



## SWEDEN

by Inger Enkvist, Frank Nordberg, and Elisabeth Porath Sjöo

Enkvist, I., Nordberg, F. & Sjöo, E. P. (2012). Sweden. In C. L. Glenn & J. De Groof (Eds.), *Balancing freedom, autonomy and accountability in education: Volume 2* (503-514). Tilburg, NL: Wolf Legal Publishers.

### Overview

Education has traditionally been organized by the state with very few exceptions. In the 1960s, Sweden had decent schools, the economic situation was good, and teacher training provided schools with competent teachers. However, there was a general political desire to offer more education and more equal access to education and at the same time provide the country with a well-educated workforce in view of a changing labor market. At the end of the 1960s, the Social Democrats who governed Sweden during most of the 20th century introduced compulsory education up to 16 years of age and chose the formula of a comprehensive school with a common curriculum for all pupils. Grammar school (läroverk, realskola) was abolished. From then on, education was targeted by social reformers as the main means for changing society. In the 1970s, Swedish authorities spoke about creating social harmony by having young people from different backgrounds study together and "at the same time" acquire knowledge, that is, the social goals were considered more important than the intellectual ones.

During the seventies and the eighties, school standards of conduct and learning began slipping and teachers started to reconsider if they wanted to continue in their profession. The most brilliant young people no longer wanted to go into teaching. The situation became worse when in 1989 the government decided to decentralize education, really “municipalize” it, because the responsibility was put into the hands of local government. There were protests from the trade unions representing teachers of academic subjects and from liberal political parties, but socialist and centrist parties and the trade union organizing primary school teachers were in favor of the new law. Giving local administrators and politicians access to a substantial amount of government money for education created a temptation to use some of it to fill other budgetary needs. Almost at once, differences between different school districts began to appear.

At the beginning of the nineties, during a short period of non-Social Democratic government, the possibility to open independent schools was created. It was presented as a “choice reform” because for the first time in modern Swedish history, pupils could choose a school instead of being sent to the nearest one. It can be surmised that if the standards of state schools had not suffered during the two previous decades, there would not have been a strong demand for alternatives, but now charter schools, or “free schools” as they are called in Sweden, quickly became an important feature of the school system. These schools are financed by the state but run by different independent providers.

During the nineties, several new education laws were introduced. The general gist was to have fewer regulations. This was reflected in the new teacher training program based on the idea that teachers are mainly facilitators and that subject knowledge is second to pedagogical knowledge. Another idea was that teachers should be able to work with any kind of pupil. The program also invited future teachers to explore their own interests when choosing study courses. Thus, some future primary school teachers did not choose to study reading instruction. The reform was similar to the comprehensive school reform thirty years earlier but now for teachers. When critics began to point out that these changes were dangerous for school standards and for the qualification of the country’s labor force, pedagogues and politicians simply denied that there were problems. Denial continued when PISA 2000 and PISA 2003 were published, but when PISA 2006 also showed sinking results for Sweden, it was no longer possible to pretend that there were no problems.

In 2006 there were general elections, and the slipping school results were an important issue in public debate and contributed to a change in voters’ preference. The Social Democrats now lost the election to a coalition of center and right parties who proceeded to introduce new education laws. That coalition won a second term in 2010 and is consolidating the new direction of Swedish education.

These new laws include:

- A new curriculum for compulsory school with goals which are more concrete.
- Obligatory testing of language and mathematics at the age of 10, 13 and 16.
- More national school leaving tests at the age of 16.
- The requirement to have completed all courses in compulsory school in order to gain admission to vocational school or to theoretical upper secondary school.
- New curricula for vocational school and for upper secondary school. The law also introduces the possibility of training as an apprentice.
- Extra “points” at university entrance for having chosen to study advanced courses in mathematics and foreign language.
- Introduction of specialized elite programs focusing on different theoretical subjects and not only on sports or arts.
- A new “school law” regulating the judicial relationship between the state, the local authorities and the families.
- A new teacher training program providing different training for future teachers preparing to work with different age groups. The new program gives more emphasis to subject knowledge than to pedagogy. The pedagogical part is also more technical and includes less pedagogical theory. Another important feature of the reform is that all the universities that wanted to offer teacher training had to submit an application to the government. The government then withheld the permission from the weakest candidates and thus increased the overall quality.
- The introduction of a teacher diploma specifying for what age group and in what subject the teachers is qualified.

