

education in the caribbean netherlands

part b: featured themes in
Bonaire, Saba and Sint Eustatius

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contents

1	Introduction	
	Perspectives from Bonaire, Saba and Sint Eustatius	4
1.1	A look at the system based on six themes	5
1.2	Creation of this publication	5
1.3	Guide to Part B	6
2	Bonaire: multilingualism	11
2.1	Theme description: increased multilingualism in society presents a challenge for education	12
2.2	Analysis: education organisations work on multilingualism, but have little contact with other stakeholders	17
2.3	Overall picture: multilingual society demands a lot of small education organisations	23
3	Bonaire: education provision	26
3.1	Theme description: ensuring adequate provision and appropriate content is a challenge due to small scale	27
3.2	Analysis: focus on European Netherlands hinders development of tailored education provision	30
3.3	Overall picture: scarcity, inflexible rules and lack of coordination complicate education provision	37
4	Saba: school boards	40
4.1	Theme description: small scale and isolation hinder good educational governance	41
4.2	Analysis: support for school boards mainly in urgent situations	45
4.3	Overall picture: school boards demands permanent attention	49
5	Saba: teaching staff	52
5.1	Theme description: challenges in recruiting, retaining and training staff	53
5.2	Analysis: many stakeholders involved in recruiting, retaining and training teaching staff, but main onus lies with schools	56
5.3	Overall picture: responsibility for staff recruitment, retention and training requires stronger links	61
6	Sint Eustatius: inclusive education	64
6.1	Theme description: inclusive education is a guiding principle	65
6.2	Analysis: many stakeholders intensively involved, but system running up against the buffers	69
6.3	Overall picture: inclusive education under pressure	73

7	Sint Eustatius: educational transitions	76
7.1	Theme description: transition from secondary to further education demands much from students	77
7.2	Analysis: ample collaboration around transfers on the island; links elsewhere are weak	82
7.3	Overall picture: education prepares students for three future pathways, but obstacles remain	87
	References	89
	Island Committees	92
	Information	93

intro duction

Perspectives from Bonaire, Saba and Sint Eustatius

Together with the three Island Committees, the Education Council of the Netherlands explores how the Dutch education system functions in Bonaire, Saba and Sint Eustatius, based on six themes.

This part of the publication *Education in the Caribbean Netherlands* sheds light on how the Dutch education system works in Bonaire, Saba and Sint Eustatius, based on the perspectives and experiences of stakeholders on the islands. In this way, a picture emerges of how the system functions and where opportunities and challenges lie.

Definition of the education system

The education system consists on the one hand of the different education sectors, such as primary and secondary education and the various types of school and teaching programmes, the transitions between them and the laws and regulations governing them. On the other hand, it comprises the organisations which provide education and the administrative sphere in which they operate, consisting of government authorities, implementing bodies, administrative and support organisations within and outside education, and the links between them.

1.1 A look at the system based on six themes

Together with the Island Committees for Bonaire, Saba and Sint Eustatius, the Education Council of the Netherlands explored to what extent the relevant stakeholders are able to deliver good education within the framework of the Dutch education system. This exploration was carried out based on two themes per island:

- Bonaire: multilingualism and education provision;
- Saba: school boards and teaching staff;
- Sint Eustatius: inclusive education and transitions within education.

These themes were used to gain an impression of the role of various stakeholders within the system (school boards and teaching staff), of specific issues stemming from the context in which education is delivered on the islands (multilingualism and education provision) and of the way education is configured with a view to specific target groups or the educational pathways students can follow (inclusive education and educational transitions). The thematic analyses look not only at the formal configuration of the system, but also at how it works in practice.

1.2 Creation of this publication

In the publication *Education in the Caribbean Netherlands* the Education Council of the Netherlands presents an analysis of the functioning of the Dutch education system on the islands of Bonaire, Saba and Sint Eustatius. The publication is the result of a literature review, analysis of policy and legislation, and a large number of interviews with stakeholders in and around education in Bonaire, Saba and Sint Eustatius (see www.onderwijsraad.nl for a list of interviewees). The Council also made a number of working visits to schools and organised workshops with teachers, students, parents, school principals and school boards, public entities, national government agencies and organisations involved with education on the islands.

The publication consists of three parts.

- Part A: Conclusions and recommendations.
- Part B: Featured themes in Bonaire, Saba and Sint Eustatius.
- Part C: Background information.

In this Part B the Education Council of the Netherlands together with the three Island Committees present an analysis of the functioning of the education system on the islands. This analysis forms the basis for the overarching conclusions and recommendations in the advisory section (Part A). Part C contains background information on education in Bonaire, Saba and Sint Eustatius, including a description of the legislation and regulations and the education organisations on the three islands.

Collaboration with the Island Committees

In compiling this part (Part B) of the publication, the Education Council of the Netherlands worked in collaboration with three Island Committees. Each island has a Committee with five members, consisting of teachers, school principals, school board members and directors of the expertise centres for education care. The members of the Island Committees, like the members of the Education Council, contributed their expertise and perspectives in a personal capacity.

Over the course of the process (2024-2026), the Island Committees met online on a monthly basis. The Committees helped with the content and compilation of the island-specific chapters. They also selected the themes in those chapters. The Committees were also involved in the stakeholder analyses and thematic studies, and were also asked to review the draft texts to ensure that their perspectives and experiences had been correctly represented.

Moreover, the Island Committees played a key role in the organisation, preparation and content of the working visits by the Education Council of the Netherlands, helping with the planning, procedures and locations and sending out invitations.

1.3 Guide to Part B

Part B consists of six thematic chapters, with two themes highlighted for each island. Each thematic chapter consists of three parts.

1. Theme description: explains why the chosen theme is perceived as current or urgent on the island, and what the current status is.
2. Analysis: examines the functioning of the education system on the island based on the theme; which stakeholders are involved in issues relating to this theme, and how are they working to resolve it, individually or collectively?
3. Overall picture: describes the insights from Bonaire, Saba and Sint Eustatius regarding the functioning of the education system based on the experiences and perspectives of the stakeholders on the island in relation to issues connected to the theme.

Given the small number of organisations and stakeholders involved in education on the islands, the descriptions in this part of the publication may contain references to individual organisations and persons. The Education Council of the Netherlands would like to stress that any such references do not constitute an opinion regarding their functioning.

multilingualism

education provision

challenges for education

education embraces multilingualism, but...

dealing with difference between language of instruction and first language causes inequality in educational opportunities



people achieve a lot with scant resources, but...

education provision does not always align well with needs



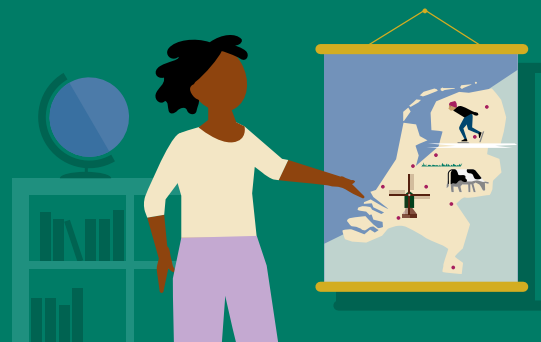
education must be able to provide for pupils with different first language



limited education provision hinders inclusive education



education provision is not always well aligned with life in Bonaire



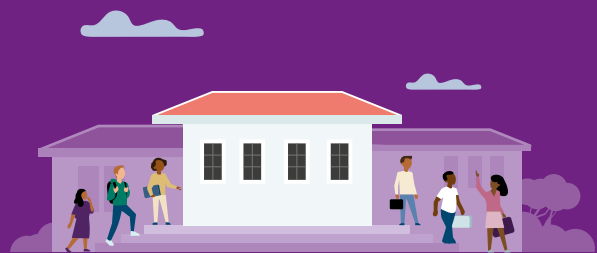
challenges for education

people work unbelievably hard to do what is needed, but...

vacancies are hard to fill



high turnover of teaching staff



mixing of formal and informal roles



teaching staff often have to come from overseas



European Dutch frameworks are not aligned with local situation



organising further and refresher training is difficult and does not fully align with needs



challenges for education

there's a place for everyone in education, but...

great pressure on care coordinators and teachers



limited numbers of specialists available



funding is inadequate



education organisations work together closely, but...

education has to prepare for different future pathways

...on the island



...in the region
(Caribbean and United States)



...in the European Netherlands





bonaire 2 multilingualism

The population of Bonaire is increasingly multilingual. For the small organisations on the island it is challenging to respond to the different needs. There is also limited contact with partners outside education, such as employers and civil-society organisations.

Bonaire is a multilingual society. Education organisations and government agencies try to accommodate this as well as possible – no easy task for the small education organisations on the island. Multilingualism creates differing and sometimes clashing needs, partly related to cultural values and identities, but also to the orientation of students towards their next steps after compulsory education, which require a command of several languages. The multilingualism on Bonaire is changing, with more languages being added and a shifting relationship between the different languages. It is difficult for education providers to respond adequately to the differing needs that result from this, partly because multilingualism not only affects education, but also the wider community of Bonaire. The required coordination between stakeholders inside and outside education proves to be complicated in practice.

2.1 Theme description: increased multilingualism in society presents a challenge for education

The extensive and changing multilingualism in society impacts education. As a result, education must cater to more diverse groups of students. The alignment between the language of instruction and the first language of students makes a difference for the educational opportunities for students.

Bonaire is characterised by extensive, increased and changing multilingualism

Bonaire is a multilingual society, something that is a source of pride for Bonaireans.¹ Over 90% of the population speak at least two languages.² There are four dominant languages: Papiamentu, Dutch, English and Spanish (see table).

Languages in Bonaire³

Language	Percentage who speak the language	Percentage for whom this is their first language
Papiamentu	88%	62%
Dutch	77%	15%
English	77%	6%
Spanish	76%	15%

Many Bonaireans alternate between these four languages, sometimes in the same sentence. Some command of all four languages is necessary in day-to-day life in Bonaire. Papiamentu is the most widely used language in everyday life, in politics, in business and in the media (see textbox).⁴ Dutch is mainly used in formal settings and in education; it is the language used by the (national) government. The number of people with Spanish as their first language has increased in recent years due to migration from Spanish-speaking regions. English is mainly used by young people.

1 Den Heyer & Zwart, 2025.
 2 Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek, 2022.
 3 Ibid.
 4 Ibid.

Papiamentu as a language

Papiamentu has its origins in the colonial era, though there is some debate as to its precise origin.⁵ The basic vocabulary consists of Spanish and Portuguese words, but also words of Afrikaans, Indian, Dutch and English origin. Aruba, Bonaire and Curaçao are the only places in the world where Papiamentu is still the dominant language. In addition, each island has its own dialect. However residents of the different islands understand each other well in either the spoken or written word.

Multilingualism in Bonaire has increased sharply over the last fifteen years. Immigration by Spanish-speakers from the region and by Dutch-speakers from European Netherlands has altered the balance between the four main languages on the island. New languages are also appearing and the share of smaller language groups has grown. In 2014 only 1.2% of the population spoke a language other than Papiamentu, Dutch, English or Spanish as their first language; in 2022 that had risen to 15%.⁶ These new languages include Mandarin (Chinese) and Haitian Creole.

The constitutional changes on 10 October 2010 (abbreviated as 10-10-10) influenced the positions of the different languages, for example changing the role and position of Papiamentu and Dutch in Bonairean society. Dutch overtook Papiamentu as the most widely used language in formal situations such as public administration, healthcare, the judiciary and education. This change has its roots in the past (see textbox). The law does however recognise Papiamentu, which can be used under certain conditions in administrative communications between government and private individuals.⁷

Historical language development in Bonaire⁸

Education on the ABC islands – Aruba, Bonaire, Curaçao – dates back to the colonial period, when its purpose was to make the population ‘as Dutch as possible’. With this in mind, Dutch became the sole language of instruction, displacing Papiamentu. Using Dutch as the language of instruction was also a condition for schools to be eligible for government funding. Strict rules and penalties discouraged the use of Papiamentu.⁹ In 2002, the then Netherlands Antilles began allowing the use of Papiamentu as a language of instruction, and it was given full status as a school subject.¹⁰ However, as there was too little teaching material available in Papiamentu, the educational outcomes were disappointing. After 10-10-10, Dutch came more into prominence in Bonaire.

Multilingualism in society reflected in education

Education organisations in Bonaire have to respond to the multilingualism of their students as well as that of the broader society. It is important that teachers acknowledge and value the linguistic background of their students, to build a bond between students and their teachers and classmates.¹¹ Education organisations are aware of this and embrace multilingualism as a given and as an added value. There is no debate about whether or not schools should actively accept multilingualism. However, it is not simply to deliver education to students who speak

5 Jacobs, 2015.

6 Staatscommissie Demografische ontwikkelingen Caribisch Nederland 2050, 2024.

7 Articles 4c to 4i of the implementing act for the public entities Bonaire, Sint Eustatius and Saba.

8 Pereira & Römer-Dijkhoff, 2020.

9 Van Putte, 1999.

10 SLO, 2024.

11 Gaikhorst, Karssen, Zijlstra, Martens & Duarte, 2023.

different languages and with different degrees of fluency. Based on their linguistic background, students in Bonaire are divided roughly into three groups.

1. Students with Papiamentu as their first language. These students face the challenge of learning Dutch. They generally have a more positive view of Papiamentu than of Dutch. Some of them also have a minimal command of Papiamentu, possibly because of the scant attention paid to Papiamentu in schools.¹² These students are often able to communicate well informally in several languages, but find it especially difficult to use these languages to express abstract ideas.
2. Students whose first language is Dutch. They find it difficult to learn Papiamentu, partly because of a shortage of Papiamentu teachers and the limited teaching materials available.¹³
3. Migrant students with a first language other than Papiamentu or Dutch. They have to learn both languages at school. English is also a new language for many of these students.

Schools face the challenge of helping all three groups of students to learn Dutch and Papiamentu. This directly influences the languages that may be used in schools for instruction, tests and examinations (see textbox).

Overview of language in schools in Bonaire

The Primary Education (BES) Act (WPO BES) allows primary schools in Bonaire to teach in both Dutch and Papiamentu.¹⁴ The Act also stipulates that Papiamentu must also be taught, as well as Dutch and English.¹⁵ Spanish may also be taught. In this respect, the WPO BES differs from the legislation for the European Netherlands, where the permitted languages are English, French and German.¹⁶ In practice, Papiamentu is mainly used in childcare settings and in the first two year-groups of primary school, with Dutch being gradually introduced as the language of instruction from year-group 3 onwards. From year-group 4, Dutch is the formal language of instruction almost everywhere. Primary schools also teach Papiamentu and Dutch as first languages and English as a foreign language. Moreover, primary schools run language classes for newcomers. The language of instruction at the primary school for children with special educational needs, which receives additional funding for this, is Papiamentu.

In secondary education, Dutch is in principle the formal language of instruction for teaching, tests and examinations.¹⁷ Papiamentu, Spanish or English may be used for support or where needed for specific students or specific educational purposes. Papiamentu is an important subject at the Bonaire school for secondary and vocational education. This school does not offer French or German, but students can take a national exam in those languages. Papiamentu and other languages are optional subjects. There are also international transitional classes for newcomers who do not yet speak Dutch.

Secondary vocational education (MBO) is in principle also given in Dutch, but can also be offered in Papiamentu under certain conditions.¹⁸ In practice, this mainly occurs for entry-level programmes and a few work-based learning pathways (BBL), where students spend most of their time learning in the workplace. Practical secondary education (PRO), entry-level education and 'cluster 3' programmes in the Special Needs Unit are also taught in Papiamentu. MBO students have to be taught Dutch at level 2F,¹⁹ but attaining this level is not a hard requirement for a school-leaving certificate. PRO and the international transitional classes may also be taught largely in Papiamentu,²⁰ but Dutch must also be offered as a subject.²¹

The law also requires schools to devote structural attention to combating language gaps, especially in Dutch.²² A specific stipulation for the Caribbean Netherlands also requires school boards to ensure optimum alignment between the teaching and the educational needs of students whose first language is different from the language of instruction at their school.²³

The language used in accordance with the school rules for instruction and feedback can differ from the language in which students communicate with each other or which teachers use in one-to-one conversations with students. Secondary and vocational students increasingly converse with each other in English, in addition to a mix of Papiamentu and Spanish. Primary school principals also indicate that in

¹⁴ Article 11, para 7 WPO BES.

¹⁵ Article 11, para 1 (a, b and c), WPO BES.

¹⁶ Article 11, para 3 WPO BES.

¹⁷ Article 2.11, para 1 and Article 2.52, para 1 WVO 2020.

¹⁸ Article 7.1.1, para 2 WEB BES.

¹⁹ According to the Language Reference Framework, this is the level that everyone needs in order to be able to participate in society.

²⁰ Article 11.4, para 1 WVO 2020.

²¹ Article 2.38 under an Implementation Decree WVO 2020.

²² Article 2.34 WVO 2020.

²³ Article 11.10 WVO 2020.

practice, many lessons are taught in both Dutch and Papiamentu, or even in three languages (with Spanish as the third language). This is an attempt to align with the multilingual context in Bonaire, despite Dutch generally being the formal language of instruction from year-group 4 onwards. However, explaining subjects in several different languages demands more time and additional skills from teachers.

Ideas differ on the role of English in education. Although some argue that the command of English among young Bonaireans is overestimated, yet one school board in Bonaire is taking steps towards setting up a bilingual primary school, in which 30-50% of lessons are taught in English next to Dutch.

Dealing with difference between language of instruction and first language leads to inequality in educational opportunities

From year-group 4 upwards, Dutch is generally the language of instruction in primary schools in Bonaire. This puts children from Dutch-speaking households at an advantage over children who do not speak Dutch at home.²⁴ Teaching in Dutch means non-Dutch-speaking students have fewer opportunities to develop their talents than students whose first language is Dutch.

The difference between first language and language of instruction thus impedes the opportunities of non-Dutch-speaking students in the transition to secondary education. Roughly 20% of primary school students in Bonaire go on to senior general secondary education (HAVO) or pre university education (VWO). Research shows that many students go on to pre-vocational secondary education (VMBO) or junior general secondary education (MAVO) because their command of Dutch is not good enough for HAVO or VWO.²⁵ Secondary school students whose first language is not Dutch perform worse in language-heavy subjects such as economics and geography than students whose first language is Dutch. Papiamentu-speaking students also indicate that they find it more difficult to connect with teachers who do not have a command of Papiamentu.

If they wish to pursue further studies in the European Netherlands, it is crucial that students have a good command of Dutch. Approximately 90% of Bonairean HAVO and VWO students go to the European Netherlands in Europe to continue their studies. Those from Bonaire often perform lower in reading skills²⁶ and have a lower graduation prospects²⁷ than their European Dutch peers. Around a quarter of these Bonairean students give up their studies prematurely, often because of language difficulties.²⁸

Students studying at the Bonaire branch of the University of Curaçao (UoC) for a Bachelor of Education in Foundation Based Education also struggle with the Dutch language. Although this study programme is taught in Dutch, outside the university students rarely to never come into contact with the Dutch language, and especially if they are on internships in year-groups 1 and 2 at primary schools in Bonaire, where the language of instruction is Papiamentu.

Initiatives are being undertaken to reduce inequality in educational opportunities. For example, there are plans to launch a pilot for bilingual teaching (Dutch and English) in secondary education in Bonaire, starting in the 2026-2027 school year. This will initially be done in one HAVO/VWO class, with the aim of increasing the

²⁴ Faraclas et al., 2022.

²⁵ SLO, 2024.

²⁶ Berben, 2012; Odenthal & Bouwman, 2016.

²⁷ Van Casteren et al., 2021.

²⁸ Nationale ombudsman, 2020.

equality of educational opportunities for students. There are also calls to offer bilingual education in Dutch and Papiamentu, though no schools in Bonaire have yet taken up this call.

2.2 Analysis: education organisations work on multilingualism, but have little contact with other stakeholders

Great efforts are being made within and outside education to find the most effective way to work with multilingualism. However, announcing the ambition and making plans is not enough to actually achieve this.²⁹ In practice, stakeholders struggle to adapt their teaching to the multilingual reality of Bonaire. This continues to generate debate about the position of the various languages. It also remains challenging to address the diversity of languages in society and in education in Bonaire.

Multilingualism features prominently on all agendas

Language choices, primarily made by education organisations, place the emphasis on Dutch

When making choices on how to work with multilingualism, much of the decision-making power lies with individual educational organisations. That aligns with the principle of decentralisation and autonomy of education providers within the Dutch education system. It offers scope for schools in Bonaire to make their own choices and judgements. If changes are made, consultation with the Ministry of Education in The Hague is only necessary if support from that Ministry is needed. School boards are for example free to decide autonomously on the following topics, among others, within the frameworks set by the national government:

- The languages taught as (optional or compulsory) subjects in teaching programmes;
- The configuration of language teaching;
- Partnerships with other organisations in relation to multilingualism;
- The language policy plan;
- The use of financial resources for implementing that policy.

In practice, these choices generally result in an emphasis on the Dutch language. That is partly due to the prominent place given to Dutch in the legislation, but even where the law offers scope for other languages, schools often prioritise Dutch, with the exception of the early year-groups in primary school, practical secondary education (PRO) and a few MBO programmes. There are several reasons for this emphasis on Dutch. A command of Dutch is a necessary condition for going on to further education and central examinations. Dutch is also the language of administration in Bonaire and official documents are therefore also in Dutch. Moreover, having a command of Dutch improves a person's position on the labour market. Then there are practical considerations, such as a lack of sufficient teaching materials in other languages (see textbox).

