

Executive summary

Denmark's public school system (*Folkeskole*) is based on trust, local autonomy and horizontal accountability. Municipalities and schools are responsible for making decisions about how to use and allocate their resources. This provides good conditions for managing resources effectively and for making sure resource decisions meet local needs. At the same time, municipalities and schools are held accountable for and supported in the management of their resources. There is a high level of financial commitment to education. Expenditure per student has always been clearly above average expenditures in the OECD and the EU. Recent policies, however, have acknowledged that better learning outcomes for all students are possible without using more of society's resources on education. Concerning equity in funding, the Danish funding system entails explicit mechanisms for equalisation between municipalities and schools. The country's approach to funding municipalities reduces differences in financial capacity across municipalities. Within municipalities, the fact that students facing some kind of disadvantage need extra resources and follow-up is widely accepted and school funding mechanisms typically take socio-economic characteristics of a school's student body into account.

Despite sustained high investment in education and provisions to ensure needs-based funding for schools, Denmark has a relatively small share of top-performers and there is room to improve the equity of educational outcomes, especially for immigrant students. Against this backdrop, Denmark has been successful in building consensus around the need for change and in implementing a number of reforms. This includes a wide-reaching reform of the *Folkeskole* since 2014, focussing broadly on three main areas of improvement: a longer and more varied school day with longer and better teaching and learning; better professional development for teachers, pedagogical staff and school principals; and few and clear objectives as well as a simplification of rules and regulations. The reform set three national goals for student achievement, equity and wellbeing to provide a clear direction and framework for the systematic and continuous evaluation of the reform. The *Folkeskole* reform is paradigmatic of Denmark's recent goal-oriented approach to policy and reform which holds the potential to create a sense of common purpose within a highly decentralised school system as well as greater transparency about the success of reform initiatives. Other reforms include changes to initial teacher education, the introduction of a new framework for the utilisation of teachers' working hours (Act no. 409), and a policy of inclusion of children with special educational needs in mainstream education.

There is evidence of a growing willingness at all levels of the system to dialogue around pedagogical needs and to build on collaborative work to improve student achievement and wellbeing. However, the shift towards a culture of using data to improve student learning is still in its infancy. Teachers, school leaders and municipalities still face challenges in focussing on improved student learning and there is a need to strengthen the capacity of the

different actors to work in a goal-oriented way. Embedding a learning focus in practice is a major cultural shift that needs to be implemented through a range of changes, including the further development of several aspects of teacher professionalism that are still at an early stage of development in Denmark and the strengthening of pedagogical leadership in schools.

Based on its analysis of strengths and challenges, the report identifies the following policy priorities to improve the effectiveness of resource use in the Danish *Folkeskole*.

Continue to pay attention to using resources efficiently and strengthen public reporting about the performance of the school system

Developments in the *Folkeskole* over recent years have the clear potential to contribute to its improved efficiency and effectiveness. The 2014 *Folkeskole* reform aims to further strengthen the focus on learning environments and student performance. Prior to the reform, there was a reduction in expenditure per student and the reform introduces a longer school day for students without a symmetric increase in the number of teachers. The introduction of a new framework for the utilisation of teachers' working time (Act no. 409) has created greater flexibility for schools to use the time and competencies of their teachers. Whether the recent changes lead to greater efficiency and effectiveness will, however, depend on the ability of all actors in the system to use resources efficiently and to adapt to the changes the recent reforms imply. It will, therefore, be key to ensure that all actors continue to work intensively on using resources most effectively to improve student learning in relation to national goals. Knowledge-sharing across schools and municipalities will be particularly important in this regard. Considering changes to teachers' working conditions, strategies to develop and allocate human resources effectively in schools are crucial to ensure the success of the reform. For instance, if teachers do not have the right conditions to prepare and collaborate as they use more of their time on teaching, there could be risks to both quality and equity in schooling.

Denmark should also consider strengthening its reporting about the performance of the school system to the public at large at all levels of the system to build and sustain the overall consensus for investments in the *Folkeskole*. Denmark could develop a system-wide reporting framework that brings together a broader range of financial indicators and outcome indicators. The reporting framework could form the basis for the periodic publication of key national analytical reports in addition to the digital publication of the data (e.g. in the ministry's data warehouse). Municipalities and schools should make efforts to bring together and analyse data on the use of resources and outcomes. Municipalities should be encouraged to consider both financial and pedagogical dimensions in their biannual quality reports and to use data with a greater focus on the effective use of resources. Schools could benefit from a school-level reporting framework which enables them to examine the fiscal impact of their resource and curriculum decisions.

Give attention to all learning goals, monitor the learning outcomes of students at risk of underperformance and further support schools in striving towards excellence

A key challenge in monitoring education systems is to develop indicators and measures of performance that permit a good understanding of how well an education system is achieving its objectives. While national goals are typically comprehensive and broad, monitoring systems may be rather limited in the information they can offer. Schools should

be encouraged to supplement standardised national assessment tools with a range of other assessments to obtain relevant information on student learning across the curriculum and to use this information to design differentiated teaching strategies. The ministry could consider introducing broader national measures of student learning to monitor the school system's progress in stimulating students to excellence in higher-order thinking and the development of complex competencies (such as a light monitoring sample survey on a broader range of skills and competencies).

