

# **MENNTUN FYRIR ALLA Á ÍSLANDI**

Úttekt á framkvæmd stefnu um menntun án aðgreiningar á Íslandi

# **EDUCATION FOR ALL IN ICELAND**

External Audit of the Icelandic System for Inclusive Education

Annex 2: Critical Reflection Document



**EUROPEAN AGENCY**  
for Special Needs and Inclusive Education



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## **EDUCATION FOR ALL IN ICELAND**

External Audit of the Icelandic System for Inclusive Education

### **Annex 2: Critical Reflection Document**

Critical reflection paper and standards

Review of the implementation of the policy of inclusive education

Prepared by the Ministry of Education, Association of Local Authorities  
and the Ministry of Welfare

1 March 2016



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## INTRODUCTION

In the autumn of 2013, the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture initiated a review of the implementation of inclusive education policy in compulsory schools in Iceland. It ran until May 2015. The Ministry appointed a working group to carry out an assessment of the implementation of inclusive policy in schools with representatives from the most important stakeholders. The final report, *Mat á framkvæmd stefnu um skóla án aðgreiningar*, was delivered in May 2015 (Mennta- og menningarmálaráðuneytið, 2015).

The report's main findings indicate that most stakeholders fully support the national policy of inclusive education – education for all. However, there are different interpretations of what this means to different stakeholders. Teachers in particular appear to feel uncertain about their changing role in relation to implementing inclusive education. There are concerns raised over the increasing demands placed on teachers and their ability to cope with the perceived increased workload. A related issue is how well teachers' initial and on-going training prepares and then supports them to effectively meet a diverse range of learning needs in inclusive classrooms.

Said report indicates that there is a degree of fragmentation, or disconnection, between the various bodies, agencies, ministries and municipalities that are responsible for implementing and monitoring the policy for inclusive education. This has led stakeholders to call for more guidance on the implementation of policy goals for inclusive education. Their calls are linked to requests for clear, practical information about the system's effectiveness and more information about 'what really works' in inclusive education.

One of the recommendations to the Ministry was to ask the European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education to review the implementation of this policy in Iceland. The Ministry and the Agency signed an agreement on 3 November 2015. To prepare for the review, the Ministry was asked to deliver a short critical assessment of the current situation, in collaboration with the most important stakeholders. The present **Critical Reflection Document** is mostly based on the above-mentioned report and other evaluation documents.

The document is divided into seven chapters:

1. The notion of inclusion
2. Policy and guidelines on inclusive education
3. Inclusive education in practice
4. Support for schools



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5. The use of resources
  6. Governance and quality assurance
  7. Teacher education and continuing professional development.



## 1. THE NOTION OF INCLUSION

The concept of *skóli án aðgreiningar* (inclusive education) is first mentioned in the Icelandic translation of the *Salamanca Statement* from 1994. The most recent regulation on learners with special needs in compulsory and upper-secondary schools, defines inclusive education as follows:

*Inclusive education refers to a compulsory school in learners' locality or immediate area or a study environment in upper-secondary schools which meets the educational and social needs of learners in a mainstream school environment guided by principles of human dignity, democratic values and social justice* (Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, 2010 and 2012).

The National Curriculum Guide for Pre-Schools emphasises the value of play, the importance of democracy and equality in all school activities. Pre-schools shall employ whatever appropriate measures are necessary to support the children's welfare and successful education, bearing their maturity and individual needs in mind. However, there is no specific national definition of 'inclusive education' in the pre-school guidelines.

According to the report *Mat á framkvæmd stefnu um skóla án aðgreiningar*, mentioned in the *Introduction* (Mennta- og menningarmálaráðuneytið, 2015), the understanding of the concept of inclusive education seems to vary within the school system in Iceland. This policy is considered both controversial and not fully understood among professionals. On the other hand, the group concluded that 'the ideology of inclusive education and the schools' role in the services to learners is emphasised in laws, regulations, national curricula and international agreements' (ibid., pp. 17–18). The biggest problems seem to be the lack of definition of what the policy means in practice and the lack of co-ordinated efforts among all those responsible for implementing the policy.

The reports also points out that, in 2008, only 32% of parents and 44% of teachers rather, or very much, agreed that inclusive education has improved Icelandic schools. A survey (Samband íslenskra sveitarfélaga og Kennarasamband Íslands, 2012) conducted by the Municipalities Association and the Icelandic Teachers' Union in 2012 similarly showed that only 42% of teachers are positive or very positive towards the ideology behind inclusive education. Moreover, less than 33% of teachers said that implementing this policy into practice works well or very well.