These reforms make the years 2006-2010 into the main period of educational reform ever in Swedish education.

According to the Education Act, all children and youth shall have equal access to education. All children shall enjoy this right, regardless of gender, where they live, or social or economic factors. The Education Act states that education shall provide

the pupils with knowledge and, in co-operation with the homes, promote their harmonious development into responsible human beings and members of the community. Consideration shall also be given to students with special needs. The Education Act also states that all education throughout the public school system shall be free of charge. There is usually no cost for students or their parents for teaching materials, school meals, health services or transports.

The curriculum, national objectives and guidelines for the public education system are laid down by the Parliament and Government. Within the objectives and framework established by Government and Parliament, the individual responsible authority – a municipality or a board of an independent school - may determine how its schools are to be run. Every provider of education and every school shall systematically and continuously plan, assess and develop education. The process of developing quality in education shall be conducted with participation by teachers, pre-school teachers, non-teaching staff, and pupils.

The Swedish school system is made up of compulsory and non-compulsory schooling. Compulsory schooling includes regular compulsory schools, Sami (indigenous) schools, special schools, and programs for pupils with learning disabilities. Non-compulsory schooling includes pre-school, upper secondary school, and upper secondary school for pupils with learning disabilities, municipal adult education, and adult education for adults with learning disabilities.

## *The structure of schooling*

Schooling is compulsory between ages seven to sixteen. Either vocational or upper secondary school enroll students between sixteen and nineteen. There is also a compulsory preschool year between six and seven years of age. Today most Swedish children attend kindergarten, and it is an exception when children do not. The reason for that is that most Swedish mothers work even if they often do not work full time.

Swedish schools are currently controlled locally within a national framework. The State provides the curricula, the teacher training and the financing, and the local boards of education hire school principals and appoint teachers.

The municipalities have a legal duty according to the Education Act to provide schooling for every youth who is entitled to education. Also non-public organizations can provide schooling in so called independent schools. But schooling provided by non-public organizations must follow the national curriculum. Further, they also must have a formal approval from the Swedish Schools Inspectorate before they can start to provide schooling. The conditions for such approval are stipulated in the Education Act.

## *The legal framework*

The Education Act of 2010, called the “School law”, specifies the obligations assumed by the state and those that pertain to local government. The law substitutes for a large number of earlier laws that are now gathered in one law and reconciled. Many of the dispositions have to do with what economic claims parents can make and in what cases they can appeal against the decisions of the authorities.

The act covers Education from pre-school activities to adult educations. The Education Act is supplemented with ordinances for the different types of education. The national curriculum for compulsory school and upper secondary school are issued by the government, while the different course plans are issued by the National Agency for Education.

The charter schools are based on a voucher system, which means that all financing is public but provision of schooling can be made by different agents. Education can be provided by public or non-public organisations. The municipalities have a legal obligation to provide public education, while non-public organisations can do that if every condition for approval is fulfilled. A non-public provider applies for approval to the Swedish Schools Inspectorate. If application is denied, the organisation has a right to appeal to the Administrative Court in Stockholm.

Both public and non-public schools are supervised by the Swedish Schools Inspectorate. The Inspectorate can intervene in different ways if a school doesn't fulfil its legal obligations. Generally the Inspectorate issues an injunction in which the deficiencies are listed. The provider is given a time-limit to either correct the deficiencies or deliver a description of which measures the provider intends to undertake, if the deficiencies are of a kind that can't be corrected in a short time. When the provider has answered the injunction, the Inspectorate has a number of choices to pursue the matter. If the undertaken measures are considered sufficient, the Inspectorate can close the matter. If there still are remaining deficiencies, but the Inspectorate finds that the provider is on the right track, a further injunction with a prolonged time-limit can be issued. After that the Inspectorate can close the matter, if the circumstances are satisfying.