Adequate teaching materials remain a challenge

There is a shortage of teaching materials and literature available in Papiamentu.³⁰ This complicates the provision of learning opportunities for Papiamentu-speaking students.³¹ There are also a limited amount of books, magazines and websites in Papiamentu. Many students consequently read more Dutch at home than Papiamentu.³²

Teaching materials for learning Dutch are also insufficient. Schools in Bonaire primarily use methods developed in the European Netherlands for students whose first language is Dutch. There are no suitable methods for teaching students who are learning Dutch as a foreign language. Developing material in-house is constrained by limited time and resources. Schools in Saba and Sint Eustatius do have methods in place for teaching Dutch as a foreign language, but these are not suitable for Bonaire. This is because Dutch is generally also the language of instruction in Bonaire, whereas in Saba and Sint Eustatius it is English. In the international transitional class and PRO materials for Dutch as a second language (NT2) are predominantly used.

Government agencies set frameworks within which education organisations make choices

The freedom that schools in Bonaire have to respond to multilingualism in the student population is largely determined by national frameworks and support. The legislation on education in the Caribbean Netherlands, for example, contains provisions on the language of instruction and the language in which examinations are administered. There are also provisions stipulating the languages that must be offered. The law also sets out core objectives for Dutch, Papiamentu and English (primary education) or Dutch and English (secondary education). The education legislation for the Caribbean Netherlands differs in a number of respects from that for the European Netherlands.³³

The legal frameworks are not always a good fit for the situation in Bonaire. For example, the law stipulates that in primary education, the core objectives, competence levels and assessment of Papiamentu must be based on a first-language perspective, whereas in secondary education the core objectives for modern foreign languages apply for Papiamentu,³⁴ even though Papiamentu is not a foreign language for the majority of students, but their first language and language of habitual use. The core objectives for Papiamentu as a modern foreign language thus do not align with their reality. The difference in legal rules for primary and secondary education also leads to an interruption in the teaching continuity for Papiamentu.³⁵ In response to this, the Ministry of OCW has commissioned a review of the core objectives for Papiamentu as a modern foreign language (see textbox).

³⁰ Faraclas et al., 2022.

³¹ Kibbelaar, 2025.

³² Van der Elst-Koeiman, 2023.

³³ See *Part C: Background information*.

³⁴ Article 9.2 Implementation Decree WVO 2020.

³⁵ SLO, 2024.

Review of core objectives

The National Expertise Centre for Curriculum Development (SLO) has been working at the request of the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science (OCW) since 2024 on developing new core objectives for Bonaire, Saba and Sint Eustatius. This exercise is part of a broader curriculum review in the Netherlands. One of the objectives is to afford a greater role to Papiamentu in education in Bonaire, so that all students attain the basic level needed to go on to secondary education. SLO has worked with teachers to develop a reference framework and learning pathways for Papiamentu.³⁶ The core objectives for Dutch from the Core Objectives (WPO BES) Decree will be amended in the near future and organised at national level, while the core objectives for Papiamentu from that Decree will remain separate and be reviewed separately.

The Inspectorate of Education carries out regular quality inspections to ensure that schools are complying with the law. During inspections, the Inspectorate always discusses how multilingualism is addressed in everyday teaching practice. It looks at aspects such as the school's language policy plans and visits Papiamentu classes. The Minister of OCW has previously stated that an Inspector need not have a command of a language or subject, because the supervision takes place at governance level.³⁷

Addressing multilingualism is not only a matter for education, but also for society as a whole. As a result, various stakeholders are involved, each with their own responsibilities. First, school boards develop their own language policies within the framework of the education policy and legislation for the which the Ministry of OCW is responsible. In addition, the public entity Bonaire (henceforth: OLB) together with the Ministry of the Interior and Kingdom Relations (BZK) is developing an island-wide multilingualism policy. These activities are not always well coordinated.

Administrative Agreement on Papiamentu in Bonaire

In March 2021 the Minister of BZK, together with the Minister of OCW and the OLB, signed the Administrative Agreement on Papiamentu in Bonaire. This Agreement recognises that Papiamentu is under pressure from other languages and may therefore 'weaken'. It was agreed to develop a plan to recognise Papiamentu under the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages.³⁸ Papiamentu was duly recognised on 1 July 2024.

Island government, employers and civil-society organisations strive for more attention for Papiamentu

There is also a debate outside education about the position of the different languages in Bonaire. The OLB, employers and civil-society organisations are trying to influence education and to raise awareness about the need to protect Papiamentu, for example with the Ministry of BZK, the Dutch Parliament and the Council of Europe. They have little direct influence on decisions about education, but employers do exert influence over internships and work experience placements and over the setting in which schools operate. For example, there are agreements between employers and MBO regarding which language will be used in the curricula,

³⁶ SLO, 2022, 2023.

³⁷ Ministerie van Onderwijs, Cultuur en Wetenschap, 2025.

³⁸ Rijksdienst Caribisch Nederland, 2024.

within the legal frameworks.³⁹ At the request of employers, it has for example been agreed that MBO level 2 care training courses will be taught in Papiamentu and MBO level 3 courses in Dutch.

The OLB is developing an island language policy and can provide support in implementing it, for example by commissioning research and subsidising organisations which protect Papiamentu. Two foundations, Fundashon Akademia Papiamentu and Stichting SPLIKA, have explored ways of strengthening the position of Papiamentu, and are working to set up a language institute.

Little contact between education organisations and stakeholders outside education

Education organisations in Bonaire attempting to work together at governance level
Education organisations in Bonaire work well together at governance level. Primary school principals are also in regular contact. In the context of the BES(t) 4 kids programme,⁴⁰ primary schools and childcare providers have made agreements on the language of instruction. MBO is also party to these agreements, to ensure well-trained personnel. Primary school boards and principals and the units making up the Scholengemeenschap Bonaire (henceforth SGB)⁴¹ hold monthly meetings, at which language policy is one of the items discussed. Other education providers, such as Forma, Fundashon Mariadal Academy (FM Academy) and the Bonaire branch of the University of Curaçao, do not take part in these meetings. There is no formal contact with school teachers on language policy.

Another example of cooperation between education organisations in relation to multilingualism is the Inclusive Language Teaching in Bonaire project (Inclusief Taalonderwijs Bonaire - iTOB) (see textbox below). This project is an attempt by education organisations to pool their strengths to work best with multilingualism. Here again other education providers, such as Forma, FM Academy and the Bonaire branch of the University of Curaçao, are not involved in the project. Contact with iTOB operates mainly through school boards and school principals. After the summer of 2025 the project came to a halt for several months, because the members of the core team had stepped down. A new core team has recently been found.

Inclusive Language Teaching in Bonaire (iTOB)

iTOB aims to support schools in Bonaire to work more effectively with multilingualism in the classroom. The core team works closely with schools and supports them with innovations. The project is led by the two biggest school boards in Bonaire, which have charged iTOB with helping all primary schools and SGB. iTOB develops policy for multilingual education, organises inter-school consultations and advises on school language policy. Together with Stinapa – the nature protection organisation in Bonaire – it has also developed teaching materials, training courses and bilingual teaching materials. iTOB wants schools to use students' first language in order to strengthen the learning of other languages, such as Dutch. iTOB uses scientific knowledge and methods for this. The aim is to improve the school achievement of students. iTOB also carries out research on policy, approach and teacher development.⁴²

³⁹ Article 7.1.1, para 2 WEB BES.

⁴⁰ BES(t) 4 kids is a partnership between the public entities Bonaire, Saba and Sint Eustatius and the Ministries of Social Affairs and Employment (SZW), Education, Culture and Science (OCW), Health, Welfare and Sport (VWS) and the Interior and Kingdom Relations (BZK). The aim is to strengthen daycare and out-of-school care in the Caribbean Netherlands.

⁴¹ Scholengemeenschap Bonaire (SGB) is the only provider of secondary and vocational education on the island. See the theme education provision for more information.

⁴² <https://www.inclusieftaalonderwijsbonaire.com/>

Contact with organisations outside education is difficult or held off

There is little consultation between education and other sectors regarding the position that various languages on the island can play. Where contact does take place, it is often summary and informal. Schools are mainly in contact with employers through internships, but there is little contact with other organisations. The contact between schools and the OLB on multilingualism is also patchy, though consultation does take place during the twice-yearly meetings⁴³ organised by the outpost of the Ministry of OCW in the Caribbean Netherlands (OCW CG). The OLB on the island and with the Ministry of BZK in The Hague.

One of the reasons for this is that Bonaire does not have a formal civil-society structure comparable with the education unions⁴⁴ or sectoral councils⁴⁵ in the European Netherlands. Such organisations are able to bring stakeholders together, but are currently largely absent in Bonaire. There are many island initiatives, but there is no single organisation with sufficient authority, people and resources to link those initiatives together.

National government agencies keep a close eye on schools

School principals and boards in Bonaire are often in direct contact with staff from the Ministry of OCW in The Hague, without mediation by OCW CG. They find that this enables them to obtain information and help more quickly. OCW staff in The Hague also confirm that the lines of communication are short. There are formal meetings which are also attended by OCW CG. The contact with the Ministry of OCW mainly involves school boards and principals; there is virtually no involvement by other stakeholders. As a result, many on the island feel that the Ministry of OCW in The Hague has little idea of wider developments in Bonaire, such as the growing multilingualism. This leads to frustration with mandatory forms of control, such as the student monitoring system which is to be introduced in the near future (see textbox).

⁴³ These are education platforms which the public entity Bonaire and the Ministry of OCW jointly invite schools to attend.

⁴⁴ There are two trade unions in Bonaire: Simabo and ABVO. They are closely involved in pay negotiations, and have signed the Collective Labour Agreement. They are not involved with multilingualism.

⁴⁵ The PO-Raad was intensively involved in the Caribbean Netherlands in 2011, but that involvement has been reduced at the request of the Ministry of OCW. The VO-raad is tangentially involved, and holds discussions every two years with school principals and boards.

Dissatisfaction over introduction of student monitoring system

There is a considerable dissatisfaction in Bonaire regarding the student monitoring system (LVS BES)⁴⁶ and the compulsory primary school leavers attainment test which have been introduced from the 2025/2026 school year. It is mandatory for primary schools in Bonaire to use a student monitoring system and the primary school leavers attainment test for Dutch as a foreign language (NVT), Papiamentu and arithmetic. English is optional.⁴⁷

Bureau ICE⁴⁸ was commissioned by the Ministry of OCW to develop a single student monitoring system for Bonaire, Saba and Sint Eustatius. Bureau ICE also developed a separate attainment test specifically for Bonaire, in which NVT, Papiamentu and arithmetic are tested. Principals and school boards welcomed these tests, which are a better fit for the Bonairean context; this was urgently needed. At the same time, they indicate that important enabling conditions are missing, such as adequate teaching materials and qualified teachers.

Unlike in the European Netherlands, schools in Bonaire have no choice regarding primary school leavers attainment tests or student monitoring systems. School principals and boards moreover addressed that the attainment test has to be administered too early in the school year. In the European Netherlands, the attainment test needs to be taken early because of the time needed to enrol for secondary education, but this situation does not apply in Bonaire.

Implementing agencies such as the Board of Tests and Examinations (CvTE) and SLO also work more directly with schools in Bonaire than in the European Netherlands. CvTE consults regularly with the SGB-units, while SLO works closely with the primary schools. CvTE and SLO visit schools in Bonaire more often and work intensively alongside principals and teachers than schools in the European Netherlands. The two national government agencies see these direct links as positive and as a necessary condition for understanding the island context. The schools consider it important to be part of the process, but also experience it as additional work and sometimes unnecessary control. Moreover, that work often ends up on the plate of a small number of colleagues in Bonaire, such as primary school principals and SGB-unit directors.

Limited ties with education organisations elsewhere and with other support agencies
Education organisations in Bonaire have little contact with their counterparts off the island or with support agencies. Relationships were established via iTOB with a number of knowledge institutes in the European Netherlands, and there is cooperation with Aruba and Curaçao, with knowledge and good practices being occasionally shared with organisations on those islands. National borders do however form a barrier to links with education partners in Aruba and Curaçao, where education providers and partners operate outside the Dutch education system. Bonaire does not engage in dialogue on multilingualism with education organisations in Saba and Sint Eustatius, partly because the language situation and education on those islands are different. Saba and Sint Eustatius are largely English-speaking and use the English-language Caribbean education programmes operated by the Caribbean Examination Council (CXC) in secondary education.⁴⁹

⁴⁶ <https://www.bureau-ice.nl/caribisch-onderwijs/lvs-bes/>

⁴⁷ The tests for Papiamentu are based on the SLO Reference Framework for Papiamentu and the linked learning pathways. The tests for English and NVT are based on the European Language Reference Framework.

⁴⁸ Bureau ICE specialises in tests and examinations.

⁴⁹ See *Part C: Background information* on CXC education.

Positions taken on languages in education often mask differing values and interests

Language and multilingualism are closely linked to culture and identity and are charged themes because of the colonial past. In Bonaire, there are opposing views on the role and position of Dutch and Papiamentu, which are associated with a primary focus on the island context or the European Netherlands, respectively. Some stress the ties with the European Netherlands, while others emphasise their own Bonairean culture and identity. Discussions about language and multilingualism often take place against the backdrop of the colonial past and are related to current debates about the relationships between Bonaire and the European Netherlands. Some argue that making Dutch the first language of instruction in education is a ‘neo-colonial decision’, given the limited use of Dutch by the Bonairean population.

There are differing views within education regarding the role of Dutch and Papiamentu as a first language, second language, foreign language or language of instruction. Calls to offer more scope for Dutch and English mainly stem from arguments about increasing the opportunities to go on to further education outside Bonaire. Education in Papiamentu is seen mainly as a way of preserving cultural heritage, facilitating identity-building and preventing Papiamentu-speaking students from being put at an educational disadvantage.

Stakeholders in education sometimes find the interference from outside problematic. They believe that the calls for creating more space for Papiamentu devote too little attention to the necessary enabling conditions, such as sufficient resources, teaching materials or teachers of Papiamentu. Conversely, stakeholders outside the field of education feel they have little to no influence over educational decisions, even though these have consequences in areas outside education. The OLB, for example, argues it is insufficiently involved in decisions and plans by education organisations regarding multilingualism, even though the OLB is held accountable for those decisions, for example when parents turn to the OLB to seek ‘redress’.

The differing views in Bonaire regarding the positions of the different languages are also related to the future pathways of young people and the wishes of their parents. For example, many parents feel it is important for Dutch to have a strong position in education, because a good command of the language will enable their children to continue their studies in the European Netherlands.⁵⁰

2.3 Overall picture: multilingual society demands a lot of small education organisations

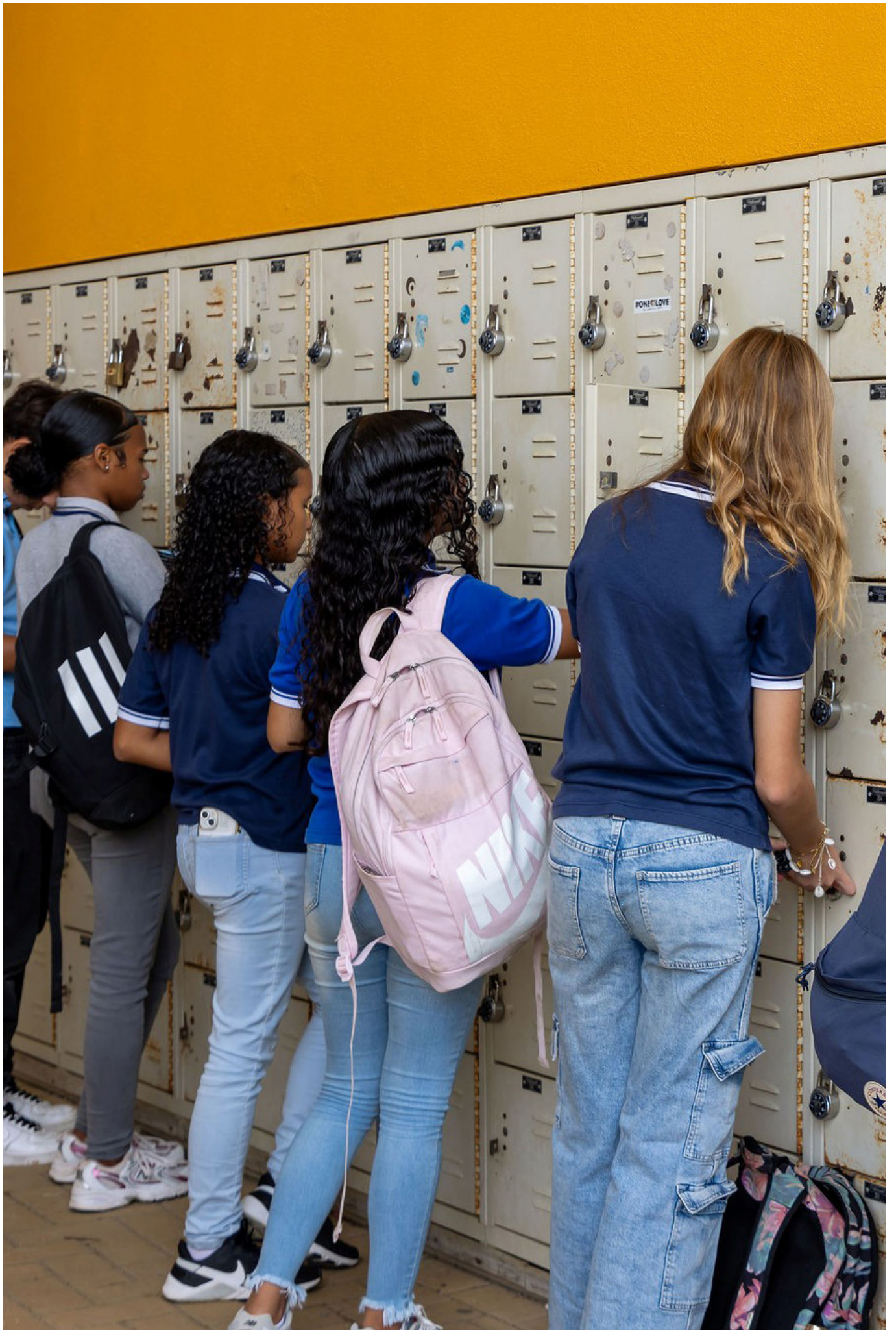
Schools in Bonaire have to serve diverse groups of students with differing backgrounds and future pathways. Some of those students grow up with Papiamentu as their first language, while others from the Caribbean region or the European Netherlands have other first languages. Bonairean students prepare for the local or regional labour market, further education in Bonaire or in the European Netherlands, the United States or the Caribbean region. For many students who wish to enter the Bonairean labour market and to remain in Bonaire, a command of Papiamentu, Dutch, English and Spanish is important. For students focused on future pathways off the island, a command of Dutch and English, in particular, is crucial. All these

differing needs demand a great deal of small organisations, which have to structure the education they provide in a way that adequately equips all groups, despite limited resources.

Public debate about language adds complexity to the challenges faced by education

The small education organisations on the island not only have to take account of the needs of diverse groups of students, but also those of society and the labour market. First, multilingualism is a very prominent topic in Bonairean society; language touches on people's identity and the colonial past. It is against this backdrop that calls are being made for more attention to be given to Papiamentu in education, despite the enabling conditions not being in place for this to happen. The labour market on the island also has wishes, such as ensuring that school-leavers have a good command of Dutch, Spanish, English and Papiamentu. However, those wishes do not always correspond with the wishes of students, some of whom are keen to acquire the best possible command of Dutch in order to study in the European Netherlands.

The divergent wishes within and outside education manifest themselves in different approaches to multilingualism. This sometimes evokes mutual frustration, with choices by education organisations about the position of languages in their teaching sometimes displeasing the labour market or the OLB. Conversely, the education organisations sometimes regard wishes and demands concerning the language teaching from stakeholders outside education as interference. The education organisations and the Ministry of OCW are involved with language choices in education in Bonaire, while the OLB and the Ministry of BZK focus on language choices in other areas of society on the island. These two positions are not always well aligned with each other; there appears to be a lack of connectedness, partly because the Ministry of OCW generally focuses attention on the education organisations and relatively less so on the island government. That is normal practice in the Dutch education system, but sometimes gives rise to friction in Bonaire.



bonaire education provision

Several stakeholders are involved in seeking to ensure that the education provided is closely aligned to the needs of Bonairean students. The small scale means this is not easy, and legal frameworks pose obstacles to some initiatives. There is a lack of strategic consultation between the different providers on the island.

A lot of effort is put into providing education in Bonaire⁵¹ which aligns with the needs of students and society as a whole. Yet on a small island the education provision is always limited. Not all curricula can be offered and it is difficult to create tailored teaching content. Additionally, the legal frameworks sometimes impede initiatives on the island. There is limited strategic consultation on the island concerning the current education provision and how it should be shaped in the future.

3.1 Theme description: ensuring adequate provision and appropriate content is a challenge due to small scale

Education organisations aim to ensure a sufficient range of provision and relevant content for students in Bonaire. For a population of just under 27,000, the island offers a relatively broad range of education (see textbox). That is important, as students cannot easily travel off the island to access a particular type of education.

Education provision in Bonaire

Publicly funded primary education in Bonaire consists of two single-school boards, each operating as an independent foundation with one school. In addition, there is one foundation operating two public primary schools and one foundation operating four Catholic primary schools. One public primary school provides education for students with additional support needs, without receiving full funding for special education. Furthermore, there is one non-publicly funded school intended for students from European Netherlands who are temporarily residing in Bonaire. Finally, a separate educational provision exists for students who, in European Netherlands, would attend cluster 3 or cluster 4 special education schools.⁵² For secondary and vocational education, there is one foundation, the Scholengemeenschap Bonaire (henceforth SGB), that operates four independent units. Together these units offer all educational levels: PRO, VMBO, MAVO, HAVO, VWO, and MBO, including an international transitional class and a ‘rebound’ facility⁵³. This organisational form is known in the European Netherlands as a ‘vertical school community’ in which a single school board manages both a secondary school and a secondary vocational school (MBO). Steps are being taken in Bonaire to formally transform the SGB into a vertical school community.

There are a few other organisations providing education in Bonaire. This include Fundashon Forma, which among other things provides social opportunity programmes⁵⁴ and private courses in Papiamentu; Fundashon Mariadal Academy (FM Academy) delivers hospital-based MBO courses; and the Bonaire branch of the University of Curaçao offers the publicly funded Bachelor programme in Primary Education (LOFO), among other courses.