Research carried out in compulsory schools between the years 2008 and 2013 (Óskarsdóttir, 2014) showed that 93% of parents consider it important or rather important that work in schools centres on the individual. Nevertheless, 50% of them believe that teachers do not have the professional preparation needed to organise that kind of work. Over 50% of professional staff in the schools agree with the





parents that teachers lack the knowledge and competences to meet all children's needs. Some 62% of parents and about half of the teachers think that it is important or very important that all children can attend their local school.

These findings call for a further investigation of the current situation, and particularly the reason for this rather negative attitude towards the implementation of inclusive education. Is the concept misunderstood, or is the implementation of this policy perhaps flawed? Or are these just different opinions about a school policy?

Inclusive education is not just one 'policy' among others – rather it is supposed to underlie all other educational policies. Therefore, it is important that all stakeholders reach an agreement about and mutual understanding of this policy's basic principles and implications.

### **Critical issues**

- Lack of a common, comprehensive definition of 'inclusive education' for all three school levels in legal documents or national guidelines.
- Different understanding among stakeholders of the term 'inclusive education'.
- Mixed views towards the implementation of inclusive education.
- Lack of research in the field of inclusive education.

### **Standard**

**Inclusive education is defined by all stakeholders as an approach for improving the quality of education of all learners**

### ***Standard descriptors***

- The concept of inclusive education and its implications is well understood by all stakeholders, including parents and pupils.
- Inclusive education is understood by all stakeholders as being an approach for all pupils.
- Research on inclusive education is supported by all stakeholders.



## 2. POLICY AND GUIDELINES ON INCLUSIVE EDUCATION

This chapter attempts to identify the strengths and weaknesses of the Icelandic policy and guidelines regarding inclusive education, primarily as reflected in the legislation, regulations and guidelines. Whereas in most cases regulations and guidelines reflect respective laws, most of the discussion here will address documents other than the laws themselves.

The legislation for the three school levels – pre-school, compulsory school and upper-secondary school – and the recently updated National Curriculum Guide contain, among other things, guidance on critical thinking, creativity, communication and active participation in a democratic society. These factors are sometimes referred to as 21<sup>st</sup>-century skills. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, general education is defined with regard to social and individual needs.

The education policy in the National Curriculum Guides from 2011 (Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, 2011) for all three school levels is based on six fundamental pillars: literacy, sustainability, health and welfare, democracy and human rights, equality, and creativity. The fundamental pillars are based on the aim of achieving both social objectives and the individual's educational objectives. They are socially-oriented, as they aim to promote increased equality and democracy and to ensure well-educated, healthy citizens. Such citizens can both participate in and change and improve society, as well as the labour market. The pillars are meant to accentuate the principle of general education and are fundamental in promoting an inclusive culture at all school levels.

The National Curriculum Guides from 2011 describe the policy on inclusion, especially at the compulsory school level. The curriculum for the pre-primary level implies inclusion as the goal at that level. According to the National Curriculum Guide, the basic principle in school operations in Iceland involves each learner's universal involvement, access and participation in school activities. Inclusive education is a continuous process that aims to offer good education for everyone. It shows respect for learners' diversity and different needs, abilities and characteristics, and makes an effort to eliminate all forms of discrimination and segregation at school.

The Regulation on Learners with Special Needs in Compulsory School (no. 585/2011) and the Regulation on Learners with Special Needs in Upper-Secondary Schools (no. 230/2012) address important issues regarding learners with special needs. These regulations' objectives are very ambitious in providing learners with SEN with equal opportunities, in accordance with international conventions on the rights of children and people with disabilities. An additional objective at the upper-secondary



school level is to adequately prepare learners to live independent lives, participate in the labour market and undertake further study.

Other regulations include a recent one on Specialist Services of Local Authorities for Pre-Schools and Compulsory Schools and a Pupil Welfare Council in Compulsory Schools (no. 584/2010)<sup>1</sup>. Specialist services include, on the one hand, support for learners in pre-schools and compulsory schools and their parents and, on the other hand, support for the activities of the schools and their staff. The local authorities' specialist services aim to use educational, psychological, developmental and sociological expertise optimally in school operations. A regulation from 2012 on the schooling of foster children at the compulsory school level (no. 547/2012) is seen as an important step for ensuring that foster children attend schools in the neighbouring area.

At the upper-secondary level, all learners have the right to enrol and study up to the age of 18. They are entitled to receive suitable instruction, carried out in a stimulating study environment and appropriate premises, which takes into account their needs and general well-being. Appropriate instruction and special pedagogic support shall be provided to learners with a disability, in accordance with Article 2 of the Act on the Affairs of People with Disabilities, no. 59/1992, and to learners with emotional or social difficulties. The Minister may, by contract, authorise upper-secondary schools to operate special study units for learners with disabilities. In 23 out of 31 upper-secondary schools in Iceland, a special unit has been established since the year 2000.