But if the provider can't or doesn't want to undertake sufficient measure to eliminate the deficiencies, the Inspectorate can increase the pressure with an injunction with a fine.

## *Freedom to establish non-state schools*

For a long time, schools with a special profile were few and considered elitist. The state repeatedly threatened to withdraw their financing. The most well-known examples were schools in the capital with a music profile or that taught part of the curriculum in French or German.

However, the Independent School Reform of 1992 made it possible for families to send their children to any school — public or private — without having to pay fees. The proportion of students in independent schools has grown considerably since the beginning of the nineties, although the sector is still rather small. In school year 1990-91, about 0.9 percent of all Swedish pupils in compulsory education (ages 6-15, approximately) were enrolled in independent schools, whereas in 2007-08 the figure had grown to about 9 percent. The same trend may be observed in secondary education (ages 16-18, approximately), where the share has grown from 1.5 percent to 17 percent during the same period. In about 210 of the 290 municipalities in Sweden, independent schools compete with public schools run by locally elected school boards. The urbanized areas of south and middle Sweden, in particular in the Greater Stockholm area, have the highest concentration of independent schools.

Independent schools are open to everyone and must be approved by the Swedish Schools Inspectorate. Authorised independent schools are financed by a voucher system, by which the municipality provides resources to the independent school equivalent to those provided to its own schools, on a per-pupil basis. The value of the voucher is determined by negotiations between the independent school and the municipality school board. For pupils who need extra resources (this includes both children with physical or mental handicaps and children with learning and behavioural difficulties), extra funding may be provided at the discretion of the local school board—which, however, may refuse for financial reasons and refer the child to one of its own schools. Independent schools are not allowed to charge fees for instruction.

Independent schools have the same duty to follow the national curriculum as the municipal schools. Non-public schools may have a particular profile, for instance a confessional denomination or a special educational approach such as Montessori or Waldorf. In addition to the types of schools mentioned, there are also a number of international schools in Sweden that receive partial Government funding. These schools are intended primarily for the children of foreign nationals whose stay in Sweden is temporary.

In public debate about independent schools, one issue often raised is whether they should be permitted to make a profit. They are financed by tax money and not by parents' contributions. It has been pointed out that some non-state schools offer

fewer lessons than state schools which enables them to have fewer class-rooms and teachers, thereby creating a benefit for the investors. The critics speak about luring pupils by offering them a free laptop and a lot of freedom but not guaranteeing educational quality. Other critics accuse independent schools of inflating grades to attract pupils. The government is currently tightening the control on all schools, including independent ones. When the possibility to open independent schools was created, the need to control those schools was not as easy to see as it is now. The legislators' idea might have been that those who would want to start schools would be ambitious teachers wanting to give more and better lessons and not companies seeing schools as a business opportunity.

The School law from 2010 introduces new regulations that oblige non-state schools to comply with most of the rules for state schools. They must hire qualified teachers and they must document the pupils' progress. Both these regulations diminish the freedom of independent schools to a certain extent, but they have been well received by state school supporters who saw the earlier conditions as too favorable for independent schools. The process of getting permission to start a new school has also been somewhat tightened, probably because of complaints from state schools that say that they cannot plan when a new independent school could appear quite suddenly in their area and attract the pupils for which they have an obligation to provide. The public is also calling for a better kind of inspection, not only when independent schools are established but also later when they are operating.

The Swedish panorama of non-state schools is different from that in countries with a Catholic tradition. As state and religion were one and the same for a long time in Sweden, the Swedish Church had no reason to establish their own schools. The faith schools today are mainly a few Evangelical and Muslim schools, the latter ones established by recent immigrants to Sweden. Catholic immigrants from Latin America or Poland often choose to attend the local schools provided in their neighborhood. Some independent schools were established by parents mainly in areas where the authorities wanted to close the village schools because there were not enough pupils. However, most owners of independent schools come from private enterprise. Investors began to see a possibility for a new market in education (as in health care). That group is now the main one.

