

## Emphasising the public character of education

The growth in private education provision and the intermingling of state and private provision are putting increasing pressure on the public character of Dutch education. That public character demands education that is generally accessible, of high quality, and allows for input by education professionals. However, the growth in private provision and the intermingling with publicly funded provision means that publicly funded schools are increasingly losing grip on their core mission of providing accessible, high-quality education. Education is increasingly transitioning into an accumulation of individual interests, with societal goals such as a well-educated workforce and social cohesion fading to the background. The Education Council recommends that the government and schools step up the efforts to protect the public character of education, so that everything that is offered at a state-funded school is (freely) available to all students, whilst guaranteeing educational quality and the ability of education professionals to exert a degree of control.

### **Background: Growth and intermingling of private education provision**

Private education has grown enormously in recent decades in the Netherlands. One result of this is that more than a quarter of primary and secondary school pupils access some form of private supplementary education, such as homework supervision, additional lessons and examination training. The number of private schools has increased and a growing number of schools offer additional services such as bilingual teaching or an international programme for which parents have to pay. At the same time, private content has become increasingly interwoven with the teaching offer of publicly funded schools. This is leading to an intermingling of the funding and goals of education and of the input that stakeholders have into the educational provision. There are some schools which enter into a contract with a private homework institute, which provides services for the school in return for free accommodation and promotion of its commercial services.

The Council believes there are both positive and negative aspects to the growth and intermingling of private and publicly funded education. It can provide a powerful stimulus for boosting innovation in publicly funded education. Offering private education services at no cost for pupils from more disadvantaged milieus can help foster equal educational opportunities. But private services that can only be accessed by pupils and students whose parents can afford to pay for them puts other pupils and students at a disadvantage. The growth and intermingling of private provision can also lead to loss

of control and oversight of educational quality. It can also undermine the input of teachers and school heads into educational provision.

This report, compiled by the Education Council on its own initiative, focuses on the issue of how the accessibility and quality of education and the ability of education professionals to exert influence can be safeguarded against the backdrop of the increase in private provision and its intermingling with publicly funded education.

**Recommendation: Provide better protection for the public character of education**

The Education Council advises the government and schools to provide better protection for the public character of education. A greater awareness of the importance of that public character would ensure that schools continue to be fully committed to delivering their core mission, namely providing generally accessible, good-quality education, and do not relinquish that responsibility. Schools will then be in a better position to benefit from the major stimulus to educational strengthening, improvement and innovation that private provision can offer, whilst at the same time mitigating the negative effects.

At present, government and school boards appear to be insufficiently aware of the risks of the growth in private provision and its intermingling with publicly funded education. School boards carry first-line responsibility for maintaining the public character of the education provided in their schools. Judgements are made under their aegis, and it is their duty to provide leadership to all stakeholders in the school organisation, such as heads, teachers, supervisory board, pupils and parents, on how they can protect the public character of education. The duty of the government is to provide clarity regarding the public character of education and regarding those elements which do and do not form part of publicly funded education.

**Recommendation: Schools should be cognisant of the public character of education**

Everyone within the school organisation must be fully aware of the public character of education and test their choices against that principle. Accessibility, quality and input by stakeholders must be placed at the heart of all day-to-day decisions about public and private provision. School administrators have a key role to play here; they provide leadership in the dialogue with school heads, teachers, parents and pupils on the social function and public character of education.

When reflecting and making decisions on incorporating private provision within a school organisation, it is useful to draw a distinction between 'what is needed' and 'what is nice to have' as an extra. 'What is needed' should be incorporated within the

educational programme and be accessible to all at no cost, under the full responsibility of the school. As regards 'what is nice to have', schools the question that needs to be addresses is what generally contributes to good education. Activities in this category should only have a place at school if they are accessible for everyone and if the school has ultimate responsibility for and professional input into its quality.

**Recommendation: Government must be clear about the public character of education**

The government currently does not have a clear and cohesive stance on the public character of education and what significance the influence of private provision has. The government must make it possible for schools to fulfil their public education role. As a minimum, that implies adequate funding to enable schools to deliver generally accessible, good-quality education for every pupil, without dependence on extra private lessons, homework supervision or examination training.

The Council commends anchoring the existing agreements on sponsorship and donations in legislation and incorporating stipulations aimed at protecting the public character of education in governance codes. The Council advocates banning the advertising of commercial services or products through the school. It should not be permitted, for example, for pupils to be given folders at school advertising services such as paid typing courses or material for practising at home. Such advertising creates the incorrect impression that private provision is an inherent and necessary part of the school organisation. This can throw up perceived barriers for less affluent parents as regards the accessibility of the school.

In addition, the Council advises the government to decouple voluntary parental contributions from the individual child, and instead to set a maximum limit on the contribution that parents can make. That contribution can then be placed in a school fund on which the school can draw for the benefit of all pupils. Following on from this, the Council recommends investigating the opportunities for a local or regional education fund. A proportion of the parental contributions could then be paid into an overarching fund, which could be addressed by less well-off schools to fund activities for their pupils.

The full advisory report "Publiek karakter voorop" (in Dutch) can be found at: [www.onderwijsraad.nl/publiek-karakter-voorop](http://www.onderwijsraad.nl/publiek-karakter-voorop)

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