The Minister's *White Paper on Education Reform* (Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, 2014a) focuses on identifying which efforts to strengthen the Icelandic education system need to be directed and which strategies are most likely to provide learners with the education mandated by law and by the National Curriculum Guides. Work on the *White Paper* has been based on international studies of education reform. It attempts to draw lessons from the experience of those nations that perform best in international comparisons. The *White Paper* discusses the current state of the Icelandic education system and proposes priorities and actions on the basis of that analysis. It emphasises the key goals of improving reading performance before the end of compulsory education, improving the progress of upper-secondary learners and reducing dropout rates.

There are concerns about the extent to which current policies and guidelines support each other. Guidelines are mostly based on rights and needs and no

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<sup>1</sup> A cost evaluation of Regulation no. 584/2010 showed a total increase in local authorities' expenditure of around ISK 220 million. The local authorities have not yet reached an agreement with the central government to finance this expenditure.



guidelines have been developed for the actual implementation or funding of necessary measures.

### **Critical issues**

- The extent to which policies and guidelines support each other and support implementation.
- Lack of clear national guidelines that all teachers should be prepared to work in inclusive schools.
- Inclusive education has mostly focused on learners with special needs, rather than the diversity of learners – such as gifted learners – and needs in general.
- Lack of financial agreements between central government and municipalities in connection with new policies and regulations.

### **Standard**

**Legislation and policy for inclusive education has the goal of promoting equal opportunities for all learners**

#### ***Standard descriptors***

- Legislation clearly articulates rights to appropriate education for all children.
- Policies provide operational definitions of what is understood by access and appropriateness.
- All schools and municipalities have policies and action plans detailing how national-level policies on inclusive education will be implemented and funded.
- Legislation is fully in line with international normative instruments, in particular the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006), the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) and EU policy directives and policy guidelines.



### 3. INCLUSIVE EDUCATION IN PRACTICE

This chapter focuses on the implementation of the policy of inclusive education, particularly at the school level. This includes issues like the organisation of instruction, administration, communication between teachers and learners, teaching methods, assessment for learning and co-operation between homes and school. Chapter 4 discusses how local or national authorities support schools.

The general rule is that children in pre-primary and compulsory schools have the right to attend a mainstream school operated by the municipalities close to their home. Parents can also choose another public or independent mainstream school, according to the municipality's rules and regulations. According to the law, secondary schools are obliged to offer suitable education for all learners up to the age of 18. However, individual schools are highly selective when it comes to accepting learners. There are few special schools in Iceland and the number of learners attending special schools is low. At the pre-primary school level, there are three schools offering specialised services for children with disabilities such as blindness, deafness and autism. At the compulsory level, there are three special schools – two in Reykjavík and one in Akureyri – for learners with disabilities and behavioural disorders. There are also special units organised for certain types of disabilities within mainstream schools. However, these units are not freely chosen by the parents, but are based on diagnoses and specialised criteria accepted by the authorities. There are no special schools at the upper-secondary level.

Iceland's National Curriculum has a very broad definition of learners with special needs. It includes those who have difficulties studying because of specific learning difficulties, emotional or social problems and/or disabilities, learners with dyslexia, learners suffering from long-term illnesses, developmental disorders, mental illness and other learners with health-related special needs. Immigrant learners who speak Icelandic as a second language are also included. Gifted learners and learners with special talents in particular fields are also entitled to appropriate study opportunities. According to the Curriculum, they should be given the opportunity to develop their special abilities, to pursue additional and more complex objectives, and to undertake more demanding and meaningful study based on their own capabilities.

In line with the policy on inclusive education, the trend has been that more and more learners stay in mainstream schools and classes, often with support. There is, however, a growing concern that schools do not have the capacity to meet learners' diverse needs. A group of parents has also criticised how difficult it is to get provision in a special school at the compulsory school level, where they believe that their children would have better educational and social opportunities. This criticism



has recently led to a change in the regulation on support for children with special needs at the compulsory level. It clarifies the procedure for the municipalities when they are organising special schools and special units, with more intervention by the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture.

Each pre-school, compulsory school and upper-secondary school must create its own school curriculum based on the National Curriculum Guide. They have a certain degree of flexibility. They must develop a general reception plan for every learner, including learners with SEN. Every school receives a general budget, which includes general support to learners from the municipalities. Schools are also responsible for self-evaluation and learner assessment. They have the freedom to organise teaching strategies and choose suitable pedagogical methods. The learners' education and welfare is a joint task of the home and school. Home-school co-operation should be based on mutual respect and trust, mutual exchange of information and joint decisions and responsibility. Emphasis is placed on home-school co-operation concerning each individual, their study and welfare.