51 The Education Council uses the term ‘education provision’ to mean two things: publicly funded education provided by education institutes training organisations, and the content of the education in the form of subject matter and associated materials.

52 Cluster 3 and 4 schools in the European Netherlands are part of the partnerships for appropriate education. There is a separate facility for this in Bonaire, but not in Saba and Sint Eustatius.

53 Rebound facilities offer temporary, intensive programmes for secondary school students who are in danger of dropping out due to behavioural problems. The aim is to guide these students back into mainstream education; their ‘home’ school retains responsibility for these students.

54 Social opportunity programmes are for young people who can no longer attend mainstream education and who do not have enough education or experience to get a job, and aim to give them another chance to complete their education. See *Part C: Background information* for more information.

Education provision constrained by small scale and unsuitable legal frameworks

Although the education provision in Bonaire can be considered as broad given the island's modest size, it remains more limited than in an average municipality in the European Netherlands. There are no schools in Bonaire based on special educational concepts, such as Montessori or Dalton, no bilingual education or Technasium, and there is less choice of school subjects and MBO programmes. In secondary and vocational education, there is only one school, the Scholengemeenschap Bonaire (henceforth SGB). Higher education is almost entirely absent, and there is no special education.⁵⁵ This poses five challenges for Bonaire.

- *Funding*: small student numbers means providing education is expensive.⁵⁶ The teacher training programmes in Papiamentu and English at the Bonaire branch of the University of Curaçao were for example withdrawn in the 2025/2026 academic year due to insufficient enrolment.
- *Quality*: educational quality can come under pressure in small education organisations.⁵⁷ The limited number of teachers means there is little scope to divide up tasks or arrange replacements, leading to high pressure of work and less time to spend on improving teaching.
- *Teaching staff*: there are not enough specialist teachers to teach all subjects, and it is expensive to attract part-time teachers from off the island.⁵⁸
- *Collaboration*: in contrast to the European Netherlands, education providers in Bonaire do not readily collaborate with other providers, because the sea forms a hard boundary. Despite this, a number of initiatives have recently been launched, such as collaboration between a few MBO programmes in the Kingdom and collaboration with Saba and Sint Eustatius for childcare.
- *Organisational difficulty*: a diverse education provision requires lots of administration, staff capacity and organisation from small schools and units.

In addition, Dutch laws sometimes cause difficulties with creating a specific education provision. There is for example no fully fledged legal framework – and therefore no full funding – for schools catering for students with additional support needs. Stakeholders also mention the lack of an adapted inspection framework. On top of this, not all students with additional support needs can be adequately accommodated within the existing facilities. There is also some debate as to whether the mandatory qualification requirement is appropriate for Bonaire, given that many young people go into employment immediately after obtaining a VMBO diploma, because in practice work experience is found to be more important than a higher qualification.⁵⁹ Around half the labour force (44%) consequently have no basic qualification and there are limited opportunities to continue learning in later life.

Limited education provision makes matching needs difficult

The small scale means young people in Bonaire are not always able to follow an education that matches their talents, ambitions or support needs. 'Uniformed careers', such as the fire service, police and Coast Guard, are popular among young people. Many young people also prefer jobs in the hospitality and tourism industries, as well as the care, engineering and construction sectors.⁶⁰ There are few subjects,

⁵⁵ See the theme inclusive education in chapter 6 for more information on how special needs education is organised in the Caribbean Netherlands.

⁵⁶ <https://www.duo.nl/zakelijk/caribisch-nederland/bekostiging-subsidies/bekostiging/basisbekostiging.jsp>. For the funding system, see *Part C: Background information*.

⁵⁷ Onderwijsraad, 2014.

⁵⁸ See also chapter 5.

⁵⁹ Basic qualifications include a general secondary, pre-university or secondary vocational level 2 or higher diploma.

⁶⁰ ROA CN, 2024.

disciplines or curricula focusing on these popular careers. There is no special needs education and limited facilities for students needing extra help, which means not all students with additional support needs are adequately accommodated within the existing system. The limited provision means young people are sometimes forced to choose a MBO programme that is a poor fit for their ambitions, especially if they do not (yet) wish to leave the island to follow education elsewhere.

Rapid population growth and the changing population profile place yet more demands on education provision. More and more people with Spanish or other first languages are migrating to Bonaire and there are also increasing numbers of residents from the European Netherlands.⁶¹ This is leading to growing demand for multilingual education⁶² and adult education. There is also increasing demand for international transitional classes for newcomers who do not yet speak Dutch. Each year, dozens of students begin school during the course of the school year, not just at the start. This demands flexibility in the education provision.

Additionally, more and more young people aged over 18 are migrating to Bonaire. There is little education provision for this group, especially if they do not speak Dutch or Papiamentu. As the public entity Bonaire (henceforth: OLB) has no legal responsibility for civic integration,⁶³ this responsibility ends up with education providers. This leads to high enrolment and extra pressure of work in secondary vocational education, even though not all these young people are motivated to follow an education.

Employers state that the curricula are not always a good match for the labour market, forcing companies to train new employees themselves. Employers would like to see specific teaching profiles and programmes which enable students and graduates to be deployed more rapidly, for example training programmes for asbestos removal or for teaching assistants. But these programmes are not offered because the number of students is too small.

Further education opportunities in Bonaire are limited, and many young people therefore leave the island to pursue their education pathways elsewhere, with 90% of HAVO and VWO students going to the European Netherlands, for example. However, it is not straightforward for newcomers without a Dutch passport to do this, despite the lack of alternatives on the island. The fact that students have to leave Bonaire to follow higher education also makes it difficult to match programmes to the Bonairean labour market. This also increases the risk that young people will not return to Bonaire after completing their education, because there is a great chance of finding work elsewhere.⁶⁴

Education content not always well aligned with the island's context

The education content does not always adequately correspond to the needs and aspirations of students in Bonaire.⁶⁵ The core objectives in primary education closely resemble those in the European Netherlands. There is scope to provide additional lessons in Bonaire and the region, but schools often lack the time and resources to offer such lessons. The emphasis is currently on students' language and arithmetic skills, which means topics such as the culture and history of Bonaire receive less attention – though there are initiatives to give Bonaire and the region a more central role in citizenship teaching in primary schools.

⁶¹ See *Part C: Background information*.

⁶² See chapter 2 on multilingualism

⁶³ Wet inburgering 2021.

⁶⁴ Nationale ombudsman, 2020.

⁶⁵ Language also plays an important role here; see chapter 2 on multilingualism.

The centralised examinations in secondary education in Bonaire are virtually identical to those in the European Netherlands.⁶⁶ This is helpful for students wishing to go on to study in the European Netherlands, but also means the education content has only limited relevance for Bonaire. Subjects such as history, biology and geography are largely focused on the European Netherlands, with little attention for the world in which Bonairean students live. One exception is in the first years of VMBO, where a course has recently been developed on the history of Bonaire.

The same pattern can be seen in the teaching materials in primary and secondary education. Most of the books and methods come from the European Netherlands and have little relevance for everyday life in Bonaire. Students learn about things which do not exist in Bonaire, whereas knowledge about the island itself, such as its nature, culture and history, is often lacking. Moreover, a relatively high proportion of teachers come from outside Bonaire and therefore lack the knowledge of the island needed to develop their own teaching materials on these subjects.

MBO is an exception because of the close working relationship with employers in Bonaire aimed at matching the training programmes to the world of work. They too, however, are limited by the small scale and having to work within the framework of the Dutch education system.

3.2 Analysis: focus on European Netherlands hinders development of tailored education provision

Despite the limited resources, great efforts are being made in Bonaire to ensure that the education provision is as good and appropriate as possible. Ambitions in this area are described in the Third Education Agenda (see textbox below).⁶⁷ Attempts are being made to find practical solutions to enable schools to offer the most appropriate education possible on the island within the rules set by the national government.

Third Education Agenda on education provision

The Third Education Agenda for Bonaire names four goals for teaching content: (1) standardised assessment tests in Papiamentu, English and Dutch; (2) a primary school leavers assessment test for year-group 8 which meets the wishes of school boards; (3) teaching materials for citizenship education; and (4) taking account of the wishes of schools in reviewing core objectives. Attention is also given to the transition to further education via the Strategic Education Alliance (SEA), a Kingdom-wide collaboration between public authorities and education institutes on the Caribbean islands and in the European Netherlands. All six Caribbean islands participate in the Alliance.

School boards determine the type of education they offer, within the framework of national regulations and budgets. Within these legal frameworks, they decide on the curricula in primary, secondary and secondary vocational education. Foreign education institutes may also establish branches in Bonaire or initiate hybrid educational models and collaborations, such as the University of Curaçao. These initiatives must meet the legal requirements.

⁶⁶ One exception is the central examination in geography in general secondary and pre-university education (HAVO/VWO), which has been partly adapted for Bonaire. The school does not offer the central examination in history, instead offering oral examinations. The retrospective standardisation of all central examinations is only minimally adapted to compensate for language use and unsuitable tasks and texts.

⁶⁷ Ministerie van OCW, 2024d.

Legal frameworks for education provision

All education organisations in Bonaire work within national regulations that are set by the Dutch legislator, the government and officials at the Ministry of OCW. Four specific education laws apply for the Caribbean Netherlands: the Primary Education BES Act (WPO BES), the Secondary Education Act 2020 (WVO 2020), the Adult and Vocational Education BES Act (WEB BES) and the Youth Social Opportunity Programmes BES Act (SKJ BES). As the Expertise Centres Act (WEC) does not apply for Bonaire, Saba and Sint Eustatius, there is no legal basis for providing special needs education in Bonaire. In the near future, the WEB BES will be integrated into national legislation,⁶⁸ and the SKJ BES will then lapse.⁶⁹

These laws contain rules on the configuration of the education system, on which curricula and provisions are possible and on how education organisations receive funding. The legislation is largely aligned with that in the European Netherlands. It incorporates the same school types, profiles and central examinations, with minor adaptations in subjects. No separate MBO qualifications have been developed for Bonaire; the Minister of OCW decides which Dutch qualifications may be offered and whether these will be funded. The law also determines the funding and therefore the financial capabilities of education providers in Bonaire. That funding does make allowance for the small scale, but the number of students still determines the affordability of a particular programme.

In addition to the existing schools, new education institutes can also be founded in Bonaire. A formal request must be submitted to the Minister of OCW for this, demonstrating that there will be sufficient students. Three new primary schools have been founded in Bonaire over the last 20 years, all private, non-funded schools. Two of them did subsequently receive funding, while one school has remained private.⁷⁰ In the summer of 2025, an educational foundation submitted a request to found a new bilingual (Dutch and English) primary school, with a view to launching in 2027. In addition, a number of schools have recently begun using the International Primary Curriculum (IPC), in an attempt to align their teaching better with Bonairean society. This does create extra work for teachers, who have to seek out additional teaching materials and consequently require more preparation time, time which is not always available.

There is one broad-based education organisation providing all secondary and vocational education in Bonaire (SGB). SGB is the only provider of funded secondary and vocational education on the island, and tries to offer the broadest possible education provision, tailored to Bonaire. For example, the VMBO unit uses short internships and guest lessons by island professionals to strengthen the ties with Bonairean society and utilise specific expertise. The Liseo Boneriano unit uses digital lessons to teach Information Technology. The Special Needs Unit works with organisations such as the Expertise Centre for Education Care (EOZ) and Mental Health Caribbean (MHC) to offer education to students with additional educational needs. There is also a collaboration with the Netherlands Caribbean Correctional Institution (JICN) to provide education for young people who are temporarily residents of the facility.⁷¹

⁶⁸ At the time of writing, the bill on modernising the rules for vocational education, adult education and special needs education 'Modernisering regels voor beroepsonderwijs, educatie en vsv Caribisch Nederland' was before Parliament. The intention is that the law should come into effect on 1 August 2026.

⁶⁹ See *Part C: Background information*.

⁷⁰ A private school simply needs to be recognised by the Inspectorate of Education as a school within the meaning of the Compulsory Education (BES) Act.

⁷¹ Cf. Onderwijsraad, 2025a.

The MBO unit faces perhaps the biggest challenge: creating a varied and appropriate offer that meets the needs of the labour market as well as offering sufficient opportunities to transfer to other institutions in the region. The small size of the island makes it difficult to offer certain training programmes on a permanent basis. Sometimes the labour market becomes saturated after a programme has been taught for several years, or a need may arise for different programmes. This demands a great deal of flexibility from teachers and examination bodies to continually match the offer to the changing demand. The Council of Education and Labor Market for the Caribbean Netherlands (ROA CN) advises the Minister of OCW on which programmes should be offered.

Collaboration on Caribbean MBO programmes falters after promising start

The MBO programmes for doctor's assistant and pharmacy assistant began as a project between the Ministries of Health, Welfare and Sport (VWS) and OCW with Aruba, Curaçao and the Netherlands. An MBO institute in the European Netherlands delivered the training together with education partners in Aruba, Bonaire and Curaçao. The theoretical subjects were taught online, with local internships on the islands. Although the internships were assessed very positively, following the theoretical subjects entirely online proved too complicated for students. After a promising first year, insufficient enrolments meant the second year was unable to go ahead and the programme was only continued in Bonaire with three students.

In addition to private courses for adults, Fundashon Forma provides education in Bonaire for young people who are not (any longer) participating in mainstream education. Forma launched in 1994, offering programmes to combat school dropout as part of the mandatory social training.⁷² After 2010 these were converted into social opportunity programmes (SKJ's). Since then, Forma has worked with SGB to provide entry-level courses in Papiamentu, since SGB is the only body officially authorised to issue MBO diplomas. Forma also organises private courses for companies, for example on informal care and guides, without receiving any formal funding or recognition.

Other education providers are also active in Bonaire, such as a branch of the University of Curaçao (UoC), which has provided courses partly on the island and partly online since the 2006/2007 academic year. The Ministry of OCW provides UoC with a grant for the Bachelor of Education in Foundation Based Education degree course, as part of Kibrahacha,⁷³ a partnership for training primary school teachers within the Kingdom. There are plans to extend this partnership to include secondary and vocational teachers. Other UoC programmes are funded by the university itself, which means that programmes with few enrolments have to be discontinued, as happened with the teacher training programmes for Papiamentu and Dutch. UoC is accordingly exploring the possibilities for expanding its offer through new forms of partnership. One example is the Associate Degree in Social Work, which is offered in partnership with Sentro Akseso Boneiru, the youth and social care organisation in Bonaire. To be accredited within the Dutch system, UoC works with recognised institutes.

⁷² *Social development duty* is the obligation for every young person to follow an opportunity programme if they do not hold a Level 1 vocational qualification; Article 1 Wet SKJ BES.

⁷³ Kibrahacha is named after an indigenous tree on the islands which blooms exuberantly during the rainy season.

The public entity of Bonaire (OLB) has no formal influence over teaching programmes, the Minister of OCW must consult the Island Council on decisions regarding the funding of a new vocational course.⁷⁴ For secondary education, the rules on curriculum planning from the WVO 2020 do not apply in Bonaire. This means that the SGB does not have to consult with the Executive Council on teaching programmes, whereas this is mandatory in the European Netherlands.⁷⁵ The Executive Council can however submit a 'viewpoint'⁷⁶ to the Minister of OCW in response to requests for new schools or teaching programmes. The OLB also has some influence, based on its responsibility for school buildings. In the past, the deputy governor has also worked in partnership with the University of Applied Sciences in The Hague and ProDemos to develop courses, initially for its own employees and later more broadly.

Targeted measures for students with educational support needs

The legislator has organised a care structure specially for students in the Caribbean Netherlands with extra support needs, because the Expertise Centres Act (for special needs education) does not apply in the Caribbean Netherlands.⁷⁷ Primary school students in Bonaire who would attend a special needs school in the European Netherlands can attend the Kolegio Strea Briante⁷⁸ in Bonaire, which receives additional funding for this. These students may go on to the Special Needs Unit for secondary education. In addition the EOZ offers support to students in mainstream education, and in 2022 founded a specialist facility, Kolegio Emmy Schermer, providing education to primary school students whose behavioural and/or mental health issues mean they are not able to attend a mainstream school.

Other schools have also taken steps to offer additional support, such as language classes for newcomers, the Flamingo class for gifted students and classes for students with special educational needs. Until recently, this was funded from the National Education Programme (NPO), but that programme ended in 2025, forcing schools to find alternatives. One primary school has sought a solution in creating a smaller class for students needing extra help, while making the other classes bigger.

Education organisations in Bonaire report that the lack of a legal framework for special needs education is a major constraint. At the time, a deliberate choice was made not to apply the Expertise Centres Act (WEC) that applies in the European Netherlands to Bonaire, but to create a separate care structure.⁷⁹ Stakeholders emphasise that the situation has since changed to such an extent due to the growing number of students that the principles which applied in the past are no longer appropriate. The present situation puts education organisations and staff under extra pressure.

Limited responsiveness to (changing) population composition

The education offered in Bonaire does not yet reflect the recent population growth and the increase in young immigrants with specific educational needs. The number of international transitional classes is however growing, with almost all schools having one or more. The SGB asked the OLB for support with teaching adult immigrants, but the request was denied because the OLB does not have a statutory duty with regard to civic integration.

⁷⁴ Article 1.4.1. and Article 2.1.1. WEB BES.

⁷⁵ Article 11.52 WVO 2020.

⁷⁶ A viewpoint is an official response to a proposed decision by the government.

⁷⁷ See chapter 6 on inclusive education.

⁷⁸ Papiamentu for 'brilliant star'.

⁷⁹ For more information on the care structure in the Caribbean Netherlands, see chapter 6 on inclusive education in Sint Eustatius.

The small number of students means it is not viable for publishers to create teaching materials specially for Bonaire, and as a consequence there is little material with island-specific content, or in Papiamentu. Teachers sometimes create their own material, such as textbooks in Papiamentu and Dutch about nature in Bonaire. They often do this in their own time, with occasional help from sponsors. This material is not widely disseminated, however, so that colleagues wishing to use something similar have to make it themselves.

Prior to 2011, the OLB was able to influence education provision via its own department, *Servisio Edukashon i Kultura* (SEK). Today, the OLB works from its own educational vision and organises projects around cultural education.

No strategic coordination of education provision at island level

Education organisations in Bonaire generally operate independently, as is customary in the Dutch system. Although schools maintain good contacts at board and principal levels, there is little coordination regarding the education provision. As a result, schools decide for themselves whether, for example, special classes for gifted children or language classes, are needed, and which subjects and disciplines they provide.

Education organisations maintain good contact, but also compete with each other
Education organisations in Bonaire maintain good contact, but are also competitors as they draw from the same small pool and serve the same students. This means that cooperation is sometimes challenging. At board level, there are formal opportunities for schools to meet, for example through the strategic alliance for education care via the EOZ and the fortnightly meetings between primary and secondary school boards. These fixed meetings facilitate agreements on support and programmes, such as those related to multilingualism.⁸⁰ School principals and unit directors also meet regularly.

The SGB is the sole provider of secondary and vocational education and therefore has few horizontal relationships with other education organisations on the island. It does collaborate with Forma, but this is a dependency relationship, because Forma can only offer entry-level programmes via the SGB.

Various forms of consultation on education provision

Ideally, the education provision meets the needs and wishes of students, as well as those of employers and society at large (see textbox).⁸¹

Multiple interests in education provision

There are multiple interests at play in creating the education provision in Bonaire.

- **Interests of students:** ensuring that they can follow an education that matches their interests and capabilities. This requires a broad range of programmes.
- **Interests of the labour market:** ensuring that the education matches what employers need, so that students acquire relevant knowledge and skills.
- **Interests of society:** ensuring that education contributes to what society considers useful or valuable, including culture, history, citizenship, science and practical skills.

⁸⁰ See also chapter 2 on multilingualism.

⁸¹ Onderwijsraad, 2025b.

All education institutes maintain links with the EOZ in Bonaire concerning the education provided to students and the associated support needs. There are both informal and formal consultations between education institutions and the EOZ. The SGB has good contacts with employers; in particular, VMBO and MBO work in partnership with the labour market to organise internships and ‘lifelong development’. Employers are a crucial part of this: without them, the training programmes would not be possible. The Council of Education and Labor Market for the Caribbean Netherlands (ROA CN) also plays a key role. The Minister of OCW set up ROA CN to bring education and the labour market closer together.⁸² ROA CN is the Dutch Caribbean variant of the Foundation for Cooperation on Vocational Education, Training and the Labour Market (SBB) in the Netherlands; it accredits and supports companies in providing internships and work experience placements, advises on the match between teaching programmes and the labour market and brings together vocational training institutes and companies in order to ensure that the training is better aligned to the needs of the labour market. Formal consultation takes place via ROA CN between the MBO unit at SGB and the labour market on the education provided. The Bonaire branch of the University of Curaçao also works with a number of civil-society organisations to offer education that meets certain societal needs.

The OLB’s formal involvement with education provision is limited, as is usual in the Dutch education system.⁸³ The OLB does very occasionally become involved in plans for new schools, and also seeks support from national agencies and collaborates with organisations such as the Culture Fund and Méér Muziek in de Klas (More Music in the Classroom) to increase the educational content around culture. The contact with school boards often depends on individuals.

Education organisations within the Dutch system are heavily dependent on the national government in creating their educational offer. The Minister of OCW decides on the funding and accreditation of teaching programmes. Schools also have to deal with other agencies, such as SLO, CvTE and the Inspectorate of Education. As many tasks are performed by small teams in Bonaire, the involvement of these agencies also brings work pressure.

Different perceptions of legal frameworks

Given the different interests at play around the choices made in providing education, it is difficult on a small island like Bonaire to meet all wishes and expectations. Moreover, not everyone perceives the legal frameworks in the same way.