## *Homeschooling*

Homeschooling has no tradition in Sweden. It has been so rare as to be almost non-existing. In the new school law it is said explicitly that it is not allowed except in extraordinary circumstances.

Since education in the Swedish schools always must be comprehensive and objective

and be organized in a way that everybody can participate regardless of his or her religious belief or philosophical persuasion, the legislator has drawn the conclusion that there is no need for any regulation that entitles parents to provide home schooling for their children. But the Education Act recognizes that exceptional circumstances might occur which would be a reason to allow a child to fulfil the duty to participate in compulsory education in another way than by attendance at school. The conditions for such an arrangement are very restrictive. It can only be permitted for one year at a time and there must be an extraordinary reason for that. Parents must apply to the municipal board of education, and there is an opportunity to appeal to the Administrative court if approval is denied.

### *School choice not limited by family income*

School choice is not limited by family income, as all Swedish education is free of charge. Expressed in another way, fee-paying schools are not allowed. The state funding is the same for all pupils, and schools are not allowed to ask parents to contribute any additional money. Indeed, this principle may be said to be enforced with an excessive zeal as a school may have to desist from a study visit or some other kind of enhancement to the curriculum because the funding does not cover that expense.

There can be observed some differences between municipalities, as municipalities are allowed to decide the exact amount they will pay for students at different level of education and that includes independent schools. There are local authorities that try to deduct a percentage from the funding for independent school, arguing that these schools often take more advantage than other schools of municipal facilities such as libraries and sports halls.

Sweden's choice reform can be considered surprising in a country with a long tradition of social services provided by the state. The independent schools were introduced as a means of offering the same quality level for all pupils, as nobody is forced to accept a local school of mediocre quality. There is evidence that the establishment of an independent school forces the municipal school to become better in order to retain its pupils.

Many immigrant parents look out for independent schools in districts where the state schools are not able to provide good educational quality. Indeed, this is one more complaint from state-school proponents because they claim that ambitious students from immigrant families tend to avoid local schools, thereby weakening the results of that student body.



## *Distinctive character*

Both public and independent schools must follow the national curriculum. However, the curriculum gives opportunity for variations. In compulsory schools, a specified number of lessons must be offered in certain subjects. But the rest of the available space can be used for “school’s choice” or “pupil’s choice”. School’s choice is about the school’s profile, while pupil’s choice gives an opportunity to the pupil to select further lessons in a subject which he or she is especially interested in.

In upper-secondary schools the situation is similar. The school can offer extended lessons in profile subjects, but are also obligated to offer a number of lessons to individual selection of the pupil.

But as said above; the tuition in every subject must be comprehensive and objective and rest on a sound academic basis.

By adopting a special “profile” school can compete to attract more students. However, most of these profiles are of a practical nature. A certain school can offer for example more art or more computer skills. There are some Montessori schools.

The three main groups of charter schools would be cooperatives organized by parents or teachers, schools with a religious profile, and schools that belong to a corporation that has made education its business, and it is the last group that is by far the largest one. As to having a special focus, among independent schools some seventy percent could be called “general” or “mainstream” schools and ten percent faith-based schools. Some five percent are oriented towards a language or an ethnic group and another five percent specialize in other subjects.

The grades must always follow the national curriculum. No alternative grading system is allowed. Independent schools can be admitted not to give grades, if that is according to the pedagogical principles of the school. An example of that are Waldorf schools.

The reason for the system described above is the principle of equivalent education. Every pupil has the same right to education wherever in the country he or she lives. Grades must be made from the same system, so the same information is provided for future employers and education providers. Another important aspect is that the students from upper secondary schools must be given a right to compete for education in a university on the same conditions.

## *Decisions about admitting pupils*

At the compulsory level, the law mentions three criteria for admitting pupils to a

certain school: siblings in the school, time in queue, or home located near the school in question. When a charter school applies for a permission to start, it must state in what order it will use these three criteria, and the most usual choice is the order indicated above.