As mentioned previously, there are no special schools at the upper-secondary level. However, there are special units (programmes) in most schools and they only accept learners with diagnosed special needs. These learners are entitled to a four-year programme. These units began in a few schools, but have rapidly spread to other schools around the country. Learners in these units have well-organised provision from qualified staff. The 2011 evaluation of the special units in upper-secondary schools (Ásgeirsson, 2011) highlighted various recommendations for potential reform. However, it also clearly indicated the rising cost of these units in recent years. It seems, nevertheless, that parents are generally satisfied with provision in upper-secondary schools. The cost of these units has risen rapidly in recent years, which is of concern to national and local authorities<sup>2</sup>.

Another major concern is the high dropout rate in upper-secondary schools. According to the Minister's *White Paper* (Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, 2014a), only 30% of learners who entered so-called 'general programmes' in 2007 had graduated six years later. This figure is 77% for academic programmes and 45% for VET programmes. The reasons for this high dropout rate are not easy to pinpoint, but it certainly raises questions about the suitability of upper-secondary school programmes for weaker learners. It should be noted here that not all upper-secondary schools accept academically weak learners. A few very popular upper-secondary schools in Iceland compete for learners with excellent grades.

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<sup>2</sup> Research is currently being carried out at the upper-secondary level where the main goal is to provide understanding of teaching and learning in upper-secondary schools in Iceland and the forces that shape their development (See: [menntavisindastofnun.hi.is/throun\\_skolastarfs/upper\\_secondary\\_school\\_practices\\_in\\_iceland](http://menntavisindastofnun.hi.is/throun_skolastarfs/upper_secondary_school_practices_in_iceland)).



As discussed in Chapter 1, the policy of inclusive education is controversial in Iceland. According to the previously mentioned report from 2015 (Mennta- og menningarmálaráðuneytið, 2015), the policy on inclusive education is considered to have changed the school system in Iceland a lot. Its implementation has led to requests for increased financial contributions, as well as more support for schools in general (see also Chapter 4). Teachers report that their job and working conditions have changed greatly due to this policy. They feel more stress in their work, that more professional expertise is required and that a lot of time is spent on reporting and consultation meetings because of individual learners with special needs.

More positive opinions, however, are also found in smaller municipalities, both among teachers and parents, where groups of learners are smaller and it is easier to individualise teaching (see Mennta- og menningarmálaráðuneytið, 2013.) These conditions can seem to make inclusive education easier. However, it is often more difficult to implement the policy in smaller municipalities due to geographical distances and a lack of expertise. Available data shows that pre-primary teachers and parents seem to be more satisfied with support services within pre-primary schools. They feel that it is easier to enforce and implement the policy of inclusive education within that school level.

The report further raises the question of whether the policy needs to be further developed and articulated, what it entails and what is needed to carry it out. It is also necessary to strengthen research in the field and increase supervision in the schools, revise working methods, provide support to teachers and pay attention to their professional development. It is also important to ensure similar working methods in the special teaching service of various schools, describe working plans and facilitate co-operation between schools, municipalities and school levels and improve access to specialised solutions. According to the report, it may be argued that the policy on inclusive education has not been evaluated in advance or implemented systematically enough. Nor has the cost been assessed sufficiently and therefore it has been difficult to evaluate the result.

In 2014, the OECD conducted a *Review of Policies to Improve the Effectiveness of Resource Use in Schools in Iceland*. The *Country Background Report* (Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, 2014b) presents a comprehensive overview of current challenges in the pre-, compulsory and upper-secondary schools. A key finding in relation to inclusive education was that there is a significant challenge in relation to the policy on inclusive schools: 'while there is general agreement that the policy itself is justified, school administrators and staff feel that the implementation is not sufficiently managed or funded' (ibid., p. 11).



## Critical issues

- The capacity of mainstream schools to provide quality education for all learners in an inclusive school and classroom.
- Doubts that the policy of inclusive education has improved schools.
- Lack of teacher knowledge and competences to implement the policy.
- Increased workload of primary school teachers.
- Lack of certified pre-primary teachers.
- The education of school assistants at all school levels.
- Division of labour between different staff categories unclear.
- Teaching material meets the needs of all learners.
- Lack of adequate support services (see also Chapter 4).
- Funding of the inclusive policy (see Chapter 6).
- Waiting lists for diagnosis of disabilities and special needs.
- Too little attention given to gifted learners.
- The special schools at the compulsory school level are not freely chosen by parents; the rules for enrolling are very selective for those with severe disabilities.
- On-going concerns about dropout in upper-secondary programmes.
- Inclusion in upper-secondary schools' special units/programmes.

