

## Assessment and recommendations

### The strengths of the Dutch education system

*In many respects, the Dutch education system stands out from the crowd*

Within broad parameters set by government, schools have extensive freedom, with no national curriculum. In contrast to more “comprehensive” systems, students are “tracked” from around the age of 12. A strong vocational education and training system plays a big role, with good employer links and a dual apprenticeship system, and one of the lowest levels of young people neither employed nor in education or training (NEET) in the OECD. Outcomes, in terms of literacy and numeracy, are very good on average, and the system minimises weak basic skills among teenagers as effectively as the East Asian champions of Japan and Korea, far ahead of most European countries. Education systems thrive on relentless evaluation and self-criticism, and a constant aspiration for improvement and those qualities are found in the Netherlands. The system is underpinned by: a high level of decentralisation, which is balanced by a solid accountability system that includes a national examination and a strong Inspectorate of Education; school financing that supports disadvantaged students; experimentation and innovation; and good data and research. Strong stakeholder intermediate institutions inform a lively research and policy debate.

*But some challenges remain, and the Netherlands rightly aspires to greater excellence*

Radical changes in a system that seems to be working well are always risky. Reform in the Netherlands should, therefore, be pursued with due consideration, and attended by careful policy evaluation to ensure that results are positive and unintended effects monitored. Against this background, this review has sought to identify the strengths and challenges of the education system, from early childhood up to the end of secondary education, and makes policy recommendations for further improvement.

## Challenges and recommendations

### *Strengthen educational quality in early childhood education and care*

Early childhood education and care (ECEC) can have extensive benefits, particularly for disadvantaged children. In the Netherlands, disadvantaged children are offered support through special programmes, while the needs of working parents are usually met in somewhat different ways. Public expenditure on ECEC has increased from a low base, and the cost of childcare services for parents is above the OECD average. Enrolment rates are high, but most parents use childcare facilities just a few hours a week. High quality is crucial for ECEC to have beneficial impacts for children, and in the Netherlands there is evidence of some quality problems. The qualification levels of ECEC staff could be improved and there is no ECEC curriculum outside the VVE programmes for disadvantaged children.

*Recommendation 1: Strengthen educational quality in early childhood education and care through the development of a curriculum framework, improving and standardising the qualifications and training of ECEC staff. Move towards a more integrated approach to ECEC provision.*

### *Reform initial selection and subsequent permeability*

The merits of “early” tracking (after primary school) have been extensively debated, but evidence from cross-country studies on the overall effects is uncertain, and studies based on variation within countries produce similarly mixed results. Despite early tracking, student outcomes in the Netherlands are good on average and in respect of equity. Large performance differences *within* tracks are a problem.

One major problem is that the criteria determining track allocation are highly variable. This is partly because the tests used to guide allocation are used in different ways, partly because teacher recommendations are inconsistent, and partly because individual schools are free to adjust their selection criteria to circumstances. A recent reform that places more emphasis on teacher assessment will not improve the consistency of selection.

Alongside effective initial selection, tracking requires subsequent permeability between educational tracks, and this is currently facing increasing obstacles. Strong differentiated teaching skills are needed to support permeability, as these will allow teachers to identify strong performers within their classrooms and support their potential promotion to a higher track. (One quarter of students in secondary education repeat a grade or are down-tracked).

*Recommendation 2: As one component of a reform package, consider options for reducing the extent of early tracking.*

*Recommendation 3: Establish a student's right to enter a track based on a national objective test, and require schools to respect national test standards when selecting students into tracks and subsequently sustaining them in those tracks.*

*Recommendation 4: Promote permeability between all tracks by (a) facilitating upward transition between tracks throughout the school career and (b) merging some tracks.*

### *Promote and reward student motivation and excellence*

High-level skills are important for the advanced Dutch economy. There have been growing concerns about weaknesses among top performers. The Netherlands has more 15-year-old top performers in basic skills than most of Europe, but is still behind some Asian countries; mathematics performance has declined across the performance distribution. National studies suggest that some of the most promising students are not reaching their full potential. Conversely, the share of highly skilled adults in the Netherlands is similar to other top-performing countries.