Nevertheless, the compulsory schools legislation is different for public and independent schools. For a public school the basic rule is that the pupil shall have a place at the school where the parents want to put their child. The exceptions that an approval of such a request would violate the right of another pupil to select a school in the vicinity, the municipality can offer the pupil to go to another school than the one requested.

For upper secondary education and vocational training, pupils are admitted on the basis of the grades from compulsory school. There are also schools specializing in visual arts, dancing, music or sports that have special requirements. The same is true about the newly started “profile schools” that offer advanced studies in for example mathematics, languages or history. The public school system is required to reach out to pupils who have not been admitted to the school of their choice in order to try to find a solution for them.

## *Decisions about staff*

When the decentralization was carried through in 1989, hiring teachers became a local decision. In public schools, principals are hired by the local authority that might use a “head hunter” to find the best candidate. In charter schools, the board makes the decision. As to teachers in public schools, the decision is often made by the principal or the principal and the trade unions together. In a charter school, there are more options. The decision could be taken by the board, by the principal or collectively by all the teachers.

From the point of view of the employee, decentralization can contribute to make teachers feel less free in regard to their employer as it opened a new possibility for schools to give preference to candidates that appeal to local administrators for non-professional reasons. Also, at the same time, individual salaries were introduced, and school principals were invited to raise the salaries of the best members of their staff. This change gave more freedom to schools, but the quite a few teachers are ambivalent or hostile to this change in their working conditions.

Decisions about staff are one of the main factors that independent schools can use in order to make their schools different from state schools. They can get more committed teachers by providing a better work climate, more enthusiastic

colleagues, and sometimes, but not always, better pay. In some cases, independent schools ask their teachers to work longer hours, and they are able to do so because some teachers have had no real choice because they did not have a regular teacher qualification or because the teachers preferred an independent school even if they had to work longer hours.

For the last two decades, the possibility of offering work to good teachers who for one reason or another had not passed through state teacher training gave non-state schools an edge when hiring. The new School law requires that only licensed teachers make decisions about grades, which is a means to push non-state schools to hire teachers with a teacher diploma. There is now a transitional period for schools and teachers to adjust to the new rules. Charter schools may see the new regulations as an added difficulty especially if they are small and need to use the same teacher in many capacities. However, that is exactly what the law tries to change.

Public schools cannot take any heed to religious, philosophical or political inclination. An independent school can give priority to those who share the same value as the provider. But also for those schools it is mandatory to recruit teachers who fulfil the formal competence qualifications.

### *Accountability for school quality*

For many decades, progressive pedagogy has eschewed the issue of quality in compulsory and secondary education. With a focus on social harmony rather than on academic results, Swedish pupils were supposed to learn “other things” and not only to get more knowledge. However, this is changing with the new school reforms.

Schools will have to evaluate their pupils in third, sixth and ninth grade in reading comprehension and mathematics. At the end of compulsory school, there will also be tests in English, in natural sciences and in social sciences. In these last two areas, the precise subject matter will alternate. The rationale is not to burden pupils and teachers with too much national testing but neither to allow them to narrow down the curriculum to just a few subjects, the ones being tested. The results of national testing are published in a national ranking where parents can see how their area's schools are faring. The ranking is of course a kind of wake-up signal for areas that that not doing well.

However, there are problems with how these tests are used. For the last decades, correcting the tests has been put in the hands of the teacher who is teaching the

pupils assessed. Also, the instructions for correcting are so generous as to bring to mind the expression “anything goes”. The government will have to deal with this.

Some cities with a large immigrant population have low results, and the Swedish National Agency for Education uses an index called Salsa which indicates what results could be expected in a certain area. However, this index is also questioned because it seems to give an alibi for not expecting all pupils to do their utmost.

Both public and non-public schools are supervised by the Swedish Schools Inspectorate, whose role is to monitor and scrutinize. The Inspectorate can intervene in different ways if a school doesn't fulfil its legal obligations. It is the principal organizer of a school, that is, a municipality or the operator of an independent school, which is responsible for its quality and results.