## Standard

**Policy for inclusive education is effectively implemented at all levels**

### *Standard descriptors*

- Every member of the school community is made to feel welcome and valued.
- There are high expectations for all pupils.
- Schools have formal and objective procedures that assist in the early identification of students' individual needs.
- All schools have well educated staff fit for their purpose.
- The division of labour between different types of teachers within schools is clear and promotes successful implementation of inclusive education policy.
- All pupils have access to good teaching materials that suit their needs.





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- There are clear and objective procedures implemented for monitoring the achievements of pupils who are at risk of exclusion.
  - All students have a voice and are appropriately involved in school-level decision-making, as well as decision-making about their learning programme.
  - All national government bodies and agencies work collaboratively to ensure joined-up policy delivery (see also Chapter 4).



#### 4. SUPPORT FOR SCHOOLS<sup>3</sup>

Much of the available evidence indicates that Icelandic teachers are not fully prepared to work in an inclusive education environment. In general, they feel the need for support. A large proportion of teachers in today's schools were educated before the policy on inclusive education was written into law and regulations. This means that this group of teachers requires special support, in addition to the support all schools need to function in such an environment.

To function effectively in an inclusive education environment, all stakeholders – teachers, school administrators, parents, etc. – need to develop diverse competencies relating to the implementation of inclusive policy, including certain skills and knowledge. To do so, there must be a support system that delivers the knowledge and skills needed. This includes the diagnosis and identification of learning needs, knowledge of appropriate teaching methods, knowledge of appropriate administrative procedures, knowledge and know-how for evaluating learning achievement, sharing of know-how and best practice and so forth. Naturally, individual schools will never be fully self-sufficient in this respect. There will always be a need for a support system to enable all stakeholders to function in such an environment.

Typically, a support system consists of special resource/specialist services, training providers, forums for collaboration and sharing of experiences, and finance mechanisms. In Iceland, the structure of school support services is highly decentralised. The municipalities decide how to organise support for pre-schools and compulsory schools. Upper-secondary schools are free to seek support wherever they want, including services from the municipalities. By law, special schools and units at the compulsory level provide support and pedagogical counselling to staff at mainstream compulsory schools to support inclusive education. The Local Authorities' Equalization Fund finances the support (see also Chapter 5 for funding issues). These special schools have received this pedagogical counselling since 1996, when the compulsory schools were transferred to the municipalities. However, implementation of this counselling service is generally considered weak.

Municipalities can operate specialist services as an independent unit within or outside of schools. They may provide such operations jointly with other local authorities, or may conclude service-level agreements with other local authorities, institutions or parties providing the necessary services. There are no national guidelines for individual municipalities on how they should organise their services or how they should work together or co-ordinate the services within or between

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<sup>3</sup> For teacher education and professional development, see Chapter 7.



municipalities. This has been criticised in reports on individual schools and also in the evaluation report from 2013 on the support services in six municipalities (Mennta- og menningarmálaráðuneytið, 2013). The municipalities differ hugely in size and in how they organise the services. At the upper-secondary level, individual schools organise their support services as they wish according to contracts with the Ministry of Education. It is a challenge to better co-ordinate all kinds of support to the mainstream schools at all levels, to parents and the system in general. This would require a holistic approach in supporting inclusive schools and learners at all school levels with more focus on resource centres at national level, as is the case with the literacy programme. It would call for a multi-stakeholder approach.

The State Diagnostic and Counselling Centre is available for different types of special needs and disabilities, while some other institutions cater for special groups. The Centre is a national institution dedicated to improving the lives of children with developmental disabilities and their families. It provides early intervention, multi-disciplinary assessment, counselling and access to resources. It is responsible for educating parents and professionals about children's disabilities and the main treatment methods.

The support services of the municipalities and individual schools are also expected to identify special needs and all deviations early and to organise suitable follow-up. Long waiting lists for different kinds of diagnosis give cause for concern. Suitable support is often not given during the waiting period. For some disabilities, diagnosis is crucial for relevant professional and financial support or treatment.

The new Directorate of Education (Menntamálastofnun) is responsible for national assessment of compulsory school learners, national testing and screening tests, the PISA research and school evaluation at all levels. It is also responsible for providing compulsory school learners with learning material. The Directorate is expected to systematically develop improved learner assessment. This may be by developing and conducting different screening tests for all levels, on reading and the risk of dropout for example. The Directorate now has, temporarily, a department with experts on reading and literacy. They are expected to act as a temporary resource centre to assist schools in building capacity to improve reading, based on the *White Paper* goals. The Directorate must also support upper-secondary schools to develop programmes to prevent dropout.