There is also room to give more prominence to monitoring inequities in learning outcomes between specific student groups. Education system targets could pay attention to the achievement of different student groups. It would be important to review how more targeted indicators for the achievement of equity goals could be included in the monitoring strategy for the *Folkeskole* reform. In particular, regular reporting of information on learning outcomes for groups for which there is evidence of systematic underperformance is recommended. Ensuring that key performance indicators in the ministry's data warehouse are systematically disaggregated for different groups at risk of underperformance would be helpful for monitoring equity goals at all levels of the system. Given the high investment in schools enrolling students from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds and students with special educational needs, municipalities and the school community should monitor how such funding is used in schools and how this translates into performance for students at risk of underperformance.

The *Folkeskole* reform aims to challenge all students to reach their full potential and to increase the number of high-performing students from year to year. A policy focused on achieving these ends must set high standards for achievement and would involve the use of differentiated approaches to teaching, assessment and evaluation to provide the right level of support and challenge to individual students, professionals and schools. Enhancing school evaluation practice would be key to continuously challenge all schools to improve and the national level could play a stronger role in stimulating more effective self-evaluation in schools and municipalities (e.g. through a national sample programme of external school reviews and/or a central evaluation framework to model good practice).

Promote the better use of data at all levels of the system

Information can only lead to school improvement if it is relevant, available in adequate quantity, and properly interpreted. As the Danish school system is highly decentralised, it is of key importance to address concerns of varying capacity among schools and municipalities to effectively use the available information. For municipal staff, this means developing the capacity to understand, interpret and make decisions based on evaluation and assessment data collected from schools and drawn from the data warehouse together with their own data on resource inputs. Municipal administrators must be able to use school reporting data to engage in meaningful discussion with their schools and school leaders. Ongoing resources should be set apart to make sure municipalities can play their supervision role to its full extent. For school principals and teachers, it means developing the capacity to collect and report data on school budgets and student outcomes to the school community and the municipality in effective ways. School leaders and educators need to be able to transform data into knowledge that meets their own needs and those of their different stakeholders. School leaders need to develop an inquiry habit of mind, become data literate and be able to create a culture of inquiry. Exemplars of good practice in data interpretation, analysis, reporting and communication should be provided nationally to schools and municipalities to

promote minimum requirements and municipalities should support their schools in using the available data.

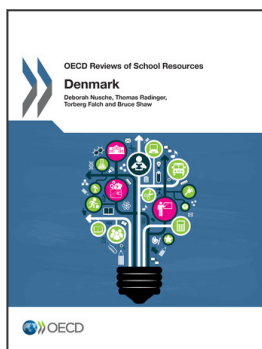
At the national level, it is important to invest in research to increase the number of experts capable to respond to future needs and to offer the best advice available from scientific knowledge. The ministry's initiatives to establish a learning consultant corps and to develop a data warehouse should be sustained and further developed. Both the ministry and Local Government Denmark (KL/LGDK), the association of Danish municipalities, have an important role to play in the management and dissemination of the knowledge and data required to analyse the relationship between inputs and outputs and the effectiveness and efficiency of policies and programmes, and to facilitate both horizontal and vertical connections within the system.

Develop a vision for teacher professionalism and further develop the school leadership profession

Many changes to the education system in Denmark have left teachers struggling with what it means to be an excellent teacher. To support teachers, school leaders and municipal leaders in understanding and supporting the implementation of these changes, Denmark should consider developing a national teacher profile, vision or standards of practice. A national teacher profile would communicate the new expectations regarding teacher practice and put the conditions in place for many of the changes of the *Folkeskole* reform to take shape. Teacher standards would help to provide a framework to guide the development of the profession as whole. They would establish a foundation for teachers to explore their practice and for schools to develop their improvement initiatives. In a decentralised system like Denmark, a national teacher profile could be particularly relevant to promote a common vision and shared expectations.

The effective monitoring and appraisal of teaching is central to the continuous improvement of schools. Denmark should, therefore, also strengthen formal teacher performance appraisal focused on the continuous improvement of teaching practice (e.g. through a low key and low cost process organised internally in schools with some form of external validation) and consider ways to strengthen informal feedback to teachers to improve their practice (e.g. by encouraging collaborative teacher activities in schools).

Both the ministry and the individual municipalities as the employers of school leaders should promote the further development of school leadership, including teacher leadership, in collaboration with the school leader association. The first step should be the creation of a framework to guide the work of school leaders. This framework should clearly focus on the pedagogical role of school leaders while recognising that successful school leadership is always context-dependent. The ministry should consider developing a more strategic approach to the training of school leaders that constitutes a continuum and is available at and targeted to the different stages of a school leaders' career. Opportunities for collaboration, coaching and mentoring between school leaders can also provide useful support and enable school leaders to gain new expertise. Further developing school leader performance management in municipalities is another area for possible policy development.



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