Low motivation among top performers could be an issue. Many students in the Netherlands, including top performers, are not well-motivated. Top performers also lack perseverance and openness to problem solving. Raising student motivation is hard. The Dutch school system does not incentivise excellence and Dutch parents are also less engaged in their children's education than in the highest performing education systems. One answer is the kind of differentiated teaching that can challenge and motivate students. For example, students could be offered additional lessons for enrichment purposes.

*Recommendation 5: To enhance student motivation and promote excellence, build teacher capacity to better respond to individual learning needs, reinforce rewards for excellence at every level of education through the opportunity for track promotion, set high expectations through a relevant curriculum, and foster parental engagement in education.*

### *Strengthen teacher professionalism and further develop the career structure*

Building teacher professionalism is a lifelong endeavour. Many teachers are currently approaching retirement age, so there is a real challenge in replacing those skills, and a real opportunity to update and refresh the profession. Good quality teaching requires high level recruits. Entrance to

initial teacher training has become more selective, but perhaps too selective given the difficulty in finding recruits; selection needs to rely on more than cognitive skills. Co-operation between teacher training institutions and schools is insufficient, induction programmes for starting teachers are not routine and systematic, and many lessons in secondary schools are still taught by unqualified teachers.

Over the course of a teaching career, participation in professional development is generally high, despite some barriers, but annual teacher appraisals are not yet routine. More importantly, most teachers do not work and learn in a collaborative culture, which is a real obstacle in the ambition for schools to become learning organisations. The teacher career structure is underdeveloped, and although the “functions mix” promotes greater salary diversity, conditions may not always be sufficiently attractive to draw highly qualified individuals into the profession. Both new and established teachers lack assessment and differentiated teaching skills.

*Recommendation 6: Building teacher professionalism calls for a life cycle approach, starting with effective initial selection arrangements and mandatory induction, and for promoting collaborative working and learning within and across schools.*

*Recommendation 7: Develop a teacher career structure that promotes greater salary and career diversity, is founded on clear competence standards and links appraisal to professional and school development goals.*

*Recommendation 8: Throughout initial training and subsequent professional development, give increased and sustained emphasis to differentiated teaching skills.*

*Develop a leadership strategy that promotes professional collaboration and a culture of continuous improvement*

The quality of school leadership is especially critical in the decentralised school system of the Netherlands, but has received relatively little policy attention. Leadership competences have been established for primary and secondary education, but they are fairly abstract. School leader salaries may not be sufficiently attractive, and although most school leaders have some type of leadership training, the induction of new school leaders is underdeveloped. School leaders play a key role in transforming schools into learning organisations, but this makes greater demands on school leaders in terms of their capacity to use data, undertake effective appraisals of teachers and promote a collaborative learning culture geared towards continuous improvement. Schools, and in particular poor performing schools, will need support if they are to develop into learning organisations. Strong school leaders are a precondition for achieving this objective.

*Recommendation 9: Develop a leadership strategy that promotes professional collaboration and a culture of continuous improvement that includes:*

- *Promotion of collaboration among school leaders, teachers and school boards and the linked development of a culture of continuous improvement.*
- *A mandatory national induction programme for school leaders that guarantees the quality of induction and mentoring support.*
- *Annual appraisals for all school leaders and personal development plans that are aligned to school goals.*
- *Continue building the capacity of school leaders and leadership teams to conduct school self-evaluations and provide support for schools to develop into learning organisations.*

*Enhance the accountability and capacity of school boards and rebalance their authority*

School boards have a key governance role and are highly diverse: some manage large school systems while others manage one small primary school. School boards suffer from some gaps in their capacity to appraise teachers and school leaders, manage finances, tackle the problems of the weakest schools or develop a strategic improvement culture. School boards also lack democratic accountability, and other forms of accountability are relatively weak. Competency standards for board members are often vague, performance appraisals of board members and annual reporting by boards are not routine.

*Recommendation 10: The accountability of school boards should be substantially improved by making their workings more transparent and opening up their operations to meaningful challenge.*

*Recommendation 11: Building on existing initiatives, systematically enhance the strategic leadership capacity of school boards and develop their professionalism. Rebalance the authority of school boards by giving more authority to school leaders.*





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