### **Critical issues**

- The complexity (transparency) of the support system.
- Lack of co-ordination between stakeholders in a decentralised system, both at ministerial level and between the state and the municipalities.

- Lack of a clear structural system which defines the goals and responsibilities of the state and the municipalities on each service level, from first level (general) to more specialised regional level and then to national level.
- Lack of accountability and definitions of general support services, additional services and more specialised national services.
- Lack of possibilities for upper-secondary schools to offer personal/psychological support to learners (see also Chapter 5).
- The organisation of support within schools, especially the role of the support assistants (*stuðningsfulltrúi*).
- Lack of appropriate training for new teachers during induction periods.
- Lack of school/teacher forums to share experience and best practice.
- Lack of support for parents.
- Waiting lists for diagnoses in the health and welfare system.
- Lack of co-operation between the State Diagnostic and Counselling Centre and the support services of the municipalities in every part of the country.
- The counselling services of the special schools and units.

## Standard

**All stakeholders, at all levels are enabled to think and act inclusively in their daily practice**

### *Standard descriptors*

- Support services have the ultimate goal of empowering students, families and teachers.
- Schools are effectively supported by the specialist/school services as appropriate in delivering the provision required by students with individual educational needs.
- The support system is co-ordinated and easy to understand.
- Appropriate training is available for all staff in order to ensure all staff can respond positively to student diversity.
- The staff and resourcing levels of resource services at all levels is adequate to meet the needs of the schools and pupils.
- There is an adequate access to diagnoses in the health and the welfare system.



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- School administrators are able to act as leaders in inclusive education settings.
  - There is a recognised forum for teachers to meet and share experiences.
  - There is a recognised forum for training providers to meet, share experiences and facilitate effective co-ordination of service provision.
  - Parents understand the philosophy of inclusive education.
  - Parents have the opportunity to participate in the decisions that affect their child's education.



## 5. THE USE OF RESOURCES

The Ministry of Education, Science and Culture funds all upper-secondary schools. They receive an annual lump sum, based on the number and type of learners attending the school. Allocation for the special units for learners with disabilities is included in the lump sum, but is based on a yearly plan. The contribution for the special units in upper-secondary schools has risen from 2.6% of the total upper-secondary school budget in 2007 to 6.6% in 2015. The Ministry also finances teaching material for compulsory school learners and the fund for teacher continuing professional development.

The municipalities fund the pre- and compulsory schools. Some schools receive lump sums from the municipality, but others need to apply for special support for learners with special needs. In most cases, this financing of special support for learners with special needs comes from the Local Authorities' Equalization Fund, based on formal diagnoses. The amount municipalities get from the Fund is based, among other things, on the number of children with disabilities or learners with immigrant background in the municipality. However, the Ministry of Welfare is responsible for financing primary healthcare in schools, the State Diagnostic and Counselling Centre and some other diagnostic centres and institutions for different groups of disabilities.

The Local Authorities' Equalization Fund operates on the basis of the Local Governments' Revenue Act, no. 4/1995, with subsequent amendments. Its role is to pay contributions to the local authorities to equalise their possibilities to raise revenues and their expenditures. These include contributions for the transfer of the cost of operating compulsory schools. The Fund is located in the Ministry of Interior. The Fund's rules are currently under review. It is now moving away from a diagnostic approach, and focusing instead on individual support needs for active participation in society. The Fund is planning to use a new international evaluation scheme (Supports Intensity Scale – SIS), which is meant to measure these needs<sup>4</sup>.

The rapidly rising cost related to the policy of inclusive education has been a growing concern among ministries and local authorities. It is not always clear what causes this rising cost, but it is usually associated with the rapidly growing number of diagnoses and increased staff cost. The extent to which this growing cost translates into better educational practices and provisions is not known at present

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<sup>4</sup> It might also be mentioned that, since 1996, one expert has been co-ordinating support for teachers and parents of learners with a mother tongue other than Icelandic and organising courses for teachers. This is despite the huge increase in learners from an immigrant background in recent years. This specialist service for learners with a mother tongue other than Icelandic is funded by the Local Authorities' Equalization Fund and is organised for municipalities other than the capital Reykjavík.



and needs to be explored. The role of diagnosis in deciding financial support has also been criticised and in some cases, there is a tension between the medical and the pedagogical approach. It is argued that the financing instruments sometimes conflict with the indicators on inclusive education presented by the European Agency.