With a relatively limited range of education on offer, it is difficult to meet the wishes of all employers and civil-society organisations. Moreover, young people in Bonaire have different needs, and a diversity of ambitions: staying in Bonaire to work, studying further in the region or going to the European Netherlands. Education therefore has to prepare students for a variety of future pathways. The desire to enable young people to follow further education in the European Netherlands, and equip them accordingly, can be at odds with the desire to prepare young people to live and work in Bonaire, which demands more attention for Bonairean culture and society.

One sensitive point is that the Ministry of OCW mainly consults with school boards, school principals and unit directors, and to a lesser extent with other stakeholders. This upsets some Bonaireans, particularly since a number of school board members

⁸² Article 1.5.1. WEB BES.

⁸³ With the exception of educational disadvantage policy and supplementary education.

come from the European Netherlands and Bonaireans feel they have a less clear idea of what living and working on the island requires from education.

Tension between quality, efficiency and accessibility of education

Since 2010, the national government has emphasised educational quality in Bonaire, requiring it to meet the quality and efficiency standards. Both national government and education organisations look for suitable resources for this, both in the form of extra funding per student and teaching smaller programmes jointly. The focus on quality and efficiency can however also mean that some programmes are not (or no longer) provided, despite a desire on the island for them to continue.

Stakeholders deal with this situation in different ways. Some prefer not to offer what they consider to be 'below par' courses, while others prefer to keep the existing curriculum going, even if the quality leaves something to be desired. Although Bonaire has the same right to good, accessible education as in the European Netherlands, and although this is the responsibility of the national government, not everyone can see how this is achievable in practice.

Different approach to legal frameworks

There is a tension in Bonaire between the rules set by the Dutch government and the needs of the island, or in other words a tension between uniformity and differentiation. On the one hand, people in Bonaire stress that schools should follow the same rules as in the European Netherlands, so that everyone receives the same education (uniformity). Yet others argue that the education should be adapted to the situation on the island, so it is better aligned with what students and society in Bonaire need (differentiation).

There are also differences in how strictly rules are interpreted. The national government expects compliance with rules through formal procedures and supervision. But the rules also leave scope for schools to make their own choices and find their own solutions. Some schools utilise this scope to solve problems (practical flexibility), while others follow the legal frameworks to the letter for fear of mistakes or sanctions, and are thus less inclined to experiment (strict compliance).

These differences are exacerbated by the fact that the rules are written in the language of education law. That language is Dutch, and moreover a specific, legal variant of it. Without translation, information and explanation, the meaning and intention of rules does not always come across accurately. Schools therefore largely rely on guidance from supervisors from the Ministry of OCW. Historical distrust of the Dutch government and fear of a poor rating by the Inspectorate of Education make education institutes extra cautious. Schools attach importance to a good reputation and mistakes are often felt as personal failures in Bonaire. Education organisations therefore constantly have to strike a balance between strict compliance with the rules and finding scope to meet island-specific needs. This requires a combination of caution, practical choices and sometimes creativity to provide an education that is suitable for students on the island.

3.3 Overall picture: scarcity, inflexible rules and lack of coordination complicate education provision

On a small island like Bonaire it is difficult to offer a comprehensive breadth of education and appropriate content, due to the limited financial and staff capacity. Schools have too few staff and too little money to deliver a broad education programme, to offer more specialisations or to create programmes and teaching materials themselves. They have limited contact with organisations outside the island that could offer help. Students in Bonaire have to be prepared for a diversity of school and labour market careers – on the island, in the region or in the European Netherlands – each of which requires them to be equipped in a different way.

The more the education is geared to the needs of the island itself, the less scope there is to equip students for further education or work elsewhere in the region or in the European Netherlands, and vice versa. Schools therefore often find themselves in a cleft stick: they are embedded in Bonairean society and have to be sufficiently aligned with it, but at the same time have to prepare students to study, live and work elsewhere. Demand for specific education types is moreover subject to change. This demands continual evaluation and adaptation,⁸⁴ especially given how rapidly the island population is changing. On top of that, society, and especially the labour market, has specific wishes and needs, for example training young people for specific sectors. Education providers therefore have to take lots of wishes and interests into account.

Not all stakeholders are involved in decisions about education

Creating an educational offer that is adequate and appropriate is challenging not only because of the small scale of education on the island. The limited collaboration and coordination between providers, rules and interests also plays a role. There is a lack of coordination and clear role divisions between partners within and outside education. Stakeholders outside education, such as civil-society organisations and interest groups, representatives of the island labour market and society, generally have little influence over education, with the exception of MBO, where ROA CN plays an important role. Beyond that, there is no structural consultation on the kind of education provided. Education organisations generally decide for themselves what to offer, without being required to accept input from stakeholders on the island.

The Ministry of OCW also consults primarily with school boards, principals and unit directors, and less with other stakeholders, such as employers, civil-society organisations and interest groups, young people and their families. That is a sensitive issue for some Bonaireans, mainly because some school board members come from the European Netherlands, and some islanders feel they therefore have less insight into what living and working on the island demands from education.

Difficulty making suitable choices within frameworks

It can be difficult for education organisations to make suitable choices regarding the education they offer because they have to operate within a number of legal frameworks, which are not always aligned and sometimes pose unnecessary obstacles. For example, education organisations cannot always adapt their education to suit the needs of students and the island due to obstacles in the

Dutch system and the associated regulations. Those obstacles do not always stem from rules, but are sometimes based on a (distorted) conception of those regulations. There is a lack of clarity regarding the legal frameworks governing education in Bonaire.

It is a challenge for Bonaire to collaborate with other education organisations on the two closest islands, Aruba and Curaçao, and this collaboration across national borders and system boundaries is made more difficult by differences in regulations and funding. As a result, the focus tends to be on seeking partners in the European Netherlands, whereas collaboration with Aruba and Curaçao would sometimes be more practical and appropriate for education organisations and students in Bonaire.

You dream it we accept it
and together we build it!



Whole 1

out of → vinculum
one → denominator - below

3. $\frac{1}{2}$ = one half or one out of two equal parts

4. $\frac{1}{3}$ = one third

5. $\frac{1}{4}$ = one fourth or one quarter

working together



saba school boards

School boards in Saba operate in a small, isolated community. That creates both opportunities and challenges. National government agencies generally offer temporary support in urgent situations, but good educational governance demands permanent attention.

Good education requires school boards to be able to fulfil their roles adequately.⁸⁵ That requires not only sufficient administrative capacity, but also the right circumstances to be able to apply and exploit that capacity.⁸⁶ The two school boards in Saba are inherently vulnerable because of the island's small size and isolation. It requires extra effort to find the right people, to establish good collaborative partnerships and to obtain structural support from other stakeholders in the education system.

National government agencies assume a high level of responsibility for school boards, which have access to adequate support. This does not align well with the situation in Saba; the physical and cultural distance of the island means it is difficult for national agencies to support and strengthen them adequately.

Disclaimer

Saba is a small, close-knit community with 2,158 residents.⁸⁷ Recent years have seen a good deal of turbulence in educational governance, making this a difficult period for many people. This chapter looks at this issue. The small scale of both the education provision and the island community means it is sometimes possible in this description to trace which organisations or persons are being referred to. Where this is unavoidable, the Education Council of the Netherlands would stress that these references do not constitute an opinion about their individual functioning. The central question is what can be learned from these experiences about the working and structure of the education system in Saba.

4.1 Theme description: small scale and isolation hinder good educational governance

Sharing responsibility in everyday life on the island is a given in Saba. The isolation and long history of having to rely on itself means that Sabans are accustomed to doing things for themselves and helping each other. As a result, a great deal happens informally, and Sabans often take the initiative themselves to get things done because of their engagement with the island. Retirees, professionals from other fields and members of the public entity regularly take on voluntary administrative tasks, based on a desire to do what is needed for the island. The small scale means that most Sabans know each other and work together intensively. Virtually everyone went to one or both of the two schools on the island, has children or grandchildren at school or knows someone who works there. Consequently, ensuring a good education is seen as a shared responsibility, which is borne by the whole community.

⁸⁵ Precisely who the 'school board members are depends on the statute and structure of an education organisation. Unless stated otherwise, the Education Council means both the person or persons charged with the day-to-day management and the supervisory section of the school board.

⁸⁶ Onderwijsraad, 2016.

⁸⁷ As at 1 January 2025. See <https://www.cbs.nl/nl-nl/cijfers/detail/83698NED>

Governance structure of education in Saba

There are two small education organisations in Saba, each operating one school: Stichting Katholiek Onderwijs (SKO) Saba is the competent authority for the Sacred Heart Primary School (SHS). SKO Saba has formal links to the diocese of Willemstad. The Saba Educational Foundation (SEF) is the competent authority for Saba Comprehensive School (SCS). SEF has a statutory link with the Island Council. Until 2025, the two school boards in Saba each had a one-tier model, with one governance body per school consisting of five voluntary board members and one school principal. In mid-2025, at the insistence of the Inspectorate for Education, a two-tier model was introduced with each school having a paid director-executive which is a daily board member and school principal, and a supervisory board consisting of three voluntary board members.

The director-executives of the two schools are supported by a management team. In addition, the two education foundations and the Saba Reach Foundation (SRF) each supply a board member for the Expertise Center Education Care foundation (EC2)⁸⁸, which is responsible for education care in Saba. The day-to-day management of EC2 is in the hands of the director. EC2 is also considering whether it needs to move to a new governance model.

Dutch education system assumes heavy responsibility for school boards

The constitutional reforms in 2010 brought the governance structure in Saba into line with the rest of the Dutch education system. A characteristic of that system is the high degree of functional decentralisation; in other words, the national government leaves many choices, decisions and responsibilities to the education organisations themselves. This led to an increase in their responsibilities. Previously, school boards were only concerned with the budget for expenditure other than staff costs. Nowadays, they also decide within the legal frameworks on matters such as the structure of their own organisation, spending of financial resources, staff policy, quality assurance systems, educational programmes and assessment. The professional standards for school boards have also been raised.

In line with the limited influence of local authorities in the European Netherlands, the national government has transferred almost no competences or responsibilities for education to the island government, which now has less influence over education than when Saba formed part of the Netherlands Antilles. At that time, for example, the national government set teachers' salaries, which were paid via the island administration. Since 2010, the public entity Saba (henceforth OLS) has only a few specific tasks, such as enforcing compulsory schooling, looking after school buildings (together with the Ministry of OCW) and reimbursing costs of food, clothing and transport for students growing up in households who lack the financial means for this.⁸⁹ Beyond this, the OLS has only limited scope to pursue an independent education policy. It does however have a role as the responsible authority for ensuring the continuity and character of public education.

School boards requires further attention

School boards in Saba requires extra attention in several areas due to the island's small size and isolation. First, there is the limited availability of suitable board members on the island. Members of the two school boards have to be sought within a small community, which means the number of people with the necessary knowledge,

⁸⁸ Expertise Center Education Care (EC2) is referred to in the legislation as Expertisecentrum onderwijszorg. It is known as the EC2 in Saba, and that is therefore the term used here.

⁸⁹ *Part C: Background information* looks in more detail at the role of the public entity in education in Saba.

qualities and experience is limited. People who do meet the required profile are often already performing another role, which in practice cannot be combined with a position as a school board member. This shortage of suitable individuals is exacerbated by the fact that Saba has adopted the European Dutch distinction between primary and secondary education, which means the island has two small education organisations, each with its own school board. This in turn means that a relatively high number of board members are needed for this small community. Until recently, school board members were required to live on the island, but since mid-2025 the educational governance structure on the island has moved from a one-tier to a two-tier model and the supervisory board members may live off the island.

Second, the education organisations lack support and capacity. Their limited staff numbers mean the school boards carry many responsibilities, for example in relation to finance, staff policy, quality assurance and maintaining school buildings. Applying government policy, legislation and regulations, and applying for grants, also places a heavy burden on a small number of people. Education organisations in Saba have to meet the same standards as their counterparts in the European Netherlands, but with fewer people. Given the small scale, education organisations in Saba receive additional funding from the Ministry of OCW over and above the regular funding. The primary school also receives an additional amount because it is the only one on the island.⁹⁰ The additional funding takes the form of 'top-ups' and 'amounts', among other things to compensate for the level of wages and prices on the Windward Islands and because of the small scale. These payments come on top of the basic funding. Despite this additional support, it is not feasible to appoint full-time paid school boards or set up an extensive administrative office.⁹¹

Third, the scope for providing external support is limited because of the island's isolation. The education organisations in Saba are therefore forced to arrange many things themselves within their own community. There are few specialist administrative staff on the island and it is often difficult to work with external stakeholders. The island's isolation makes it complex to bring in people such as sparring partners and confidential advisors from outside, because of their limited knowledge of the Saban context.

Tradition of volunteering in public administration at odds with professionalism requirements

The expectations of the national government are based on the assumption of a professional school board. This approach does not align well with the voluntary school boards in a small island community. At the same time, parents and teaching staff in Saba are demanding more and more professionalism and leadership from school boards, and this too requires a move away from the traditional voluntary administration structure.

Many tasks are carried out by a limited number of people with the requisite knowledge and experience. For example, the day-to-day running of the two schools and EC2 are in the hands of three individuals: the director-executives of the schools and the director of EC2. These three persons were appointed on an interim basis from the European Netherlands in 2025.

Close-knit island community influences professional collaboration

Saba is characterised by strong personal networks, which benefits collaboration and communication within the community. People know each other personally and can rely on each other in different roles and functions. Family and friendship ties often cut across organisations, contributing to the harmony and closeness of the community. The flipside is that it is sometimes difficult to separate the different formal roles someone fulfils. People cannot avoid each other and have to work together, even if difficulties have arisen. The importance of personal relationships and the need for mutual understanding are sometimes prioritised above formal procedures and rules, making correction or adaptation of tasks and responsibilities more difficult.

For a long time, school boards in Saba were barely accountable to parents, teaching staff or the community. That was also reflected in the say those stakeholders were afforded. Formal participation councils did not exist. This meant that concerns and dissatisfaction could not be properly discussed and were often expressed on Facebook to a wide public. Today, both schools have a participation council and Saba Comprehensive School (SCS) also has a Student Body. These are an important step towards giving parents, teaching staff and students a greater say. The participation councils are developing new routines and trying to make their role better known in order to strengthen the participation process. It does however remain difficult to find people to serve on these councils. Formally, the participation councils are in a weak position, with a right to two meetings per year with the school board. This is different from the situation in the European Netherlands, where participation councils have a legal right to give advice or consent in several areas.⁹² This legislation was not implemented in Saba. Since the introduction of the two-tier board model in 2025, in practice the European Dutch rules on participation councils are applied at both schools and the participation council will acquire a greater right of advice and consent.

School boards confronted with recurring challenges

Educational governance in Saba is characterised by alternating periods of turbulence and stability. There have been times when the school boards were stable and functioned well, partly thanks to the dedication of a few visible, engaged members who had the requisite knowledge and experience, kept an eye on what was happening in the schools and had good relations with the school principals. There have also been times when extra support was needed, for example due to changes in the boards or when a school principal left. The textbox below outlines a number of these developments.

Recurring challenges for school boards in Saba

Even before 2010, there were challenges for school boards in Saba. In 2004 there were problems with the financial management at a school for secondary and vocational education. Ten years later there was unrest at the same school because the board had cancelled the principal's contract. Problems arose with the primary school board in 2020 after the principal had left. An interim replacement was appointed to put things in order, after which things went well for a time.

Since December 2023, the two schools in Saba ran into a number of financial and governance difficulties, partly surrounding a planned merger. The former upper school director departed and the voluntary school board took formally over the day-to-day administration. In practice, they left many tasks to the then school principals and management teams, because the day-to-day board members had full-time roles elsewhere. At the same time, the principals did not have the governance mandate needed to take day-to-day decisions on the school's education. This proved to be an unsustainable situation.

Between 2023 and 2025, the Inspectorate of Education published critical reports on the governance performance, the (lack of) social safety and the educational quality at the two schools.⁹³ That prompted the departure of both school principals in early 2025, who subsequently also left the island. They were succeeded by two interim principals seconded from the European Netherlands.

At the urgent request of the Inspectorate of Education, efforts were made in 2025 to strengthen educational governance, partly by transforming the governance model at both schools into a two-tier structure, with a director-executive and a supervisory board at one remove. Also at the request of the Inspectorate, a number of issues were brought into line with the requirements of the Dutch education system, including amendment of the articles and the introduction of an integrity code, complaints policy, whistleblower policy and management regulations. The finances were put in order and efforts were made to professionalise the school teams and participation councils.

4.2 Analysis: support for school boards mainly in urgent situations

Attempts to strengthen the school boards in Saba follow a pattern of temporary support in urgent situations. Until 2025, the Saban school boards had no structural policy in place to strengthen their organisations. And, to the extent that other stakeholders did focus on this, these efforts were always temporary. If problems became acute, the Ministry of OCW and the public entity (OLS) offered extra support, but these efforts proved insufficient to address the underlying problems effectively.

Limited and temporary measures to support school boards

The measures to support the school boards in Saba have to date been fairly limited and temporary. When problems arose, the only efforts made were often to replace individual board members or school principals, without addressing the underlying governance structure. Between 2012 and 2021, school boards received temporary support from coaches via the Association of Primary Schools in the Netherlands (PO-Raad), funded by the Ministry of OCW, with the aim of strengthening their

administration. However, these efforts did not produce the desired result. The statutes have not been amended since the introduction of the education legislation for the Caribbean Netherlands in 2010, despite this being necessary to create a clear separation between the day-to-day management and the internal supervision.⁹⁴

In addition the Inspectorate of Education exercises regular supervision of school board activities, aligning with the Good Governance Code developed in the European Netherlands.⁹⁵ Until January 2024, this supervision in Saba was carried out mainly through specific investigations in response to serious signals or incidents. In the spring of 2024 these investigations were carried out in response to signals concerning the financial situation, such as salaries that were no longer being paid, and the educational governance, including a lack of clarity about the division of responsibilities. This shows that national government agencies failed for a long time to notice that the internal supervision and participation structures in Saba were not working well in practice.

The national government is responsible in a general sense for ensuring good governance through rules, legislation, supervision and practical support. The legal rules are largely the same as in the European Netherlands, though with a few exceptions, such as the legislation on participation (see section 4.1). The Ministry of OCW also tries to take account of the limited administrative capacity by automatically awarding or merging certain grants, so that education organisations do not have to submit separate applications. The Third Education Agenda also cites educational governance in the section on strength of governance (see textbox). But the day-to-day activities of school boards demand so much time and attention that there is virtually no time left over to implement the Agenda.

Educational governance in the Third Education Agenda

Since 2010, educational governance has been a priority in all education agendas for Saba. The Third Education Agenda for Saba, signed in July 2023 by the Ministry of OCW, the Executive Council, the school boards SKO Saba and SEF and EC2, emphasises administrative strength and educational leadership. The Agenda cites the lack of support staff and assigns responsibility to the Ministry of OCW for providing governance support for the long term, for example via a central support facility or a mobile team. To strengthen educational leadership, the Ministry also offers coaches and sparring partners for issues requiring specialist support.

Many actions since 2023, but coordination is weak and stakeholders switch roles
Both school boards in Saba found themselves (yet again) in heavy weather between 2023 and 2024. Their actions were not always well coordinated and stakeholders also changed roles during the process. After the boards of both schools stepped down in the spring of 2024, it was mainly the public entity Saba (OLS) which stepped forward to offer support. This move aligns with the Saban tradition of collaboration to ensure that public amenities are well organised. A few employees of the OLS acted as interim board members at the two education foundations. National government agencies remained involved at arm's length, but did much more than usual. For example, the Ministry of OCW supported the schools with financial advances, a grant to pay for a coach and advice.

⁹⁴ Inspectie van het Onderwijs, 2024b.

⁹⁵ Since 2010 the Inspectorate has supervised the Saba primary school, the school for secondary and vocational education, the youth social opportunity programmes run by Saba Reach Foundation and the Expertise Centre Education Care (EC2).

In the same period, the Inspectorate of Education launched investigations in response to worrying signals about the financial situation, the governance performance and (the lack of) social safety. In the investigation on social safety, it is notable that the Inspectorate interpreted the legal provisions by making use of 'field standards',⁹⁶ deriving good practices and standards from the sectoral council and the collective labour agreement for the European Netherlands. Where a judgement is normally made for the islands between applying European Dutch standards and standards adapted to the island context (the comply or explain principle),⁹⁷ This appears not to have been the case here, and the situation was viewed from a European Dutch perspective.

After the summer of 2024, the Ministry of OCW adopted a more formal stance. The state secretary issued instructions to the school board for the primary school in Saba,⁹⁸ setting a number of tasks for improvement, and ultimately also an emergency instruction with a view to social safety.⁹⁹ For the board of the school for secondary and vocational education, it was enough to express concerns and the intention to issue an instruction, in which the board was required to take certain measures.¹⁰⁰ Fortnightly meetings were introduced between officials at the Ministry in The Hague and the board for the school for secondary and vocational education, as well as monthly meetings with the board and officials in Saba. After publication of the inspection report, inspectors took over these meetings from the Ministry of OCW. They issued further instructions to take the requisite steps and helped develop specific measures. The improvement actions that the interim board of the school for secondary and vocational education had taken prompted the state secretary of OCW to suspend the intention to issue an instruction in April 2025, and in July 2025 it was decided to withdraw the instruction altogether.¹⁰¹

Lots of contact between key stakeholders, little collaboration with others

The collaboration between the Ministry of OCW, the Inspectorate of Education, the education organisations and the Executive Council and Island Council of the OLS is the most important factor in the governance structuring of education. There are also incidental contacts with other stakeholders. The education organisations in Saba have little contact with civil-society organisations, interest groups and knowledge institutes in the European Netherlands. The national government has a wide range of specialisms and disciplines with their own agencies, directorates or departments. On the island, these tasks or consistently concentrated among a small number of people.

There is regular contact between the education organisations in Saba. School boards talk to each other informally. The two schools and EC2 are located next to each other. The director-executives, directors of EC2, Saba Reach Foundation (SRF) and the OLS have set meetings every six weeks.

