. As a result, children or adolescents are not always offered the best possible care or support.

Advice: update the role of local authorities in education

The Education Council recommends a reassessment of the administrative relations between central government, school boards, and local and regional authorities with a view to securing better collaboration in decentralised education and youth policies. The Council urges central government, based on its responsibility for the proper functioning of the education system at large, to organise a dialogue on this subject.

Three reasons to update the role of local authorities

The Council sees three reasons to reboot the role of municipalities in education.

First is the shift away from centralised government direction to decentralised governance, with territorial devolution taking place in many policy domains. This is strengthening the position of municipalities and prompting them to forge a more active stand vis-à-vis local communities. This active stance by local authorities can clash with the dominant position that central government still holds in the field of education, and decentralisation in the social domain is putting pressure on the role division between central and local government in education. This requires a deliberate choice to be made on whether education should be included in the general trend towards decentralisation or whether it should remain an exception. This in turn requires awareness by central government of its dominance in education and a willingness to ease back on its micromanagement of aspects that do not form part of the core central government tasks.

A second reason is the increased need for coordination and collaboration between schools and local authorities in the fields of education, youth welfare and labour market issues, for example due to the emergence of integrated action and prevention. Municipalities are often dependent on collaboration with schools to pursue successful policy. Conversely, schools also often depend on others. This is exacerbated by the fact that related tasks are being simultaneously decentralised at functional level (to school boards) and

territorially (to municipal executives). Coordination and collaboration between schools, local authorities and other civil-society actors is insufficiently supported by present administrative constellation. The mandatory consultation aimed at consensus is not universally appreciated and is too lax for some issues. Administrators, civil servants, teachers, and care professionals also need to find their way through complex local and regional networks populated by many different actors and disciplines.

The third reason lies in the differences of scale between actors in the educational field. Local authorities and schools differ in their size and administrative power. Moreover, a municipality's territory rarely coincides with a school board's area of operation or with the area in which a school's pupils reside; nor do regional structures – for example for youth care, the labour market or reducing school absenteeism - converge. This gives rise to further administrative pressure and lack of clarity, which can stand in the way of collaboration and coordination in setting or implementing local education or youth policies.

Ten principles for decentralised education policy

The Council proposes ten principles for local and regional education policies, which can serve as a framework for developing ideas and making choices. The principles offer considerations for or against territorial decentralisation in the field of education. In putting forward these principles, the Council is creating a framework and offering a perspective on the role of local authorities in education in relation to that of central government and school boards.

1. When considering to transfer tasks and responsibilities in the field of education, central government makes a conscious choice between school board or local government.
2. The administrative triangle formed by the central government, school boards and municipalities is always seen as an integrated whole.
3. Local authorities share the duty of care for education with central government.
4. Central government has a number of non-transferable core tasks.
5. When decentralising responsibility for education, central government leaves scope for local choices and differences are accepted.
6. Decentralisation is implemented at a scale that is best suited for the task.
7. The school board has primary responsibility for educational content and process.
8. The local authority provides a local government presence with regard to public and private schools.
9. The local authority is the primary driver of process with respect to local connections.
10. Decentralised networks are the avenues for central government intervention and control.

Recommendation: central government to organise a national debate

The Council advises central government to organise a broad-based national debate in the near future. The complex issue of good administrative relations with regard to education warrants attention and commitment from all stakeholders: various government ministries, other layers of government and schools. It is out of line with the trend towards decentralisation and network governance to impose changes in administrative relations in a one-sided or top-down approach. The Council advises that the debate be given a clear mission and puts forward a number of proposals in this regard.

The agenda items for the debate concern themes where there are clear tensions between local authorities and school boards or between the formal regulations and the practice of decentralised education policy. A number of themes recur continually in the literature and in discussions with school administrators, aldermen, municipal civil servants and other stakeholders.

Above all, the connections between education and youth welfare and between education and the labour market warrant attention. This is a question of working more with local or regional agendas in which shared visions and ambitions are laid down. The content of these agendas also needs to be broadened, with the educational and social domains being more closely linked in support of a broad approach to children and young people. In addition, the administrative structure at interfaces between education, youth welfare and work needs to be improved in order to facilitate collaboration and coordination. The municipal executive can in many cases assume overall control of the process and needs to be brought into a position to do so. Making regional structures more congruent could also be of help here.

It is also important that the debate addresses the question of whether there should be more regional control over educational content and whether local and provincial authorities should be more involved in this. A change in vocational education, in particular, seems appropriate. The scope that local authorities have to pursue policies in respect of the quality of education also needs to be clearly defined. The key consideration for the Council here is that educational quality is primarily the responsibility of the school board and that quality standards can only be set by central government. However, that does not rule out a role for the local authority, for example as a critical discussion partner which challenges education. The next agenda item relates to school accommodation. It is up to the debate to find models in which local authorities and school boards act more in concert here. Finally, a view should emerge from the debate on whether the administrative oversight by the local authority of outsourced public education needs to be recast. Formal responsibility and practice are currently too far apart on this point.