The regulations for the Equalization Fund are complex. There has been criticism of the fact that the Ministry of Education does not have a say in the Fund's operations; only the municipalities and the Ministry of Interior have a say. This was criticised, for example, in a report by Ríkisendurskoðun (the Icelandic National Audit Office) in 2008 (Ríkisendurskoðun, 2008). The report points out that, for example, the Fund is unable to support municipalities that are underachieving in national examinations or in external evaluations. Similarly, there is a dispute over the funding responsibilities of the Ministries of Education and Welfare for specialised services for learners with special needs.


The Ministry of Welfare takes the position that these services are to be paid by the education sector, even when the services are delivered by welfare agencies. Meanwhile, the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture claims that both parties should make financial and professional contributions.

There has also been a dispute between the municipalities and the Ministry of Welfare regarding these same issues that has created so-called 'grey areas'.

There is no central support service or resource centre for upper-secondary schools. However, according to regulations, there is a possibility for the municipalities' specialist services to negotiate with upper-secondary schools on such services, but this has not been tried out yet. Also, according to Article 29 of the Upper-Secondary Act, there is a possibility to organise so-called core schools (*kjarnaskóli*) in a particular field. Core schools shall be at the forefront of developing instructional material, study arrangements and teaching methods and shall assist other schools in improving instruction and training in the field concerned.

### **Critical issues**

- Rising cost associated with implementing the policy of inclusive education at all school levels.
- The role of diagnoses in the funding of schools.
- Limited possibilities for national authorities to influence actual funding mechanisms and practice at local level.
- The extent to which funding models support inclusive education.
- The framework of funding upper-secondary schools and, especially, central support services.

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- The role of the Local Authorities' Equalization Fund in supporting municipalities to fulfil their educational requirements and in what way the Fund can promote inclusive quality education.
  - Inter-ministerial co-operation and funding special units in upper-secondary schools.
  - Inter-ministerial dispute on funding responsibilities concerning specialised health services to learners and between municipalities and ministries.

## **Standard**

**Resource allocation is equitable, efficient and cost-effective**

### ***Standard descriptors***

- Funding mechanisms support successful implementation of the policy of inclusive education.
- There is a strong inter-ministerial co-operation in the financing of the policy of inclusive education.
- School resources are distributed in a fair and equitable way to support inclusive education.





## 6. GOVERNANCE AND QUALITY ASSURANCE

In recent decades, the state has decentralised the operation of schools at all school levels. As seen elsewhere in this document, the Ministry of Education is currently responsible for policy-making at all school levels, the operation of upper-secondary schools, national curriculum development and evaluation and assessment of schools and learners. The Ministry is also responsible for teacher education, the production of educational material and, to some extent, the funding of teachers' continuing training. The municipalities, however, are responsible for local policy-making, for operating pre-primary and compulsory schools and for offering professional services to schools and learners. They are also responsible for the inspection of their own schools.

The new Directorate of Education organises both national examinations and different kinds of screening tests. The general rule is that learners with special needs take the same national examinations as others, but can have some additional support during the tests. Some learners are exempt from testing based on procedures described in a regulation. The Directorate is also responsible for regular evaluations of pre-schools, compulsory schools and upper-secondary schools. In the last few years, the Ministry, in co-operation with the Municipalities Association, has developed standards for external evaluation of primary and upper-secondary schools. The use of these standards is now in a developmental phase. This is part of a larger developmental project where the state and the municipalities work together to externally evaluate schools.

It is a common conception that there is a lack of co-ordination between different stakeholders and too little focus on evaluation and inspection of the services, individual schools or the system in general. The school legislation at all school levels instructs all schools to implement self-evaluation procedures and the state and the municipalities to oversee, with external evaluation and other information gathering, the operation of all schools. At present, funds allocated to evaluation activities only allow six school reviews at pre-primary school level, ten at compulsory school level and six at upper-secondary school level each year. The evaluation framework and guidelines are currently being reviewed.

Furthermore, in some cases, stakeholders experience 'grey areas' in the sector. These are areas where it is unclear who is responsible for organising, supporting, co-ordinating, financing or monitoring activities. This applies, for instance, to learners with severe disabilities, long-term illness, foster children, immigrant learners, learners who are deaf and learners with ADHD or speech disorders. A case in point is



the inefficient co-ordination between the Diagnostic Centre and the services of the municipalities, especially regarding follow-up after diagnoses<sup>5</sup>.

### **Critical issues**

- High degree of decentralisation in Iceland creates ‘grey areas’ where responsibilities become blurred.
- The external evaluation cycle at pre-school and compulsory school levels is extremely long.
- Lack of systematic review/evaluation of the implementation process.
- In a decentralised system, the Ministry of Education often lacks the means to follow up external evaluation at all school levels.