The two school boards have a formal relationship with a party in the background: the diocese of Willemstad for the primary school and the Island Council for the school for secondary and vocational education. They can intervene in exceptional cases, but their degree of involvement has varied over recent years. Since mid-2025, the OLS has a formal relationship with the school for secondary and vocational

⁹⁶ Inspectie van het Onderwijs, 2024c.

⁹⁷ The comply or explain principle means that all European Dutch regulations apply in Bonaire, Saba and Sint Eustatius, unless there are reasons for not doing so.

⁹⁸ An 'instruction' is an official order to the competent authority; an urgent instruction is issued when there is a serious suspicion of mismanagement.

⁹⁹ Ministerie van Onderwijs, Cultuur en Wetenschap, 2024b, 2024g.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ Ministerie van Onderwijs, Cultuur en Wetenschap, 2025.

education. The OLS is also a close partner for the education organisations and stands ready to help deploy resources. Most contacts are personal. There are no structural consultation platforms, with the exception of the meetings around the Education Agenda.

Education organisations in Saba receive information and funding from the Ministry of OCW. The most important is the funding relationship between the Ministry and the schools. This also makes it possible to intervene if a school board is not functioning properly. There is regular contact between the education organisations and the Ministry of OCW in The Hague or its outpost in the Caribbean, OCW CG, within the National Office for the Caribbean Netherlands. As OCW CG only had a presence in Bonaire and Sint Eustatius until December 2025, school boards and former school principals in Saba often had direct contact with The Hague.

Since 2010, the Inspectorate of Education has supervised the primary school, the school for secondary and vocational education, the youth social opportunity programmes run by Saba Reach Foundation and the expertise centre for education care (EC2). The contact between inspectors and the school boards intensified in 2024 because of the specific investigations and the ensuing improvement instructions. The Inspectorate's supervision is the main corrective mechanism in the education system.

The education organisations in Saba have little structural contact with education institutes or support organisations in the rest of the Caribbean Netherlands or the European Netherlands when it comes to strengthening educational governance. They do make use of service-providers in Bonaire and Sint Maarten, such as accountants and notaries-public. They are also members of the PO-Raad and VO-raad. There is occasional contact with umbrella organisations and external advisors, but this is often temporary.

Strong differences in opinions on good governance and role of government

Opinions on good education vary widely in Saba. Stakeholders on the island and at national level also have very different expectations of school boards. Many stakeholders in Saba regard the use of professional school boards as ideal. Teachers report that they expect a reliable employer, attention for staff, transparency, clear communication and visible leadership. They also hope for knowledge of education, openness to innovation, insight into developments elsewhere, objectivity, honesty and accountability. Teachers and parents expect their voices to be heard. At the same time, they understand that it is difficult to achieve all this with a board made up of volunteers who try to carry out their administrative work with the best of intentions alongside their regular activities.

Need for both autonomy and for support from European Netherlands

Sabans attach a great deal of importance to their autonomy and stress their individual identity. It is important to them that choices align with the customs and needs of the island. At the same time, there is an appreciation of the external expertise they receive. This sometimes gives rise to tension: some residents dislike it when people from the European Netherlands are deployed as advisors or interim school principals, while at the same time appreciating the knowledge and experience of these professionals. Those professionals are generally familiar with the Dutch education system, can readily communicate with the Ministry of OCW and the Inspectorate of Education, and possess the necessary administrative knowledge. These factors mean a European Dutch school principal, director-executive or board member is sometimes preferred.

Expectations with respect to island government clash with formal role and influence
People in Saba, including education professionals, expect the island government to be more directly involved with education than is appropriate given the formal role of the OLS. If there is an issue at a school, Sabans often look to the island government for a solution. For education professionals and parents who do not come from the European Netherlands, in particular, it is not always clear that the OLS does not have a formal responsibility for the schools.

Sabans expect the OLS to be aware of what is happening at the schools and that the commissioners act as local board members and ambassadors, both on the island and elsewhere. These expectations do not align with the limited formal role of the OLS, the educational knowledge present within the OLS and the broad portfolio of the commissioners. The OLS is in other words simultaneously expected to respect its formal competences and to act in line with the expectations and engagement of the islanders.

4.3 Overall picture: school boards demands permanent attention

Saba has faced a number of challenges in recent years in relation to good educational governance. Some of those issues recur again and again and are difficult to eliminate altogether. This points to structural risks of the school boards in Saba. Until recently, solutions were often sought in replacing school board members or in individual training and coaching. Limited attention is given to the structural challenges that underlie the problems and that are related to the island context in which education organisations operate. Since mid-2025, a number of changes have been made to the organisational structure of the school boards.

European Dutch views on good governance dominate

Education organisations in Saba operate between the island community and the Dutch education system. Director-executives and supervisory boards constantly switch between these two worlds, in which different ideas prevail about good governance. Although the educational governance sphere in Saba is small, with voluntary board members, in crisis situations such as that in 2024 the European Dutch perspective on governance dominates.

Interventions by national government agencies and the interpretation of legal provisions are based on European Dutch principles. Education organisations in the European Netherlands are generally bigger and more professional, with fewer volunteers in the educational governance. The expectations on policy, finance, leadership and quality assurance or therefore high. The configuration of education organisations in Saba is different and is not always able to meet the high expectations.

The dominance of the European Dutch perspective means that roles of school boards and school principals are often filled by people from the European Netherlands, because they have experience of that system. This brings valuable knowledge and experience to schools on the island, but also means that contact between the schools and national government agencies is framed in a European Dutch perspective. Discussions with the Ministry of OCW and the Inspectorate of Education are conducted with people within the education organisations who view education from the same European Dutch perspective and who also speak the language of the Dutch education system. People who have less experience of that system find it harder to connect with these discussions.

Remote governance and adjustment are difficult

Interventions by the Inspectorate of Education and the Ministry of OCW are intended to mobilise the school boards on the island. Inspection reports make people aware of the urgency and get things moving, including among parents and others in the community. The educational governance crises in the past show how difficult it is to implement governance remotely. European Dutch officials regularly visit the island, sometimes leading to high administrative pressure. The island government is in closer contact with the education organisations, but has little formal influence.

It is more difficult for national government agencies located a long way from the island to make an accurate assessment of the local situation. Signals reach the Ministry of OCW and the Inspectorate of Education after a time lag, and the effects of measures taken only become apparent after some delay. This sometimes leads to underestimation or overreaction, or to a piling up of measures. Decisions and reports by government agencies take time, so that choices to make interventions often lag behind the most recent developments. As a result, school boards often have to work on many improvement actions simultaneously, with newly appointed board members often being criticised for actions which were actually initiated by their predecessors.

The tools at the national government's disposal to strengthen the educational governance in Saba are limited. Governance measures can only be deployed in the last phase and are generally far-reaching. An instruction, for example, has a great deal of impact. Discontinuing the funding of poorly performing schools in Saba is not an option, because there is only one school in each sector.

External interventions can prompt school boards in Saba to focus on external matters at the expense of the internal contact with staff, parents and students. This is exacerbated where there are overlapping (corrective) tasks from the Inspectorate of Education and instructions from the Ministry of OCW, as has happened in Saba. In such circumstances, measures intended to bring about improvement can actually put pressure on the administrative capacity, so that measures do not always have the desired effect.



saba teaching staff

Together, the two schools in Saba employ 60 staff. The island's small size and isolation make it difficult to recruit, retain and train teaching staff. All kinds of stakeholders are involved, but a great deal has to be done by the schools themselves. This requires strong links with networks above or outside the school and with support organisations.

Principals, teachers and teaching assistants are crucial for good education. The island's small size and isolation mean that recruiting, retaining and training teaching staff is a challenge for Saba. The two schools receive little support with this. Their human resources policy largely follows European Dutch legal frameworks, while they are dependent mainly on the Caribbean region for staff recruitment.

5.1 Theme description: challenges in recruiting, retaining and training staff

The two schools in Saba employ a total of 60 staff and have a combined total of 268 students.¹⁰² Of those 60 staff, 50 are involved in teaching. Most of them work part-time and teach more than one subject, class or year. The schools generally manage to recruit enough teaching staff and to organise or offer training activities. But there are also challenges, mainly stemming from the island context in which the schools operate.

Schools struggle with recruiting staff

Like many schools in the Kingdom of the Netherlands, the schools in Saba have open vacancies at the start or during the course of the school year. Recruiting teachers for Dutch is especially difficult in Saba, partly because it has to be taught as a foreign language and teachers from the European Netherlands are not trained to do this as standard. Recruiting teaching staff for CXC subjects, which do not exist in the European Netherlands, is also a challenge, for example for the secondary school subject Integrated Science. It is also difficult to recruit teachers who are able to teach several subjects or years. Particularly for subjects for which there is no full-time appointment, several subjects or tasks often have to be combined in order to create a full-time position. It is not the norm in Saba to combine jobs with different employers.¹⁰³ Schools do usually ultimately manage to fill vacancies, but recruiting teaching staff is a challenge for the director-executives, and the recruitment procedures are intensive, often taking so long that it can be weeks or months before a teacher is available to teach a group or subject.

The recruitment pool in Saba is small. Most teachers and teaching assistants come from outside the island; working in Saba often also means moving house, which is not always possible, especially for temporary contracts. Recruitment and selection are therefore mostly carried out remotely, by telephone or video-link. There are sometimes questions regarding competencies and recognition of qualifications. Working in Saba can be a valuable experience for teachers from the European Netherlands, though it also has its drawbacks, such as limited pension accrual¹⁰⁴ and other employee benefits (see textbox).¹⁰⁵

¹⁰² Reference date 1 October 2025.

¹⁰³ For the same reason, it is difficult to recruit specialists to support students with specific support needs such as speech therapists.

¹⁰⁴ In particular accrual of state pension rights.

¹⁰⁵ <https://www.rijksdienstcn.com/sociale-zaken-werk>

Social security and pensions for teachers in Saba

For teachers from the European Netherlands, working in Saba counts as working 'abroad', even though Saba is part of the Netherlands. Together with Bonaire and Sint Eustatius, Saba is governed by a social security and pension system that is specific for the Caribbean Netherlands. That system does not provide unemployment insurance, and teachers returning to the European Netherlands are not entitled to unemployment benefit. Teachers who become unemployed in Saba are however eligible for assistance payments (comparable to social assistance benefit in the European Netherlands) provided they have lived in Saba for at least five years.¹⁰⁶ Teachers accrue pension rights through a general old age insurance scheme (AOV), comparable to the state pension (AOW) in the European Netherlands.¹⁰⁷

The two schools in Saba have to meet formal requirements when recruiting. As roughly half the teaching staff have come from other countries in recent years, schools have to be familiar with the procedures applied by the Immigration and Naturalisation Service (IND) for issuing entry visas and residential and work permits for teachers and their families, to ensure that new staff are able to start work in Saba on time. Although teachers in Saba are given priority by the IND, the police checks over the last five years take quite a long time to complete, for example; teachers from outside the European Economic Area (EEA) or the United States, in particular, sometimes have to wait months for the necessary papers, such as a provisional residence permit. The immigration rules are discussed in the textbox.

Immigration rules for teachers in Saba

Teachers going to work in Saba are covered by the Caribbean Netherlands immigration rules. There are three categories.

1. Migrants from the European Netherlands, other Kingdom of the Netherlands countries and the US may work for three months without a permit. Thereafter, a legal declaration is needed, which the school applies for from the outpost of the IND in the National Office for the Caribbean Netherlands.
2. Migrants from other EU member states and a few other countries (e.g. Norway, Japan and Switzerland) may enter freely, but need a residence permit in order to work; the school applies for this from RCN IND.
3. Migrants from other countries need a provisional residence permit as well as a residence permit. The school first applies for the residence permit, after which the employee goes to a Dutch embassy for the provisional permit.

Residence permits are temporary and linked to the length of the employment contract; extension is possible from four months before the expiry of the contract. It generally takes between a few weeks and 45 days to grant an extension. Applications can be submitted and dealt with throughout the year.¹⁰⁸

Schools face high teacher turnover

Staff turnover is high at the schools in Saba. It is common for teachers to leave after one or two years, a few months or even just a few weeks. This has a major impact on delivering education. There are few if any replacements available within the schools, and it may be that a subject can no longer be taught for several weeks

¹⁰⁶ This assistance is paid by central government to inhabitants of the Caribbean Netherlands who are (temporarily) unable to make ends meet.

¹⁰⁷ <https://www.rijksdienstcn.com/sociale-zaken-werk/ouderdomspensioen-ao>

¹⁰⁸ <https://www.rijksdienstcn.com/immigratie-naturalisatie>

after a teacher has left. This has been the case in recent years for Dutch, at both schools, and also for the secondary school subject Sciences. As there is only one school for secondary and vocational education on the island, all secondary school students simply miss out on lessons in that subject, and therefore do not receive a full education.

Students report that new teachers often start teaching subjects from scratch again, because there is no handover procedure. This is due to the long period between the departure of a teacher and the arrival of their successor, plus the absence of a lesson plan or method. Parents and students are very concerned about the consequences of this for their educational development and the chance to go on to further education. This is definitely the case for Dutch as a subject, where specific requirements apply for being able to study further in the European Netherlands.

There are several reasons for the high turnover of teachers. Saba offers few career development opportunities, while working on the island demands a lot from teachers and teaching assistants because of the lack of protocols, structures, syllabuses and curricular continuity. Poverty, domestic violence and other social problems are also brought into the school. Secondary and vocational teachers also have to teach several, if not all, years, and there are generally several different ability levels in one and the same class. Students with support needs at both schools are taught in regular classes, because there is no special needs education in Saba. Moreover, education in Saba has a dual focus, on both the Caribbean Netherlands and the European Netherlands; primary school programmes are based on (modified) Dutch core objectives, but are taught in English. The secondary and vocational programmes are based on the Caribbean-focused CXC curricula, but also have to prepare students for further education in the United States and the European Netherlands. These combinations mean that teachers have to adapt and develop a lot of the teaching materials themselves.

Professionalisation hard to organise and insufficiently geared to situation in Saba
It is a challenge for the two schools in Saba to organise training activities for teachers locally. Trainers have to travel to Saba which adds travel and accommodation expenses to the cost. A training course can easily cost up to 5,000 US dollars, compared with 500 euros for the same training course in the European Netherlands, without the travel and accommodation expenses. Education organisations in Saba are often not eligible for grants, because their request generally does not meet the criteria for the European Netherlands grant schemes. Although some grants are paid directly by the Ministry of OCW, they are temporary. Added to that, teaching in Saba requires specific training, for example to provide education that is based on Dutch core objectives in English, or training in dealing with the specific multilingual population of Saba. Trainers who are flown in from elsewhere are generally unaware of the situation in Saba. Education organisations do know trainers who are a good fit for their needs, but it takes a lot of time and trouble to get professionals to the island and to organise adequate training.

It is not easy to impart educational innovations, subject-specific or teaching-specific developments from off the island to teachers in Saba. The island's isolation makes it hard to form a school-overarching network to regularly share knowledge and experiences. Although teachers can follow courses off the island, that always involves travelling and therefore high travel and accommodation costs. Moreover, it can also mean that the teacher is away for several days or even a week. Exchanges and training activities in the European Netherlands, such as conferences and trade union activities, are moreover mostly held in Dutch, which most teachers and

teaching assistants in Saba do not have a sufficiently good command of. Online courses and training programmes generally take no account of the time difference between the European and Caribbean Netherlands, and are also often in Dutch. As an example, two primary school teachers in Saba recounted how they followed a training course online at night, in Dutch, and then had to teach again the next morning.

5.2 Analysis: many stakeholders involved in recruiting, retaining and training teaching staff, but main onus lies with schools

Responsibility for recruiting, retaining and training teaching staff in Saba lies mainly with the schools. That is in line with the educational governance of the Dutch education system.

Many stakeholders involved, but main onus rests with schools

The first responsibility lies with the school board, as the employer and party responsible for school policy, including staff policy. Until mid-2025, this was in practice left to the school principal. The process was formalised in 2025 in the new two-tier model, with a director-executive which functions both as a daily board member and school principal. This improved clarity and reduced disagreements over roles and task divisions in the board in relation to staff policy.

At national level, the legislator and the government play a key role, especially the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science (OCW) in The Hague. First, the national government provides a legal framework with stipulations around competence, eligibility for appointment and staff policy. The legislator also determines the legal basis for school funding and thus the financial frameworks within which education organisations pursue staff policy.

The OCW outpost in the Caribbean Netherlands (OCW CN) is also involved although, unlike in Bonaire and Sint Eustatius, until 2026 there was no branch office in Saba.¹⁰⁹ The public entity Saba (OLS) – and especially the Executive Council – is also a relevant actor in relation to teaching staff. There is no teacher trade union in Saba, even though they are generally important for staff policy and regulations.

Other relevant stakeholders are the Immigration and Naturalisation Service (IND), the Caribbean Examination Council (CXC), the Technical and Vocational Education and Training Council (TVETC), teacher training providers, trainers and training organisations, and grant providers, such as the National Erasmus+ Agency. The PO-Raad and the VO-raad are also involved in relation to teaching staff in Saba, albeit more in the background.

The IND has a branch office in Saba with two employees. The other agencies involved operate remotely. There is no initial teacher training in Saba, so teachers have to follow their training off the island. The nearest is the Bachelor of Arts in Elementary Education in Sint Maarten. This is an accredited programme: graduates can apply for a certificate of teaching competence for Saba, provided they also meet the language requirements (English and Dutch at level B2). There is no training infrastructure in Saba, though a few external trainers and organisations such as Instituto Pedagógico Arubano (IPA) provide occasional training courses.

Full attention for recruitment, training and retention, but support is limited

Teacher recruitment, retention and training receive attention from the main stakeholders in the education system in Saba: the Ministry of OCW, the OLS and the two schools, EC2 and SRF. Teaching staff are also explicitly mentioned in the joint Third Education Agenda (see textbox). In practice, however, the Education Agendas are not very relevant: many teaching staff do not know they exist or do not work with them, because their day-to-day activities already demand a lot of them.

Teaching staff in Third Education Agenda¹¹⁰

A key priority in the Third Agenda is addressing staff shortages and improving the working environment and professional development opportunities. Three goals have been formulated for this: teacher retention; sufficient qualified staff; and more professionalisation. School boards are developing an induction programme for this and the Ministry of OCW organises an Information Day in The Hague for interested teachers. Efforts are under way in Saba aimed at recruiting teaching assistants, improving teacher support, and organising job fairs. The Ministry plans to investigate the teacher shortage in order to develop a customised solution. As regards professionalisation, courses are in the pipeline for experienced teachers wishing to become school principals, as is an overview of training opportunities in the Caribbean region and the European Netherlands, and an action plan for continuing training and strategic staff policy.

Education organisations work within national recruitment frameworks

The director-executives and EC2 board have primary responsibility for the entire staff policy in Saba, including recruitment and selection of new teachers, strategic staff policy, dismissal procedures and professionalisation. When a vacancy arises, the director-executive determines the recruitment strategy, making use of island-based, regional and European Dutch channels, websites and personal networks. The specific educational needs of the schools also play a role; for example, the school for secondary and vocational education looks for teachers with experience of CXC education, while different recruitment pathways are needed for teachers of Dutch.

Teacher recruitment in Saba takes place within the national legal frameworks. These set specific competence standards for teachers, laid down in the legislation regulating professional competence requirements for teachers in the Caribbean Netherlands (Besluit bekwaamheidseisen onderwijspersoneel BES). Prospective teachers at the primary school in Saba who have a qualification from a non-Dutch teacher training programme may only be appointed after the Education Executive Agency (DUO) has confirmed that their qualification meets the required standard. For the school for secondary and vocational and education, the standards set out in the BES Decree for Saba Comprehensive School and Gwendoline van Puttenschool (in Sint Eustatius) apply. These state that teachers must be competent in terms of education theory, subject content and teaching ability, must be able to form good relationships with students, must be able to deliver lessons effectively and must be able to reflect on their own performance.¹¹¹

RCN IND handles the visa and residence procedures for teaching staff. The branch office in Saba supports schools with these procedures, with a fast-track process for staff. Since July 2023, the residence and work permits have been combined,

¹¹⁰ Ministerie van Onderwijs, Cultuur en Wetenschap, 2024e.

¹¹¹ Besluit Saba Comprehensive School en Gwendoline van Puttenschool BES.
See: <https://wetten.overheid.nl/BWBR0045020/2022-08-01>

simplifying the process. Even so, a provisional residence permit can still take three to four months to be issued, depending on the ability of candidates to travel to a Dutch embassy, and how long the embassy takes to process the application.

Establishing terms of employment is a laborious process

As in Bonaire and Sint Eustatius, schools in Saba do not participate in the collective labour agreement negotiations in the European Netherlands. The terms of employment at the schools partly fall under the civil service laws of the Caribbean Netherlands, and are partly determined separately. EC2 and SRF fall outside this regime. The two schools and their staff representatives negotiate on pay, bonuses and any supplementary resources, while salaries and reimbursements paid via island decrees are set after consultation with school boards and trade unions. OCW CG facilitates an annual dialogue between schools, staff and the three islands (Saba, Bonaire and Sint Eustatius) together. The process is complex because of the large number of stakeholders involved on the three islands, and the limited knowledge of labour and civil service laws, while national organisations have insufficient knowledge of the situation on the islands.

Financial problems at the two schools in Saba led to delays in implementing agreements, in turn delaying the implementation of terms of employment for teachers in Bonaire and Sint Eustatius as well. The agreement for 2024 was for example not signed until the end of 2024. Bonaire did later sign the agreement for 2025, but as of early 2026 this had still not been done in Saba. An evaluation report on the process of negotiating terms of employment for teaching staff in the Caribbean Netherlands, published at the end of 2025,¹¹² noted issues such as a limited say for teachers, lack of clear responsibilities, delays and lack of transparency.