The Swedish Schools Inspectorate conducts regular inspection of all municipal and independent schools, from pre-school to adult education. The aim is to assert the right of each individual to knowledge and personal development in a safe environment. Schools' target achievements are therefore a central part of every inspection. The premises are that all students are to attain goals stated in curricula and all school activities are carried out so that all students are given the opportunity to attain these goals. Activities are scrutinized on a number of points such as effectiveness and learning outcome, basic values and influence, special support and assessment and grading. The decision states in which areas a school is failing to meet national requirements. At a seminar with those responsible from the municipality and school, inspectors discuss the areas where improvements are needed.

The Swedish Schools Inspectorate may make use of penalties and apply pressure so that a principal organizer rectifies its activities. If the principal organizer does not take action or seriously disregards its obligations, the Swedish Schools Inspectorate may decide to impose a conditional fine or measures at the principal organizer's expense. In the case of an independent school, its license to operate may be revoked.

## *Teaching of values*

All Swedish schools shall follow the curriculum and the Education Act. The Education Act states that school activities shall be structured in accordance with fundamental democratic values. It also points out that each and every person active in the school system shall promote respect for the intrinsic value of every human being and for our common environment. The curriculum of the compulsory school starts with: *The national school system is based on democratic foundations. The inviolability of human life, individual freedom and integrity, the equal value of all*

*people, equality between women and men, and solidarity with the weak and vulnerable are the values that the school should represent and impart.*

The curriculum also states that teaching in the school should be non-denominational. This is also for denominational schools, but in fact their education can be denominational.

Examples of the values that are stated in the curricula are that no one should be subjected to discrimination on the grounds of gender, ethnic affiliation, religion or other belief system, transgender identity or its expression, sexual orientation, age or functional impairment or other degrading treatment. Such tendencies should be actively combated. Xenophobia and intolerance must be confronted with knowledge, open discussion and active measures.

In the nineties, when schools began to experience more disruption among pupils and cases of vandalism and school violence appeared, the government started to talk about "the teaching of values", an expression that in the Swedish context would be associated realizing that when religion was removed from the curriculum, nothing was put in its place. Unfortunately, talking of values does not compensate for not daring to enforce good conduct. This has made it possible for independent school to use the argument of values and a good study atmosphere as a means of attracting parents.

## References

Ahlin, A. (2003) Does School Competition matter? Effects of a Large-Scale School Choice Reform on Student Performance. Department of Economics, University of Uppsala, Sweden.  
[http://www.nek.uu.se/pdf/wp2003\\_2.pdf](http://www.nek.uu.se/pdf/wp2003_2.pdf)

Bergström, F.& Blank, M. (2005) A Survey on the Development of Independent Schools in Sweden. London: Reform.

Böhlmark, A & Lindahl, M. (2007) The Impact of School Choice on Pupil Achievement, Segregation and Costs: Swedish Evidence. London: The Institute for the study of labor.

<ftp://repec.iza.org/RePEc/Discussionpaper/dp2786.pdf>

Cowen, N. (2008) Swedish Lessons. How schools with more freedom can deliver better education. London: Institute for the civil Society.

Curriculum for the compulsory school, preschool class and the leisure-time centre (2011)  
<http://www.sweden.gov.se/content/1/c6/02/15/38/1532b277.pdf>

Lund, S. & Hwang, S. (2003) School Choice and its effects in Sweden. Stockholm: Skolverket.

National Level 2008. Sweden's Official Statistics on pre-school activities, school-age child care, schools and adult education. (2008) Stockholm: Skolverket.

The Swedish education Act (<http://www.sweden.gov.se/content/1/c6/02/15/38/1532b277.pdf>)

The Swedish National Agency for Education ([http://www.skolverket.se/2.3894/in\\_english](http://www.skolverket.se/2.3894/in_english))

The Swedish school Inspectorate (<http://www.skolinspektionen.se/en/About-Skolinspektionen/The-activities-of-the-School-Inspectorate/>)