### **Standard**

**Governance and quality assurance mechanisms ensure co-ordinated and effective implementation of inclusive education policy and practice**

#### ***Standard descriptors***

- There is a national evaluation and assessment framework that covers the needs of all pupils, including those with the most complex needs.
- External evaluation standards address directly the diversity of pupils’ needs and the means to address them in schools.
- Systematic monitoring is conducted to ensure compliance with all quality assurance standards.
- Results of assessment procedures are communicated and explained to parents by teachers and others involved with pupils’ learning programmes.
- Mechanisms are developed for collecting and sharing data across ministries to ensure compliance with agreed standards.

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<sup>5</sup> There is one notable exception to this fragmentation: the newly structured Knowledge Centre for Blind and Visually Impaired People (*Þekkingarmiðstöð blindra, sjónskertra og daufblinda*). The centre has experts to assist the blind in mainstream schools at all levels and it is considered a good example of how this could be organised in general. The Ministry of Welfare has been working on the structure, organisation and co-ordination of diagnostic centres.



## 7. TEACHER EDUCATION AND CONTINUING PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Since 2008, a master's degree is required to become a licensed teacher at the pre-school, compulsory and upper-secondary levels. At present, there is a huge lack of qualified teachers at the pre-school level, but most teachers at the other school levels are qualified. Temporary staff can be hired to teach at all three school levels, but are not allowed to call themselves teachers. According to the legislation, it is possible to work as a qualified teacher across school levels, for example in pre-primary and the first classes of compulsory schools. It is very important to clarify the issue of teacher licences for more than one school level, securing better implementation of the law. It has even been discussed that instead of having three different types of teacher licences, one licence would be the general rule, with some special qualifications. The legal framework for this, however, is very vague but is currently under consideration.

Special needs educators have requested that their profession should be licensed with a special educator's licence. There are around 500 of them working at the compulsory level only. They claim that their profession is very important for successful implementation of inclusive education and it is important to look into this matter.

Teacher education departments can be found at three higher education institutions in Iceland: the University of Iceland, the University of Akureyri and the Iceland Academy of the Arts. Following the law in 2008, it has been difficult for the universities to attract students into teacher education programmes. This is a serious challenge. The situation has improved a little over the last few years, but there is a major concern that the profession is ageing. If no action is taken, there will be a shortage of qualified teachers at all school levels in the near future. Furthermore, the structure of initial teacher training has been changed, but the universities have freedom to organise the content of teacher education. At present, there are no clear national guidelines that all teachers should be prepared to work in inclusive schools.

The field of teacher in-service and professional development is fairly complicated in Iceland. It is highly decentralised and organised in various sectors. The municipalities and the state allocate much of the in-service financing to the Icelandic Teachers' Union, which further allocates this money to the teachers at all three school levels. Additionally, the municipalities have a national teacher professional development fund that supports various courses and projects. At the upper-secondary level, there is also a national fund operated by the state that allocates money to teachers' professional associations and individual teachers upon application. However, there is no such fund for pre-school teachers. There is a school development fund



(Sprotasjóður) open to applications for projects at all three school levels, operated by the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture. There are also some other means of in-service training offered by the municipalities, state, institutions and Nordic and European funds available. Schools and individual teachers have various opportunities to organise and attend courses, but possibilities for co-ordinated in-service training based on policy priorities are limited.

A task group with representatives from various stakeholders has been looking into these matters for some time. Stakeholders' interests and opinions diverge, but the aim is to facilitate better co-ordination of in-service education and continuing professional development at all school levels to be better prepared to implement educational policy guidelines. The group is supposed to deliver its recommendations soon.

### **Critical issues**

- The extent to which initial teacher education addresses inclusive education instructional methods.
- How well teachers are prepared and supported via their induction period and continuing professional development to effectively meet the changing demands of serving a diverse range of learning needs in inclusive education.
- Lack of possibilities to organise in-service training for inclusive education at all school levels.
- The means of allocating funds for in-service education and continuing development for better co-ordination and management.
- The role of the different actors to support continuing professional development (the Directorate of Education, local authorities support services and other institutions).

### **Standard**

**Professional development issues at all system levels are effectively addressed**

#### ***Standard descriptors***

- Teacher education is viewed as a lifelong continuous process.
- All professional development opportunities aim to develop a framework of attitudes and values, knowledge and skills that are aligned with national policy goals for inclusive education.
- Inclusive education is an embedded element within all training for school leaders and teachers.



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- Appropriate general and specialist training are available for all staff in order to ensure all staff can respond positively to student diversity.



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