Teacher retention on the agenda, but no systematic approach

All stakeholders on the island agree on the importance of providing proper support for new teachers to ensure they stay longer in post. Beyond this, the response to staff turnover is largely ad hoc. When someone leaves, the recruitment process for a new teacher begins. Until mid-2025 virtually no consideration was given to how the organisations could reduce the risks during staff changeovers, for example by clearly laying down structures and learning pathways or reconfiguring the organisation and the teaching.

Experiences with the reception, support and induction of new staff by school boards and management teams are mixed. High staff turnover requires clear, set structures, protocols, teaching programmes, curricular continuity and progression within a school, obviating the need to keep reinventing the wheel when recruiting. Recruitment procedures give candidates little room to acclimatise themselves to the idea of living and working on the island. Teachers are appointed without having visited the island or undergone a trial period, and it is also uncommon for new staff first to have worked as interns at one of the schools.

The legislator places a lot of responsibility with school boards, and has formulated rules on things such as strategic staff policy. The director-executives have to arrange a number of matters for new teachers, such as intake interviews, providing a buddy, helping with accommodation and reimbursement of travel and relocation expenses. A welcome and induction programme is currently in development; it will include regular evaluation meetings to assess how things are going, both professionally and personally. A school development plan was drawn up for the primary school in 2025,

with attention for well-being and teacher retention. A core focus in the school policy is to create a more stable staffing complement.

The Inspectorate of Education verifies compliance with legal standards for staff policy and teaching competence. During regular visits and specific investigations, inspectors discuss topics with teachers relating to recruitment, retention and training. If there are signs that things are not going well with the school, the Inspectorate conducts a targeted investigation, as recently happened with social safety at the primary school, including for staff.

Pragmatic search for training opportunities, and occasionally for extra funding

Director-executives invest in team-building and training, on the island, off the island and online. There are study days for teaching staff and team meetings to share knowledge, but until mid-2025 there was no systematic approach. Multi-year professionalisation plans are currently being developed.

Particularly in light of the travel and accommodation expenses, schools prefer to use trainers from the Caribbean region, such as the IPA teacher training programme in Aruba. They also try to align with training courses organised by other stakeholders on the island or a neighbouring island. Schools also plan training courses intensively within a short space of time, without repeat sessions, so that trainers only have to travel once.

The Ministry of OCW provides funding for coaching and training teachers, and sometimes flies in trainers itself. The Ministry also has a number of grant and support schemes, to which education organisations in Saba can sign up. Specific budgets for the Caribbean Netherlands can however also mean that the education organisations in Saba are excluded from these schemes and programmes. For example, an application by the primary school for the programme 'Goed worden, goed blijven' ('Getting good, staying good') was rejected when it turned out that there was a separate budget for this for the Caribbean Netherlands. The same applied for the grant scheme for a school-home liaison officer. There is no training infrastructure in Saba to offer schools training activities. Trainers and training organisations generally become involved because one of the education organisations on the island has approached them. They are often involved just once or only a few times.

Strong links between education organisations, weaker outside that circle

The two schools and EC2 work well together for the recruitment, training and retention of teachers. The links with stakeholders outside this circle, for example training or knowledge-sharing organisations, are weaker. Where collaboration does take place, it is often on a one-off or temporary basis. It is notable that other stakeholders mainly have one-to-one relationships with one or more education organisations in Saba. There is also a cluster of organisations at national level concerned with formulating policy on staffing and competence requirements. These are linked mainly by the direct contact between the Ministry of OCW and the Saban education organisations.

Close relations between schools and EC2

The strongest links are those between the two schools and EC2. The director-executives of the schools and the director of EC2 are in regular personal contact and share knowledge and experiences regarding curricula. They sometimes share or combine staff members, such as the music teacher and ICT coordinator who work at both schools. The care coordinator at the school for secondary and vocational education also supports teaching assistants at the primary school and EC2 who

are following the training programme in Sint Maarten. These three education organisations organise joint training courses, but currently do not really coordinate their recruitment campaigns.

Weaker relations with other stakeholders in Saba

The links with other stakeholders on the island are weaker. There is little collaboration on staff recruitment, retention or training, and where this does happen, it is generally via spontaneous personal conversations. The Saba Reach Foundation (SRF) is also somewhat more remote in Saba. Apart from a care network, there is virtually no formal collaboration between child and youth organisations around staff recruitment, retention and training, though the primary school does work with a childcare provider on training people to work with young children.

Weak relations with education institute, teacher training programmes and trainers elsewhere

There are few formal structures in Saba to facilitate collaboration around staff recruitment, retention or training. Exceptions are the six-monthly joint education platform for Bonaire, Saba and Sint Eustatius, which covers everything to do with education, and the annual negotiation on terms of employment, organised by OCW CG.

Links between the two schools in Saba and support organisations off the island are limited or non-existent. Contact with teacher training providers in the European Netherlands or in the Caribbean region are also minimal, beyond occasional contact and collaboration with the IPA teacher training programme in Aruba and contact with NVT Carib for courses. Relationships with other trainers or training organisations are more variable, and often happen on a one-off basis. The PO-Raad and the VO-raad currently play no role with regard to teaching staff, for example with coaches, training courses or online meetings.

OCW is both close and distant

The director-executives and supervisory boards of the two schools have regular informal contact with the Ministry of OCW (CG), often via personal channels, to make needs known and discuss options for funding and other kinds of support. Policy staff from The Hague, Bonaire or Sint Eustatius regularly visit the island, offering more opportunities for getting to know each other and exchanges than is usual in the European Netherlands. Between these visits, there is little contact.

Differing expectations around teaching staff

There are tensions between expectations and formal requirements. In the first place, the Dutch requirements for teacher appointment differ from what a specific proportion of teachers in the Caribbean region are used to; in some parts of the Caribbean, a university Bachelor degree is sufficient, whether or not in combination with a teaching qualification.

Second, teachers have expectations of the organisation they work for which do not always align with reality. Most are not used to the embedment of schools in the Dutch education system. Teaching professionals who have worked in the European Netherlands face the fact that schools in Saba function differently, are led differently and have more limited access to support than they are used to.

Third, expectations around salaries and terms of employment vary widely. Many teachers in Saba are not aware of their rights and obligations as employees under the Central and Local Government Personnel (BES) Act, the agreements on terms

of employment and their contract with the education organisation. The different types of contract, salary scales and dismissal rights are unknown territory for them. Regulations are not well attuned to teachers coming from different locations, making it difficult to determine which salary scale an experienced teacher should be placed in, if it is not possible to continue the previous salary scale.

Finally, there are wide differences within the school teams in terms of earlier teaching experience, language use and views on education, educational theory, teaching methods and the teaching profession, all of which can be traced back to differences in education and upbringing in the countries where they grew up or were educated. This leads to differences in teaching styles, discipline and hierarchy within the class or year-group. The cultural diversity in the teaching teams reflects the multicultural society that is Saba, and this can enrich education. This diversity does however require dialogue and educational leadership, and to date there has been little scope for this.

5.3 Overall picture: responsibility for staff recruitment, retention and training requires stronger links

In the Dutch education system, responsibility for teacher recruitment, retention and training lies primarily with the school boards. This also applies for the schools in Saba. Education legislation and supervision follow the same line. This responsibility demands a great deal of the schools in Saba. The small size of the island and the educational organisations means the schools are dependent for their staff on a small group of professionals and their networks. Schools in Saba have to complete more formalities than schools in the European Netherlands, such as IND procedures, qualification accreditation, recruitment abroad and determining terms of employment. This puts pressure on these small schools.

Schools Insufficiently keyed in to the broader system

The schools in Saba are not sufficiently connected to supra-school or out-of-school networks or support organisations to be able to meet challenges in relation to staffing. Physical and mental distance are an obstacle to connections with the European Netherlands. Given their limited capacity and the great distance, schools are not able to establish and maintain those connections on their own; they need help with this, and that currently is not available. The Ministry of OCW tries to compensate for this and sometimes carries out tasks that it would not take on in the European Netherlands, for example consulting or establishing contacts for things such as making agreements on terms of employment. Since Saba is not affiliated to the collective labour agreement negotiations for teaching staff between the social partners (employer and employee representatives) in the European Netherlands, the Ministry of OCW steps in. However, the great distance means this is not a sustainable solution. Stakeholders would like more say than they currently have; it also leads to lack of clarity around responsibilities and to delays in reaching agreements on terms of employment.¹¹³

Legislation not a good fit

With regard to teaching staff, the Caribbean Netherlands education legislation and regulations are not always a good fit for the situation in Saba. This illustrates how complex it can be to align regulations with the situation on the island. Competence requirements are an example: because of its use of CXC education, the school for

secondary education largely falls outside the standard competence requirements for Dutch teachers, while the primary school would like to work with Saba-specific requirements which take account of the needs and views of the island. Although the Primary Education (BES) Act offers scope for these specific requirements for Saba, it is difficult to put this into practice. Specific competence requirements for Saba would require a customised teacher training programme, which currently does not exist. There is no simple and workable procedure to recognise qualifications of teachers who trained outside the Netherlands and give them a licence to teach. It is not feasible for the Ministry of OCW or the schools in Saba to set up a special programme for every new rule or change.



sint eustatius inclusive education

Sint Eustatius has no separate schools for special needs education. All students, regardless of their support need, therefore go to the same school. Stakeholders are intensively involved, but the system of inclusion is running up against the limits.

Inclusive education is a widely shared guiding principle in Sint Eustatius. This means that all five schools seek to deliver education to more than 560 students on the island, regardless of their support needs.¹¹⁴ The Dutch education system does not provide for separate special needs schools on the island. There is however an expertise centre for education care which supports students and teachers to enable all students to participate in education in Sint Eustatius. The number of students with extra support needs is increasing, and with it the pressure on teaching staff. This demands a great deal of all concerned. Although stakeholders on the island consult with each other regularly, there have been no structural improvements, because they are mainly engaged in temporarily filling shortfalls and gaps. According to stakeholders, the national government is failing to create the right enabling conditions to allow the education organisations to offer good, inclusive education.

6.1 Theme description: inclusive education is a guiding principle

Inclusive education is a widely shared ideal in Sint Eustatius. Students with cognitive or physical impairments go to school together with students with no impairments. However, the support needs have increased and become more diverse, and it demands a great deal of all concerned to provide the right support for all students. The support that is provided is inadequate and the school funding and accommodation fall short of what is required.

Whereas students in the European Netherlands with a profound support need often attend a special needs school, students in Sint Eustatius with with extra support needs, whether they need support with behavioural problems, autism or learning English, receive the same education as students without extra support needs. All five schools on the island aim to offer good education to all children and young people, regardless of what support they need.

None of the four primary schools in Sint Eustatius specialise in meeting specific support needs. In other words, there is not one primary school specialising in children with autism and another specialising in children with physical impairments. After primary school, all children go to the same school for secondary and vocational education. All five schools are responsible for teaching students with support needs. To make this possible, the school boards operate within a strategic alliance, which is coordinated and implemented by the Expertise Centre Education Care (ECE). The schools also work with other organisations on and off the island. Inclusive education is a recurring theme on the Education Agenda, in the section on Education Care (see textbox).

Education care in Third Education Agenda

The Third Education Agenda for Sint Eustatius States that schools, parents, the expertise centre, care professionals, the Ministries of Education, Culture and Science (OCW), Social Affairs and Employment (SZW) and Health, Welfare and Sport (VWS) and the public entity Sint Eustatius (henceforth OLE) will work together to offer appropriate care and support to all children and young people. The aim is to improve the collaboration between schools and care organisations and to develop the expertise centre into a permanent, structurally funded facility. An evaluation is to be carried out to determine the required resources. The ministries are also investigating how many children and young people who live in care institutions, are able to (partially) follow an education and how this can be organised, at school or in some other way.¹¹⁵

Inclusive education fits in with international trend

The Ministry of OCW aims for inclusive education in the Netherlands, by which it means education that offers children and young people local, full, equal access to an inclusive learning environment in which they develop together and learn and participate together. In an inclusive learning environment, all children and young people are welcome at a school close to home. Students learn with each other and from each other. The school is accessible to all students, staff and parents.¹¹⁶

This idea fits in with a global trend. The United Nations (UN) wants all children and young people with extra support needs to attend mainstream schools as far as possible, along with students without extra support needs. Schools must make adaptations where necessary to enable these students to follow an education.¹¹⁷ This aligns with the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.¹¹⁸ The Netherlands supports this Convention and aims to provide inclusive education, though much remains to be done to achieve this fully.¹¹⁹ Despite it being a widely shared ideal, it has not yet been possible to achieve this in Sint Eustatius.

Inclusive education running up against limits

Students in Sint Eustatius all go to school together near where they live, but the schools do not always succeed in implementing the necessary modifications to enable all students to be offered the support they need. This is partly due to the facilities available; the education and support facilities in Sint Eustatius are small, and therefore have limited capacity. The same applies for care facilities. Moreover, (specialist) experts and facilities are not always present on the island, in schools or in the care system.

Target group bigger and changed; support failing to keep up

Many students in Sint Eustatius need extra support; all five schools on the island have such students, and their number has increased in recent years.¹²⁰ In 2020 they accounted for 20-40% of all students.¹²¹ The share of students needing support at the school for secondary and vocational education, the Gwendoline van Puttenschool (GvP), had grown from around 40% to 49% in the 2024/2025 school year, and the percentage at the four primary schools has also increased.¹²² The diversity of the students with additional support needs has also increased. Students

¹¹⁵ Ministerie van Onderwijs, Cultuur en Wetenschap, 2024f.

¹¹⁶ Ministerie van Onderwijs, Cultuur en Wetenschap, 2024a.

¹¹⁷ UNICEF, 2017; see also Onderwijsraad, 2020.

¹¹⁸ Verenigde Naties, 2006.

¹¹⁹ See also Onderwijsraad, 2020.

¹²⁰ Expertise Centre Education Care St. Eustatius, 2025.

¹²¹ Middelbeek, Van de Vecht & Sligte, 2020.

¹²² Expertise Centre Educational Care St. Eustatius, 2025.

with autism are the most common, as well as students who struggle with English language, because they have only recently arrived on the island or do not speak English at home. The increased demand is one of the reasons that some students do not always receive the support they need.

Specialists from the Expertise Centre Education Care (ECE), teachers and care coordinators report that language barriers make it more difficult to diagnose these students and offer them the support they need.¹²³ It makes the task of teachers extra complicated when students have an inadequate command of English.

The support for students and schools in Sint Eustatius varies depending on how it is organised in the European Netherlands. First, the care and support system differs in the education legislation for the Caribbean Netherlands from the legal arrangements for appropriate education in the European Netherlands. The Expertise Centres Act (WEC), which governs special needs education in the European Netherlands, does not apply in Sint Eustatius (or Saba and Bonaire). Moreover, many of the support organisations in the European Netherlands, such as Koninklijke Auris Groep (organisation for people with a hearing impairment), Landelijke Oudervereniging Balans (association of parents of children with support needs) and Nederlands Centrum Onderwijs en Jeugdzorg (Netherlands Centre for Education and Youth Welfare - NCOJ), are not active or not present in Sint Eustatius. Key care provisions for students with extra support needs are also absent in Sint Eustatius, for example, with few medical specialisations and a lack of residential care for children who are no longer able to live at home.

Teachers insufficiently prepared and supported

Teachers feel underprepared and undersupported to deliver fully inclusive education, though they would generally like to be able to offer it. Even if the legal framework were in place to facilitate the founding of a separate special needs school, many people in Sint Eustatius would not want this. However, teaching groups of students with diverse support needs is hard for teachers. Some students have cognitive or emotional problems, while others have a physical disability, speech difficulties or challenging behaviour. There are limited possibilities to train teachers to deal with these issues. Teachers can for example follow a Master's in Special Educational Needs online, but the time difference means they often have to do this in the evening and at night. Moreover, this Master's degree is not a good fit for the context in Sint Eustatius. An annual professionalisation budget of up to 2,500 US dollars per person is available, but training courses often cost more than this, especially if they are held off the island or if schools have to fly in trainers.¹²⁴

Care coordinators at the island's primary schools indicate that they are unable to offer sufficient support to their colleagues or to students. Some report this is because they have to combine their role with teaching or management tasks owing to the small size of the schools.¹²⁵ This combination of tasks leads to high pressure of work and leaves insufficient time to offer proper support to colleagues and students. For this reason, two of the four primary schools have now offered their care coordinator a full-time appointment. The GvP has a care team with a care coordinator, a remedial teacher and a school social worker, who are able to focus wholly on supporting students and teachers.

¹²³ Middelbeek et al., 2020.

¹²⁴ See also chapter 5.

¹²⁵ Middelbeek et al., 2020.

The support for schools is also inadequate. The Expertise Centre Education Care (ECE) acts as a spider in the web of the support given to the five schools in delivering inclusive education. But the ECE also has limited capacity. Although it has remedial teachers, a speech therapist, a creative therapist and a peripatetic support worker, other specialisms such as a health psychologist or neuropsychologist have to be flown in. This means that students cannot always obtain help when they need it. It is also expensive to bring in specialists from outside the island. Although teachers are satisfied with the work of ECE, it cannot meet all requests for support. That places a burden on teachers and care coordinators, who then have less time for other students. And as there are no facilities for more intensive care in Sint Eustatius, some students and their parents have to leave the island temporarily, or in exceptional cases permanently, to be able to follow their education.

School accommodation impedes inclusive education

The school buildings in Sint Eustatius are not conducive to inclusive education, with few suitable rooms where (shadow) teachers¹²⁶ or specialists can work with students individually or in small groups. There are almost no separate rooms where students can be given support. It is also not possible to work in the corridors, as sometimes happens in the European Netherlands. The school buildings are designed in such a way that classrooms exit directly onto the gallery and the school yard, leading to a lack of privacy and quiet workspaces.

The public entity of Sint Eustatius (OLE) and the Ministry of OCW are jointly responsible for school premises. Schools can notify the OLE that they need more classrooms, but the OLE by its own admission has insufficient budget to meet such requests.

Funding of inclusive education in Sint Eustatius¹²⁷

Funding of inclusive education in Sint Eustatius is organised via the Primary Education (BES) Act (WPO BES) and the Secondary Education Act 2020 (WVO 2020). It differs from the system in the European Netherlands in that schools in Sint Eustatius receive extra funding to support students with special educational needs. The four primary schools receive an extra 11.5% and the school board for secondary and vocational education receives 40% on top of the basic funding. In addition, ECE receives an annual grant from the Ministry of OCW to perform its statutory tasks.

Funding for inclusive education inadequate

The funding for inclusive education in Sint Eustatius is inadequate.¹²⁸ The island's small size and geographical isolation means it is expensive to provide all students with adequate support. Although the fixed funding per student is higher than in the European Netherlands and there is extra funding for students with specific educational needs,¹²⁹ school principals report this does not cover the actual costs. While acknowledging the duty of schools to offer education to all students with support needs, they emphasise that the present funding takes too little account of how hard it is to provide this type of care.¹³⁰ In practice, the schools provide a mix of mainstream, special needs and newcomer education. There is no separate funding for accommodating and supporting newcomer students, at a time when migration is

¹²⁶ Shadow teachers are linked to individual students to help in the learning process.

¹²⁷ Based on Van Buiren et al., 2025.

¹²⁸ Van Buiren et al., 2025.

¹²⁹ Article 68 WPO BES; Article 11.23 WVO 2020. See *Part C: Background information*. Schools do not have a ring-fenced budget for every student with an extra support need.

¹³⁰ Van Buiren et al., 2025.

increasing. The growing number of students with support needs places even more strain on the budget, according to school principals and school boards. Principals report that there is little money left to employ specialist SEN (Special Educational Needs) teachers or to give incumbent staff the necessary training and support.

The geographical isolation makes it expensive and difficult to offer teaching staff regular training in delivering inclusive education.¹³¹ Incidental grants, for example for language classes and support for students with special support needs, do not offer a permanent solution.¹³²

6.2 Analysis: many stakeholders intensively involved, but system running up against the buffers

Delivering inclusive education requires a combined effort by several stakeholders. In some areas it is unclear who is responsible for what, while stakeholders also have differing expectations of those concerned with inclusive education in Sint Eustatius. This leads to tensions.

Inclusive education a responsibility of many stakeholders

Inclusive education requires a team effort by several stakeholders. The national government determines the configuration of the system. The five schools on the island deliver education to all students, including those with specific support needs.

National government designed the system, with virtually no input from island government

The national government determines the design of the education care system in Sint Eustatius. In 2010 the national government decided to configure the education care structure in the Caribbean Netherlands differently from in the European Netherlands and not to include provisions for special needs education.¹³³ In 2011 and 2012, project leaders from the Ministry of OCW set up the education care structure on each island.

The Inspectorate of Education checks whether schools state in their school guide what support they offer and how the support is structured. The Inspectorate checks how this works in practice and whether it meets the legal requirements, and issues a remedial order if necessary. The Inspectorate also checks whether the school boards have an island care plan, and supervises ECE to see how much it contributes to the quality of education care in Sint Eustatius.¹³⁴ School boards are responsible for forging a partnership, establishing an island care plan and setting up an expertise centre for education care.¹³⁵

The tasks of the public entity of Sint Eustatius (OLE) with regard to inclusive education are limited. The Executive Council of OLE has partial responsibility for school buildings, and the school attendance officer has the task of enforcing the Compulsory Education Act, under the responsibility of the Executive Council. The school attendance officer monitors school absenteeism and helps determine what is needed to enable students to follow their education. School-age children who cannot attend school due to physical or mental health issues can apply for an exemption

¹³¹ See also chapter 5.

¹³² Van Buijen et al., 2025.

¹³³ Middelbeek et al., 2020.

¹³⁴ Inspectie van het Onderwijs, 2024a.

¹³⁵ Article 10.4 WPO BES; WVO 2020.

from compulsory school attendance.¹³⁶ At the time of writing there were no cases of such exemptions in Sint Eustatius. The school attendance officer discusses students' attendance record with the schools and looks at what is needed to enable them to participate in education. The OLE's Social Support Unit has also set up a centre, The Rock, to support children and parents with questions around upbringing and socio-emotional or behavioural issues.¹³⁷ Staff of The Rock are in close contact with ECE; together they explore which care can best be provided by ECE, and which by The Rock.

The OLE and the youth and care centre for the Caribbean Netherlands (Zorg en Jeugd Caribisch Nederland (ZJCN)) have a shared responsibility for providing youth care services.¹³⁸ See textbox.

Responsibility for youth care

The public entity of Sint Eustatius (OLE) is responsible for:

- a) Ensuring the availability of preventative and primary youth care on the island that is adequate in terms of both quality and quantity;
- b) Providing this youth care in a way that is both easy to access and recognisable;
- c) Offering expert advice to those working with young people professionally on questions and problems relating to problems with development and upbringing.

Zorg en Jeugd Caribisch Nederland (ZJCN) is responsible for:

- a) Ensuring that secondary and tertiary youth care is available in the Caribbean Netherlands which is adequate in terms of both quality and quantity;
- b) Ensuring that the secondary and tertiary youth care services are accessible and available at all times in situations where immediate youth care interventions are required;
- c) Ensuring that those working with young people professionally can obtain expert advice on questions and problems relating to development and upbringing;
- d) Ensuring that tasks as described in the Foster Care (BES) Decree (Besluit pleegzorg BES) are carried out.¹³⁹

Teachers provide various forms of support

Teachers see what students need and adapt their teaching accordingly. They provide support in the classroom and seek extra support from the care coordinator if necessary. If students leave the island for a short or longer period or are unable to attend school for medical reasons, teachers provide teaching material so students can continue with their schoolwork.

The care coordinators – each school has one – organise the support at school. They work with students, teachers and parents and provide them with advice. The care coordinators involve the parents of students in the care need and the care that the school provides, and establish what extra care the school can offer.¹⁴⁰ If necessary they make a referral to secondary care, which provides specialist support if the primary care provided by the school is not adequate.

¹³⁶ Article 14 under a Leerplichtwet BES.

¹³⁷ <https://www.statiagovernment.com/units-directorates/directorate-of-social-domain/services/about-the-rock>

¹³⁸ ZJCN is part of the Ministry of Health, Welfare and Sport (VWS). See also <https://www.zorgenjeugdncn.nl/>

¹³⁹ Administrative agreements on youth care in Caribbean Netherlands, concluded on 7 June 2023 in Bonaire, Saba and Sint Eustatius.

¹⁴⁰ Middelbeek et al., 2020.

Teaching assistants give practical support to teachers, work with small groups of students and sometimes supervise classes when the teacher is working with a small group of students.

*Expertise Centre Education Care (ECE) is a central stakeholder*¹⁴¹

ECE is a central stakeholder in delivering inclusive education. It provides secondary care in response to school referrals and supports schools in performing their primary function. Mandated representatives from the school boards constitute the board of ECE. See the textbox for the statutory care tasks of ECE.

Statutory tasks of ECE

Expertise Centre Education Care (ECE) has a statutory duty to provide specialist support to students with specific educational needs which schools are unable to meet adequately themselves.¹⁴² This involves offering educational support activities and peripatetic supervision to students with a physical, intellectual, sensory, mental or multiple disability. In addition, ECE performs assessments for intervention at the request of the competent authority, the partnership or parents, and advises and consults schools and other stakeholders on appropriate education and support provisions.

ECE offers advanced support and services that are not available within the schools. It does this both in the schools and in a specialist department within ECE. It tests students at the request of the school and parent(s) and draws up individual teaching plans (IEPs) for primary schools¹⁴³ to support students with special needs. ECE can also offer support to primary schools in the form of a remedial teacher or peripatetic support worker for students with dyslexia or other educational needs.¹⁴⁴ ECE co-funds shadow teachers and provides their training and support.

Where necessary and (financially) feasible, ECE hires extra expertise. ECE cannot provide intensive support or care itself. Where this is needed, the Expertise Centre makes a referral to tertiary care via a doctor. This referral will sometimes be outside Sint Eustatius. In cases of medical need, a student can be transferred to Bonaire. ECE organises this together with the Expertise Centre Education Care (EOZ) in Bonaire.

The director of ECE draws up an island care plan each year, stating how education care on Sint Eustatius is organised, what results are expected and how the money will be spent. This is a legal requirement. The island care plan is sent to the Inspectorate of Education. ECE receives an annual grant for preparing the island care plan,¹⁴⁵ and also receives financial support from the OLE. Each school board then incorporates the island care plan into the school plan and school guide.

New Challenges Foundation as safety net

A lack of appropriate support at school may result in children being unable or unwilling to continue attending school. The New Challenges Foundation (NCF) offers youth social opportunity programmes (SKJs) for young people (aged 18-24 years)

¹⁴¹ Expertise Centre Education Care (ECE) is referred to in the legislation as Expertisecentrum onderwijszorg. It is known as the ECE in Sint Eustatius, and that is therefore the term used here.

¹⁴² Article 28 Wet primair onderwijs BES; Article 11.18 Wet voortgezet onderwijs 2020; Article 3.4 Wet educatie en beroepsonderwijs BES.

¹⁴³ The Care Team at the GvP prepares the IEPs for GvP students.

¹⁴⁴ Expertise Centre Education Care St. Eustatius, 2025.

¹⁴⁵ Article 3 Regulation on subsidies for education and care expertise centres in the Caribbean Netherlands.

who left school prematurely without a basic qualification.¹⁴⁶ It therefore acts as a safety net on the island. It is funded by the OLE.¹⁴⁷

Lack of clear role divisions makes it difficult to organise enabling conditions

In some areas it is insufficiently clear to those concerned who is responsible for what. This uncertainty applies at three levels: (1) between ECE and education organisations; (2) between the national and island governments and education organisations; and (3) between the different domains on the island. Examples include the responsibilities for training, providing care, developing or implementing policy. Stakeholders indicate that this impedes collaboration and leads to tensions. This in turn can make it difficult to put in place the enabling conditions for inclusive care.

The five schools in Sint Eustatius work closely with ECE, and there is regular consultation. Despite this, expectations on roles and responsibilities are not always clear. ECE would like teachers to develop more skills in providing support to their students, while teachers experience high pressure of work due to the many requests for help from students. The combination of different support needs by students demands a great deal of teachers, and requires extra specialist staff in the school, such as a Special Educational Needs Teacher (SEN) for a Special Education Needs Class and a Behavioural Support Teacher for students with behavioural problems. However, the schools do not have the financial wherewithal to increase capacity.¹⁴⁸ As long as the teaching teams lack sufficient expertise, they will seek more support from ECE.

Schools refer students to ECE, but the Expertise Centre also has limited capacity. This gives rise to a pattern of reciprocal referral.¹⁴⁹ Every schoolteacher submits separate request to ECE, and the cumulative effect can overwhelm ECE. The Expertise Centre expects schools to do more themselves and to train their teaching staff better for this. For their part, schools expect ECE to provide more support. ECE has expanded its team of professionals, but indicates that greater supply will also lead to more demand.

In 2024 the Inspectorate of Education concluded that support and supervision could be made more effective if ECE and the schools made clear agreements on responsibilities and developed a joint approach. Students would then benefit from a uniform and stable approach from both ECE and teachers.¹⁵⁰

It is unclear for several stakeholders which tasks and responsibilities lie with the different agencies and who is meant to provide which support. In some cases the question is who should pay for the support provided. For example, if a student has behavioural problems, a determination has to be made as to whether they would benefit more from secondary care (e.g. Art Therapy from ECE) or tertiary care (referral to a remedial therapist). Medical care and mental health care are covered by insurance. If a student requires such (tertiary) care, a GP referral is needed. The (secondary) education care provided by ECE is paid for by the Expertise Centre from the grant it receives for this from the Ministry of OCW. In other cases, the question relates to what is the most appropriate care for a student and which is the most appropriate agency to provide it. Where a student would benefit from speech

¹⁴⁶ <https://ncfstatia.com/courses/skj-program/#>

¹⁴⁷ There are plans to repeal the Youth Opportunity Programmes (BES) Act and to introduce the policy for premature school dropout that applies in the European Netherlands.

¹⁴⁸ See the Action Plan 2025-2026 from the Care Team at the GvP, though for the time being the school has not budget for it.

¹⁴⁹ Schaveling, Bryan & Goodman, 2012.

¹⁵⁰ Inspectie van het Onderwijs, 2024a.

therapy, for example, it may be unclear whether ECE should organise and fund this or whether it is a case for tertiary care, paid for by insurance.

National government actions not always aligned with practice

The schools feel they already have too much on their plate. They therefore regularly seek direct contact with the Ministry of OCW in The Hague when they run into problems. However, the Ministry does not have a formal responsibility to respond to such requests and remains at arm's length. The role of the national government lies primarily in providing funding and a legislative framework. As a result, stakeholders on the island feel the need for an engaged government which has the authority and capacity to ensure that schools are able to fulfil their task adequately. The Education Agendas formulated in the education platform are also not especially relevant in practice. Many teachers are not aware of their existence or make no use of them, because their day-to-day activities already demand a great deal of time and attention.

Diverging wishes and expectations lead to tensions

The wishes and expectations of stakeholders with regard to inclusive education differ in a number of areas, giving rise to tensions between stakeholders. For example, parents have differing wishes and expectations; some are reluctant to ask for help or share test results/diagnoses, out of fear of stigmatisation. They do not find it easy to talk openly about their problems, and sometimes find it difficult to accept support when it is offered. This issue is exacerbated by the small size of the island: because everyone knows everyone, everybody immediately knows if someone is having problems. Other parents, by contrast, expect more support than schools and ECE currently (can) provide. They are disappointed if their child does not receive the help and support they need to be able to participate in education. In exceptional cases, this leads to parents being forced to leave the island with their child in order to receive suitable support elsewhere.

The expectations around the constitutional reforms on 10-10-10 have only been partially met for Sint Eustatius as regards inclusive education. In the run-up to the reforms, expectations were high for improvements in education, including for students with specific support needs. People in Sint Eustatius hoped that integration in the Dutch education system would lead to more resources and expertise to help accommodate the diverse student population. Many Statians acknowledge that students with specific support needs now receive more support than before 2010, but there are also disappointments, because the necessary expertise lags behind the growing problem. Inclusive education still functions inadequately and not all students receive the support they need. A further exacerbating factor is that in the run-up to 2010 clear agreements were never made on what level of support could be expected from the national government. It was all formulated fairly generally: 'creating or providing appropriate facilities for all students on the island needing extra support'.¹⁵¹

6.3 Overall picture: inclusive education under pressure

Inclusive education is the guiding principle in Sint Eustatius, but achieving it is proving elusive. There is no properly organised system in which tasks are clear, everyone is able to do their own job and the enabling conditions are in place. At present, little attention is given to these structural problems, because stakeholders

are mainly involved in finding temporary solutions to shortcomings. As a result, a sustainable, well-organised system for inclusive education has still not fully got off the ground.

Inadequate enabling conditions for inclusive education

Responsibility for inclusive education in Sint Eustatius lies mainly with the schools and the expertise centre. However, schools lack the knowledge, experience and networks to find their way through the Dutch education system and the Dutch health and care structure. Many facilities are lacking on the island, making it impossible to organise the right care, support and supplementary funding/grants adequately. Changes in the support needs of students have to be accommodated directly by school staff (teachers, care team or care coordinator, principal and school board) who have to find a solution themselves.

Providing care to the large numbers of students with special needs mainly falls on the shoulders of schools, care coordinators and classroom teachers. This leads to high pressure of work and reduced attention for other students. It can also mean that students with support needs receive insufficient help and consequently fall behind at school. Over the long term, this can harm their opportunities.

Little focus on structural improvements

Organisations and individuals close gaps on their own initiative when necessary to support students. The disadvantage is that the bigger problems remain untouched. Stakeholders in Sint Eustatius regularly meet to share knowledge, experiences and financial needs. The strategic consultation via the education platform, which meets twice a year, ought to be focused on finding structural improvements for inclusive education, but schools indicate that the structural improvements do not materialise.

Delivering inclusive education is especially difficult on a small island, where not all facilities are present to provide adequate help to students with specific support needs. This requires a well-coordinated structure and collaboration, because if something goes wrong for one stakeholder, this has a direct impact on another. A structure does not work properly if there are too few people with the necessary knowledge and skills to carry out the envisaged tasks. But even well-trained people cannot work optimally if no clear agreements have been made on tasks and responsibilities.



sint eustatius educational transitions

Several stakeholders in Sint Eustatius work together to ensure smooth transitions through the education system. But the links with stakeholders outside of education are weak. Students experience several barriers in transitions.

Transitions between education sectors influence the educational pathways of students. The schools in Sint Eustatius collaborate closely on this, but the formal consultation with employers and the public entity Sint Eustatius (OLE) is weak, as are the links to CXC and other education institutes. The Dutch legal frameworks are also not always a good fit, making transitions challenging, especially from secondary to further education. For this latter transition, one small education organisation is responsible for facilitating three future pathways for students in Sint Eustatius. In practice, each of these pathways presents obstacles. What is missing is a party to ensure cohesion across the education system and good alignment between the different education phases for students in Sint Eustatius.

7.1 Theme description: transition from secondary to further education demands much from students

Students in Sint Eustatius go through a number of transitions in their educational pathways, for example to a different route, school or course. This sometimes happens within one and the same school, and sometimes involves the student transferring to another school, for example from primary school to the school for secondary and vocational education, the Gwendoline van Puttschool (GvP). The progress of the transition is determined by the admission criteria (can a student be formally admitted, e.g. in terms of previous qualification requirements, enrolment procedures and admissions policy), practicability (will the student be able to keep up, e.g. in terms of language skills and prior knowledge).¹⁵² Every transition presents challenges and hurdles, but the step from secondary to further education demands the most from students in Sint Eustatius, because it always requires them to leave the island.

Heavy investment in educational transitions

Several changes have been made to the system since 10-10-10, and these have had an impact on educational transitions. For example, compulsory school attendance applies between the ages of four and 16 years, and young people aged up to 18 years are required to obtain a qualification (general secondary or vocational diploma).¹⁵³ To align better with the language most commonly used on the island, in 2015 English was introduced as the language of instruction instead of Dutch. In that same year, the GvP also switched to the English-language CXC curriculum, which is more aligned with the Caribbean context. From that point on, Dutch was only offered as a 'strong' foreign language.¹⁵⁴ Choices made in one phase of education thus have consequences for earlier and subsequent phases. The introduction of the English-language CXC curriculum¹⁵⁵ in secondary education, for example, required adaptations to be made in primary education.

¹⁵² Onderwijsraad, 2018.

¹⁵³ Veranderingen onderwijs sinds 2011 | Rijksdienst Caribisch Nederland

¹⁵⁴ See *Part C: Background information*.

¹⁵⁵ For an explanation of CXC, see *Part C: Background information*.

Stages in educational pathways in Sint Eustatius

Compulsory school attendance¹⁵⁶ applies in Sint Eustatius from the age of four, when children go to one of the four primary schools, with core objectives that are specifically determined for Sint Eustatius and Saba and laid down in the Primary Education (BES) Act.

After primary school, all students go to the Gwendoline van Puttenschool (GvP), the only school for secondary and vocational education on the island. Since 2015, the GvP has taught English-language CXC curricula.¹⁵⁷ Students start with the CCSLC (Caribbean Certificate of Secondary Level Competence) programme or in practical training, depending on their level. After completion, they can go on to CVQ (Caribbean Vocational Qualification) programmes (comparable to MBO levels 1 and 2), go to work or follow a New Challenges Foundation (NCF) course.¹⁵⁸ After completing the CCSLC programme, students go on to a Caribbean Secondary Education Certificate (CSEC) programme (comparable to junior/senior general secondary education) or CVQ. In 2024-2025 the GvP offered four CVQ options: cooking, construction, childcare and welding. All students take Dutch as a foreign language, English and mathematics.

For further education (vocational at MBO level 3 or 4,¹⁵⁹ HBO or WO), students have to leave the island. CXC certificates allow students to go on to education in the Caribbean region and in the United States, but in order to go on to further study in the European Netherlands, students must also pass a Dutch proficiency exam.¹⁶⁰ Students who fail to do so receive a school certificate without the right to follow further education in the European Netherlands.

Transition from childcare to primary education improved

The transition from childcare to primary education has improved in recent years. Around 80% of all children in Sint Eustatius start in a childcare facility, where from the age of two they receive pre-school education in preparation for primary school. One of these facilities is directly linked to a primary school, creating curricular continuity. Until recently, the links with the other childcare facilities were less clear. Primary schools received limited information about children entering childcare, and there was virtually no collaboration. This impeded a smooth transition to primary education. The situation has improved since then. Agreements have been made in the context of the BES(t) 4 kids programme¹⁶¹ and the Child Care (BES) Act, which came into force in January 2026, on sharing information, and childcare facilities and primary schools collaborate more.

Primary and secondary education better aligned

The transition from primary to secondary education has also improved in recent years in Sint Eustatius. Whereas the primary schools use Dutch core objectives adapted to the island context, the GvP works with CXC curricula, which are not well aligned with the Dutch core objectives. For example, the CXC curriculum places greater emphasis on reproductive skills than the core objectives in primary education. There is now more collaboration aimed at aligning these programmes and smoothing out the transition from primary to secondary education, and as a

¹⁵⁶ Article 7, para 1 Leerplichtwet BES.

¹⁵⁷ For the CXC programmes, see *Part C: Background information*.

¹⁵⁸ The education system for Sint Eustatius is described in *Part C: Background information*.

¹⁵⁹ The Ministry of OCW has not granted the GvP to teach MBO levels 3 and 4.

¹⁶⁰ To obtain a school diploma that grants direct access to further education in the European Netherlands, students must obtain a minimum level of B1 (CVQ) or B2 (CSEC). See for more information *Part C: Background information*.

¹⁶¹ <https://www.best4kids.nu/>

result students begin secondary school better prepared. When updating the core objectives, both primary and secondary school teachers were involved in order to ensure the best possible alignment between the programmes.

One subject where it has not proved possible to enable students to acquire the requisite standard before starting at the secondary school is Dutch as a foreign language. That is problematic, because it is important that students have a command of Dutch at level B1 or B2 by end of their GvP career. Few students manage this. A good command of Dutch is essential to be able to follow further education in the European Netherlands and to live and work on the island. Dutch is the formal language of the government, and anyone who does not have a good command of Dutch will be unable to properly understand much of the information provided by the government, and might struggle with filling in government forms, for example. The government is also the biggest employer on the island;¹⁶² anyone wishing to work there must therefore have a good command of Dutch.

Limited opportunities on the island impede smooth transition to further education

The opportunities for further education after completing secondary and vocational education are limited in Sint Eustatius; students wishing to study further have to leave the island. Since 2025, however, young people in Sint Eustatius can participate in the Caribbean Academic Foundation Year (CAFY). The programme is offered partly online and prepares students for the transition to further education off the island.¹⁶³

After leaving the GvP, young people in Sint Eustatius can also go straight into work. Most young people do not continue studying after leaving the GvP, but do find work on the island. The unemployment rate in Sint Eustatius is low: below 4%, as in the European Netherlands.¹⁶⁴ At the same time, over half the working population in Sint Eustatius (62%) do not have a basic qualification (CVQ 2 or CSEC).¹⁶⁵ That compares with around a quarter in the European Netherlands. It is estimated that around a quarter of young people in Sint Eustatius aged between 15 and 24 years are not at school and not in work, though there is no official record of the school dropout rate on the island. There is a relatively large number of vacancies on the island in tourism, construction and at the oil terminal. The biggest employer in Sint Eustatius, the OLE, also has a relatively large number of vacancies; these are often roles requiring a higher education qualification and a good command of Dutch.

Transfers within Caribbean region difficult due to lack of facilities, money and information

The GvP makes great efforts to enable Statian students go on to study further successfully. The focus is on continuing to study in the European Netherlands, although options in the Caribbean region are also increasingly coming into the picture. The GvP is attempting to improve the transfer options within the region, and to this end is seeking to organise an optimum mix of examination subjects. However, its small size and concomitant limited financial resources mean the GvP cannot offer everything.

Statian students receive student finance pursuant to the Student Finance (BES) Act.¹⁶⁶ For a number of study pathways, however, such as an MBO level 3 or 4 in

¹⁶² Commissie Sociaal Minimum Caribisch Nederland, 2023.

¹⁶³ <https://www.usm.sx/programs/caribbean-academic-foundation-year-cafy-21>

¹⁶⁴ ROA CN, 2024.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶⁶ Student Finance Act BES.

Bonaire, this funding is inadequate.¹⁶⁷ On top of that, a third of the population in Sint Eustatius live below the poverty line, many of them children.¹⁶⁸ Many parents of Statian children cannot afford to support financially if their child goes on to further education. Students must generate sufficient income themselves before and during their studies. This financial barrier makes it difficult for many young people to leave the island to follow further education.

Transfers within the Dutch Caribbean limited by limited availability and money

Going on to further education within the Caribbean Netherlands is difficult for young people in Sint Eustatius because of the limited opportunities, great distances, lack of alignment in programme content, language competence and high costs. There is one publicly funded further education institute in the Caribbean Netherlands: the MBO Bonaire.¹⁶⁹

There are no universities of applied sciences or academic universities, with the exception of the branch of the University of Curaçao in Bonaire. The number of education courses available in Bonaire is relatively small, and courses are taught either in Dutch or Papiamentu, languages of which young people in Sint Eustatius generally do not have a command, or at least not sufficient to be able to participate in education. Moreover, Bonaire is almost 800 kilometres from Sint Eustatius. This means that youngsters aged 16 or 17 years have to relocate in order to pursue further education, often without their parents. They are still minors and cannot sign a tenancy agreement, for example. They are also not accustomed to organising and running their own household and generally have no family living locally on whom they can call for support.

The contribution to the costs for Statian students wishing to study in Bonaire is moreover much lower than for young people who go to study in the European Netherlands. They do not receive a top-up grant under the Student Finance (BES) Act, nor do they receive a grant for living away from home; they do not receive a student travel card or similar, and no Start-up Allowance.¹⁷⁰ Since a third of the Statian population live below the poverty line, it is therefore impossible for many Statian youngsters to follow further education in Bonaire. Newcomers without Dutch nationality who wish to retain the possibility of naturalisation are in an even more difficult position. Further education in Bonaire is the only option for them, because they must have lived in the Caribbean Netherlands for an uninterrupted period of at least five years in order to be eligible for naturalisation.¹⁷¹

Transfers within Kingdom hindered by limited opportunities and information

Statian students wishing to transfer to further education in Aruba, Curaçao or Sint Maarten face both practical and structural obstacles. Sint Maarten is the closest to Sint Eustatius and offers several vocational and university programmes. Young people wishing to follow vocational courses generally go to the National Institute for Professional Advancement (NIPA) in Sint Maarten. In the past, young people from Sint Eustatius could also go to Curaçao, but since the switch to English-language CXC education, their prior education does not align with this, because most programmes in Curaçao are taught in Dutch.

Statian students following further education in Aruba, Curaçao or Sint Maarten also receive only a basic grant under the Student Finance (BES) Act, with no additional

¹⁶⁷ Reuvers, Scheltema, Dortalina, Meijer & Ehrismann, 2025.

¹⁶⁸ Commissie Sociaal Minimum Caribisch Nederland, 2023.

¹⁶⁹ <https://mbobonaire.com/>

¹⁷⁰ Reuvers et al., 2025.

¹⁷¹ Article 8 Kingdom Act on Dutch Nationality.

grants, no student grant for living away from home, no student travel card and no Start-up Allowance.¹⁷² As a third of the population live below the poverty line, further education on those islands is not financially attainable for many young people.

Although the GvP does a lot to inform students, students and their parents report that they do not know what educational opportunities there are and what admission requirements apply for them.

Transfer within Caribbean region impeded by limited information

Since the introduction of CXC education, the connection between Sint Eustatius and education in the Caribbean region has improved greatly. The English-language CXC certificates offered by the GvP are well aligned with programmes on islands such as Barbados and the British Virgin Islands. As a result, students often have direct access to further education in the region and are able to complete their studies successfully. Student finance is also sufficiently geared to studying in the Caribbean region.¹⁷³ On paper, therefore, there are good opportunities.

Yet few Statian students opt to continue their studies in the Caribbean region. According to students and their parents, a key reason for this is a lack of clear, accessible information about the possibilities. Although the GvP provides them with information, they indicate that they are not fully aware of what programmes are available. In addition, many students and parents believe that education in the region carries less prestige than studying in the European Netherlands.

Transfer to United States and Canada impeded by limited information and money

The United States and Canada are popular destinations for further education for young people from Sint Eustatius. Both countries offer many educational opportunities in English. Yet there are obstacles, sometimes in the form of strict admission requirements. In addition, the tuition fees and cost of living in these countries is often high,¹⁷⁴ and more than most young people from Sint Eustatius can afford.

A further problem is the frequent lack of reliable information on admission, visas and funding. Young people and their parents are unsure of what steps they have to take or which options are feasible. The US and Canada are moreover a long way away, which not only increases the costs, but also means a bigger step for young people relocating independently. Young people with a qualification from the US or Canada are not always permitted to work unconditionally in Sint Eustatius; restrictions apply for certain occupations, for example in the care sector¹⁷⁵ and education,¹⁷⁶ owing to statutory occupational requirements.

Transfer to further studies in European Netherlands well organised, but there are obstacles

For students who have completed a CSEC¹⁷⁷ in Sint Eustatius, further education in the European Netherlands is the most popular route. The financial support is in

¹⁷² Reuvers et al., 2025.

¹⁷³ Reuvers et al., 2025.

¹⁷⁴ To be able to study in the US, young people have to apply for a study visa. This requires a bank statement showing around 30,000 dollars. In addition, students without a government agreement, such as Sint Maarten has with universities, have to pay tuition fees at an international rate, which is much higher than the national rate.

¹⁷⁵ Care providers with one of the eleven 'Article 3 occupations' must register in the BIG register. These occupations are pharmacist, doctor, physiotherapist, health psychologist, clinical technician, general remedial therapist/generalist, physician assistant, psychotherapist, dentist, nurse and obstetrician. Certain training requirements apply for registration. See also the Wet op de beroepen in de individuele gezondheidszorg (Individual Healthcare Occupations Act).

¹⁷⁶ Chapter 5 discusses this in more detail.

¹⁷⁷ See Part C: Background information for information on the CXC programmes.

principle well organised for this.¹⁷⁸ Yet there are obstacles here, too. The first is that students are often still minors after completing a CSEC or CVQ, and are therefore not eligible for student finance.

A second obstacle is that a CSEC certificate alone is not enough to gain admission. Students wishing to study in the European Netherlands must meet additional language requirements: Dutch at level B1 to admission to secondary vocational education (MBO) and B2 for higher professional education (HBO), even where students wish to follow an English-language course. The education currently provided in Sint Eustatius means few students achieve the required standards. For non-Dutch newcomers to the island who begin Dutch lessons relatively late, the language requirements form an even bigger obstacle.

A further obstacle is that CXC results are only announced in November, which means graduation does not align with the Dutch school year. Although young people can start in September before receiving their final results, they have to go back to Sint Eustatius if it turns out they have not passed the examination, leading to high travel costs.

Once having arrived in the European Netherlands, many young people from Sint Eustatius also face barriers that can hinder their progress, such as a language deficit, racism, poor alignment of course content with the CXC programmes, cultural differences, lack of study support and complicated laws and regulations.¹⁷⁹

Studying in the European Netherlands is not an attractive option for students without Dutch nationality. They can only apply for student finance if they have lived in the Caribbean Netherlands for at least ten years.¹⁸⁰ If they wish to retain the possibility of naturalisation, they must also live in the Caribbean Netherlands for at least five years.¹⁸¹ Bonaire is then their only option for further education.

7.2 Analysis: ample collaboration around transfers on the island; links elsewhere are weak

Many stakeholders are involved in ensuring a smooth transfer process within education in Sint Eustatius. Most of the heavy lifting is done by the Gwendoline van Puttenschool (GvP). There are strong links between stakeholders on the island, leading to good collaboration. The connections with stakeholders outside the island are weaker; the implemented changes have not had the desired result.

Many stakeholders involved, concentration in one education organisation

Many stakeholders are involved in ensuring a smooth transfer process within education in Sint Eustatius. Most of the heavy lifting is done by one organisation, the GvP. This school acts as a pivotal link in the transition from primary to secondary education and from secondary to further education. It is mostly the GvP which establishes contacts, initiates discussions and engages with stakeholders, both in relation to student intake and for the transition to further education.

Island-based stakeholders devoting effort to creating opportunities in Sint Eustatius
Several stakeholders in Sint Eustatius are engaged in creating opportunities

¹⁷⁸ Reuvers et al., 2025.

¹⁷⁹ Nationale ombudsman, 2020, 2023.

¹⁸⁰ Article 1.4 Student Finance Act BES.

¹⁸¹ Article 8 Kingdom Act on Dutch Nationality

and support. For example, the OLE's Social Support Unit works with the GvP and NCF to ensure students are well prepared to study abroad. NCF offers a General Educational Development (GED) programme, which enables young people without a secondary school qualification to obtain an American diploma that grants them access to education in the US. Although students have to pay for this themselves, it is becoming more popular. Employers, for their part, offer on-the-job training to smooth the passage of young people into the labour market. These internships and work experience places are also available to students without a basic qualification. Employers are also involved in activities such as the Careers Day and Internship Market organised by the GvP.

GvP is the central link for smooth educational transfers

Several education organisations in Sint Eustatius work together to smooth the transfer process for students. The GvP is the pivotal link in this collaboration. The education structure on the island is like an hourglass: preschool education at the base, followed by four primary schools, often separated along ideological or faith-based lines, while one primary school has its own preschool department. After primary school, everyone goes to the only school for secondary and vocational education, the GvP. From here, students fan out to various further education programmes and to the labour market. Within the GvP, the school board, principal, management team and teaching staff are actively involved in structuring the transfer process, together with external stakeholders such as NCF, the Expertise Centre Education Care (ECE) and the Caribbean Examination Council (CXC). CXC supplies tests and records exam results.

The GvP plays a crucial role in preparing students for further study in the region or in the European Netherlands and for the local labour market. The dean at the GvP is first point of contact in ensuring a smooth transition to further education and the labour market. The GvP provides study information and organises study trips to enable students to learn about different further education institutes.¹⁸² Since the 2024-2025 school year, a study trip to Barbados has been available for CVQ students, in addition to the existing trip to the European Netherlands for CSEC students.

Strong engagement from national government

Many national government bodies and agencies are involved with educational transfers in Sint Eustatius, including central government, Parliament, ministers, the Ministry of OCW and its outpost, OCW CG. Within the ministry, the Education Executive Agency (DUO) has specific tasks, as do the Board of Tests and Examinations (CvTE), the Inspectorate of Education and Nuffic. Formally, the legislator sets the main frameworks and prior education requirements, which the government works up into lower-level regulations such as core objectives, attainment tests, language of instruction and CXC regulations. These frameworks influence the scope that schools in Sint Eustatius have to recognise previous education and further education. CvTE monitors the procedures for the CXC examinations. The European Dutch supervisory framework of the Inspectorate of Education also applies to the GvP, with a number of modifications. That supervisory framework takes only limited account of the CXC requirements and quality standards which GvP has to meet. Students at the GvP also have more extensive internship obligations than those within the CXC frameworks in order to ensure alignment with further education in the European Netherlands.

¹⁸² The Ministry of OCW offered a grant scheme to cover one third of the costs of these trips. The GvP funds the rest of the study trips itself from its lump sum funding.

The national government reacts to signals concerning problems with educational transfers in Sint Eustatius. The Bes(t) 4 kids¹⁸³ was for example introduced to make the transition from childcare to primary school smoother. The Ministry of OCW encourages successful study through research, grant schemes such as Kingdom Scholarships¹⁸⁴ and support during intake. DUO organises annual information meetings and temporary service points on the islands at the request of the Ministry of OCW. TuranGoeloe¹⁸⁵ and the WeConnect¹⁸⁶ foundation put out tenders on behalf of the Ministry of OCW for support and facilitation of students to make the transition to studying in the European Netherlands easier. The Strategic Education Alliance (SEA), a partnership between government and education stakeholders from four countries within the Kingdom, also works on improving transitions and collaboration within the Kingdom. Many of the initiatives are set out in the Third Education Agenda (see textbox). In practice, however, Statian students are unclear about the roles and tasks of all these stakeholders.

Third Education Agenda: Transfers to further education

During the Ministerial Quadrilateral Dialogue (M4LO) in April 2023, three priorities were agreed: (1) labour market research; (2) a mobility programme within the Kingdom; and (3) the Caribbean Academic Foundation Year (CAFY).¹⁸⁷ In addition, the GvP will provide more support to students with selecting an appropriate course of study, give them timely information and teach them study skills. The Ministry of OCW is also investigating further possibilities for study trips for Statian students and is updating the Student Finance (BES) Act.¹⁸⁸

CXC takes little account of Sint Eustatius

Stakeholders outside Sint Eustatius take little account of the island and the specific situation of its students. The Caribbean Examination Council (CXC) decides which CXC programmes are available, sets exams and determines syllabuses and monitors their implementation, while its presence on the island is limited to a local registrar. CXC takes no account of transfers to further education in the European Netherlands, either in terms of content or as regards the way in which exam results are announced. The focus of CXC is on the Caricom countries, the (former) British Caribbean. The Netherlands is an associate partner of Caricom. The internal decision-making takes place entirely outside Sint Eustatius and the Netherlands.

Further education institutes outside the island have to comply with their own local education systems and legislation and regulations, meaning there is less scope to align with the needs of young people from Sint Eustatius. They include the National Institute for Professional Advancement (NIPA) in Sint Maarten, the UoC in Curaçao and Bonaire and the Technical and Vocational Education and Training Council (TVETC) in Barbados.

Strong links on the island, weak links with stakeholders elsewhere

The links between education organisations in Sint Eustatius are strong, and they maintain close contact regarding student transfers. At the same time, there is little formal consultation with other island-based stakeholders that could play a role, such

¹⁸³ See *Part C: Background information* for an explanation

¹⁸⁴ <https://www.rijksdienstcn.com/onderwijs-cultuur-wetenschap/koninkrijksbeurs>

¹⁸⁵ <https://www.turangoeloe.nl/>

¹⁸⁶ <https://stichtingweconnect.nl/>

¹⁸⁷ <https://strategiceducationalliance.org/cafy/>

¹⁸⁸ Ministerie van Onderwijs, Cultuur en Wetenschap, 2024f.

as the OLE and employers. Links with stakeholders outside the island are weak, due to distance, fragmentation and limited capacity to maintain relationships. Active efforts are however under way to strengthen these external links, partly through new partnerships and contacts with education institutes in the region and in the European Netherlands.

Close contact regarding transfers between education organisations on the island
Good structures are in place between the four primary schools and the GvP to facilitate discussions about smooth transfer and coordination of teaching. Operational exchanges are organised between childcare organisations and schools in the transition from preschool to primary education. The small scale fosters collaboration within the island community. School principals know each other and know how to find each other when necessary. Principals hold monthly meetings aimed at coordinating the teaching and structuring the transitions. ECE and the education specialists from the OLE contribute by supporting students with support needs during transitions. Here, too, there is structural consultation and collaboration. The education organisations in Sint Eustatius also work together to improve arithmetic teaching at the primary schools and bring it more into line with the GvP. Four primary schools use the same arithmetic teaching methods and employ the same professionalisation methods to improving arithmetic teaching.

The GvP and the New Challenges Foundation (NCF) collaborate among other things to protect students against school dropout and facilitate the smooth transfer of practical training students to the NCF.

Limited contact on transfers between education organisations and other stakeholders on the island

Although the island is small and the lines of communication short, there is little structural contact between the education organisations and other stakeholders, such as the executive bodies of the OLE and employers or employers' organisations. The GvP tries to maintain contacts itself with employers in relation to internships and Careers Days for the CVQ programmes, but beyond the consultation rounds in the Education Agenda organised by the Ministry of OCW, there is no platform for administrative dialogue between the education organisations and the OLE regarding transfers, even where this impinges on labour market issues.

There are permanent links between the GvP and NCF, partly because students transfer from the GvP to NCF. NCF also has strong ties with the OLE. There are historical reasons for this: prior to 2010, NCF was part of the OLE. Now, only the funding for the NCF programme to combat school dropout is routed via the OLE, though a proposed legislative change will move that funds flow from the OLE to the GvP. The function of NCF depends among other things on the choices made by the GvP school board.

Efforts under way to strengthen links with education institutes outside Sint Eustatius
There are weak links with stakeholders outside the island that play a role in educational transfers. The GvP plays a key role here, too, in initiating and maintaining contacts with CXC and other education institutes. The GvP is working to build a stronger relationship with the TVETC in Barbados.¹⁸⁹ Over the last three years, the GvP has made efforts to align better with the TVET norms and quality standards, so that CVQ students are better equipped and prepared for their further studies, whether they follow them in the regional elsewhere.

The island's geographical isolation makes it difficult for both students and the GvP to establish and maintain contacts with the large number of further education institutes outside the island. The physical distance hinders collaboration, though the number of potential partners is high. There are numerous institutes outside the island: within the Kingdom, in the region and in the US and Canada, as well as in the European Netherlands and elsewhere. It is impossible for the GvP to maintain all these contacts on a permanent basis. A pilot has however recently been launched to create a smooth transfer route to the SGB Community School in Bonaire for students with additional support needs.

Links with institutes in the Caribbean part of the Kingdom are growing. Agreements are being made in the Quadrilateral Dialogue between institutes in the Dutch Caribbean, and these are coordinated and financially supported by the Strategic Education Alliance (SEA). Links with the rest of the Caribbean region are weak. Contacts are sporadic and often brief and informal; for example, a study trip to Barbados came about thanks to personal contacts between staff of the GvP and staff at institutes in Barbados. The study trip to the European Netherlands began in a similar fashion. Today, there are permanent contacts for organising this annual study trip with a small number of further education (MBO, HBO and WO) institutes, and ways are being sought of increasing this number.

Expected impact of changes not materialising

In a bid to make transfers within education smoother, changes have been made in recent years in the hope that they would alter the choices made by students. Those expectations are not being met, however. For example, the CXC curriculum was introduced among other things in the expectation that more Statian students would go on to study in the Caribbean region. In reality, they still mainly opt to study in the European Netherlands because of the greater financial support, better information provision and presence of more family ties. The community is moreover divided on the introduction of CXC education in Sint Eustatius, both as regards the content and for emotional reasons. Some Statians doubt the added value of CXC and argue for a return to a Dutch-language curriculum. Others attach value to CXC because of its connection with the Caribbean identity and context.

The desire by students to take advantage of opportunities outside the island are also at odds with the interests of the island community, which is dependent on returning graduates for its economy and public services. Students relatively rarely opt to continue their studies in the Caribbean region, partly because they and their parents are unfamiliar with the regional educational opportunities, and because it is unclear what value regional qualifications have when students return. Moreover, many parents know too little about CXC education and are therefore not able to adequately support their children in their choice of further education. And although OCW CG offers support to meet challenges relating to educational transfers in Sint Eustatius, little attention is given to the underlying labour market issues on the island. It also appears that no policy choices are being made which will genuinely improve the opportunities of Statian students.

7.3 Overall picture: education prepares students for three future pathways, but obstacles remain

Working to create smooth educational transfers for students in Sint Eustatius demands a great deal of capacity from the small education organisations on the island. The GvP plays a central role because it has to prepare students for three possible future pathways. There are obstacles to each of those pathways. The national government focuses primarily on further study in the European Netherlands, and focuses little attention on further education in the region.

Education system lacks coordination for curricular continuity

Smooth transitions between school phases require coordination and collaboration between education organisations in Sint Eustatius and with agencies outside the island. The different phases need to be well aligned. Although stakeholders recognise the importance of this, there are few formal structures in place to achieve this. This gives rise to inconsistencies, hurdles and gaps in the education pathways. Resolving these mainly requires better coordination within the education system. At present, no one has responsibility for ensuring cohesion within the education system in Sint Eustatius and for the alignment between the different phases.

Smooth transitions ask a lot of schools in Sint Eustatius

The different transfer pathways and inconsistencies force schools in Sint Eustatius to do much of the work themselves in creating curricular continuity and smooth transfers. To some extent, education in Sint Eustatius lies 'between systems': the primary schools use Dutch core objectives and attainment targets, but translated into English and adapted to the local situation, while the GvP uses the CXC curriculum supplemented by another subject, Dutch as a foreign language. All this means that schools have to look for or develop their own teaching materials. There are for example no English-language textbooks which focus on the Dutch core objectives whilst also aligning with the Caribbean context. There is no suitable teaching material for career orientation, development and support for young people in Sint Eustatius. Moreover, teachers have to gear curricula to a diversity of requirements; they have to create curricular continuity and maintain contact with further education providers outside the island. That places a great burden on their capacity.

Secondary and vocational education between different destinations

After completion of secondary or vocational education, students can broadly choose between three future pathways. Some go directly into work on the island; others opt for further education in the Caribbean region or go to the US or Canada; yet another group opt for further education in the European Netherlands. The GvP has to gear its teaching programme and language policy to these three options in order to enable students to pursue them. The small scale and language differences make it extra difficult to offer the three pathways.

Strong focus on transfer to the European Netherlands

Since the integration of Sint Eustatius into the Netherlands in 2010, the island has formed an administrative unit with a country almost 7,000 kilometres away. One of the consequences of the integration is the amount of attention devoted to the transfer route for students wishing to study in the European Netherlands. This route is well facilitated by the Ministry of OCW with financial support, guidance and information, though the alignment with CXC education in terms of content and further education in the European Netherlands remains a focus for attention. The other future pathways – studying in the Caribbean part of the Kingdom, the wider Caribbean region, the US or Canada – are much less well facilitated, even

though they may be relevant and promising options for students in Sint Eustatius. Constitutional reforms in 2010 drew a national border between Sint Eustatius and Sint Maarten, despite the two islands traditionally being closely connected historically, geographically, socially and economically.

Legal frameworks make educational transfers more difficult

Ensuring smooth educational transfers is made more difficult by the fact that the legal rules for the different education sectors are not well aligned with each other or with the situation on the island. For example, the core objectives in primary education do not align with the CXC programme used in secondary and vocational education; student finance takes different forms, and there are different requirements regarding command of the Dutch language, which prove impossible to achieve fully.

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island committees

In compiling this publication, the Education Council worked with each island's Island Committee. The Island Committees helped in determining the content and process for each chapter in the report dealing specifically with that island. The Committee members contributed their experience, expertise and perspective in a personal capacity.

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information

In *Education in the Caribbean Netherlands*, the Education Council presents a broad analysis of how the Dutch education system functions in Bonaire, Saba and Sint Eustatius.

The publication consists of three parts:

Part A: Conclusions and recommendations

Part B: Featured themes in Bonaire, Saba and Sint Eustatius

Part C: Background information

About the Education Council

Good education for everyone: that is the goal which the Education Council of the Netherlands is committed to helping achieve. For more than a hundred years the Council has been advising successive governments, parliaments as well as local authorities on education policy and legislation. It provides this advice both on commission and on its own initiative. The Council's work culminates in evidence-based studies and advisory reports focused on offering solutions for the long term. They deal with all aspects of the education system, from pre-school provision right through to post-university education and lifelong learning and development.

The Education Council is independent, focusing on developments and attitudes in society and education. Its advisory reports are based on scientific knowledge and insights, fed by the knowledge and experience of those working in the field, and also draw on education policy and legislation. The Youth Education Council (JongerenOnderwijsraad), is made up of pupils and students across a range of ages and school types who support the Council with experiences and ideas about Dutch education and a range of linked topics on which the Council provides advice.

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