

Executive summary

The Estonian school system is high-performing and has accomplished significant achievements. Coverage rates in pre-primary education are high and participation in schooling is almost universal. Secondary-school attainment of the adult population is among the highest within the OECD area while the proportion of adults holding a tertiary qualification is above the OECD average. Also, the performance of students in international assessments at the secondary level is among the best in Europe in reading, mathematics and science and has improved significantly in the last few years. However, a significant proportion of young adults do not have a professional or vocational qualification and rates of completion in vocational education are low. Also, while at the secondary level students' socio-economic background has a smaller impact on performance in Estonia than in other OECD countries, there remain concerns about the performance of students in Russian language schools (in spite of some recent improvement).

Estonia has launched significant initiatives to improve the quality of the education system. These include adjustments to the mechanisms of school financing, the establishment of the Estonian Lifelong Learning Strategy 2020, the 2011 curricular reform in general education, the 2013 new standard for vocational education and the introduction of a new competency-based career system for teachers. In this dynamic policy context, there is an apparent desire to improve the use of school resources. This report analyses the use of resources in the Estonian school system, with a particular focus on the organisation of the school network, the funding of school education, school organisation and operation, and the teaching workforce. It identifies policy areas with potential efficiency gains or requiring further public investment.

The following policy priorities were identified to improve the effectiveness of resource use in the Estonian school system.

Further consolidate the school network

Estonia operates an extensive school network able to ensure full access to education. Especially, there is a strong emphasis on providing access to early education in rural areas. However, there is room to accomplish efficiencies in the Estonian school system. The size of the student population has contracted considerably while the sizes of the school network and the teaching workforce have not adjusted to the same extent. As a result, there are many small schools with small classes in Estonia. In this context, and given the current demographic, the further consolidation of the school network is inevitably a policy priority. Developing planning capacity, co-ordination mechanisms and inter-municipal collaboration is cornerstone to create a more efficient and equitable school network. This could be organised through regional planning platforms covering all levels of school education and involving all relevant stakeholders. Municipal co-operation could involve

the co-management of basic schools across municipalities, improving transportation services and the common use of various facilities. The consolidation itself may involve a range of different strategies. One possibility is to close or consolidate small schools, or reduce services within schools with due consideration to the costs and feasibility of different alternatives such as transporting students and housing them at boarding schools. Another possibility is that nearby schools share resources. A further possibility is the clustering of schools, which involves the conversion of several nearby small schools into satellites of one educational institution with a single leadership team and budget.

Also, the national government's policy of not allowing municipalities to create new schools that combine the teaching of primary and lower secondary education with Years 10-12 is to be supported. However, the implementation of the "recentralisation" of the management and funding of general upper secondary education, supported with the construction of new state-run *gymnasiums*, is faced with a number of challenges and needs to proceed with considerable caution. An option to be considered in order to consolidate the school network is the specification of a threshold class size or average school class size below which students would not be funded from the state grant, unless the school is identified as meriting "protection" in order to maintain student access in remoter areas. Within the extent of the state funding resulting from the regulated average minimum class size, school owners and schools would retain their autonomy on class organisation, including in deciding the actual size of specific classes within schools. This could possibly be assisted with extra resources coming from the school owner's own revenues.

Make vocational education a more attractive option and improve its efficiency

The Estonian government is adequately placing increasing emphasis on strengthening the mechanisms for the vocational education and training (VET) system to adjust to changing labour market needs. However, vocational education is faced with a number of challenges including its low status among students and parents, high drop-out rates and few opportunities for students to engage in work-based learning and apprenticeships. Improving the attractiveness and efficiency of vocational secondary education involves making programmes more relevant for the labour market and for regional development, further involving employers and improving student completion rates. A holistic strategy could combine: a funding approach that gives institutions more stability and better incentives to improve completion rates; improved career guidance for students; more committed engagement from employers, including with their contribution to the funding of VET; and ensuring regional development strategies are taken into account.

Target extra resources for students with special educational needs and Russian-speaking students

Though Estonia has a well-developed network of special education schools (SEN schools) and programmes, relatively little progress has been made in integrating children with special educational needs into regular classes in mainstream schools. The solution lies, in part, in increasing the financial support given to mainstream schools for SEN students. In this way, the national government should review the coefficients used to provide additional revenue to mainstream schools for teaching SEN students in both mainstream and special classes. These coefficients should make it possible for schools to hire well qualified teaching assistants to work in integrated classes. It is also important that funding for SEN students in mainstream schools is earmarked and that there are

effective ways to monitor its use to facilitate the integration of SEN students in regular classes. The expansion of effective inclusive education will also require SEN schools to enlarge their functions to support both SEN students being educated inclusively in mainstream schools and teachers providing inclusive education in these schools. The other key component of a strategy for inclusive education is adequately preparing teachers in mainstream schools to provide effective inclusive education.

Language acquisition problems clearly pose barriers to, and raise the costs of Russian-speaking students advancing through Estonia's education system. As such, they run against Estonia's commitment to equal opportunity and fair treatment. Language barriers are likely to distort the choice of upper secondary programmes by Russian-speaking students in favour of vocational programmes, and thus ameliorating the basis for this choice would probably improve the efficiency of the system as well. Hence, the national government should consider developing an earmarked grant designed to provide financial support to municipalities and schools for the additional hours of Estonian language instruction necessary to make Russian-speaking students proficient in the country's official language.

Promote school leadership through further professional support

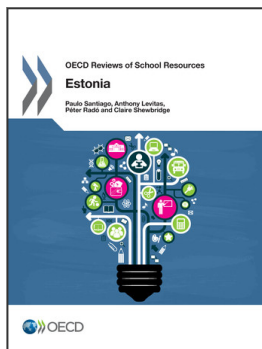
School leaders are recognised as a key resource and their professional development is considered crucial. This reflects the high levels of autonomy provided to school leaders in delivering the curriculum and managing resources. However, the position of “school leader” is perceived as unattractive and compensation is inadequate. Also, no systematic mechanism to provide professional feedback to school leaders is available. There is no central framework for school leader appraisal and appraisal is not mandatory. Hence, there is a clear need to make the school leadership position more attractive and this requires re-thinking of the school leader career and finding ways to make leadership positions more financially attractive. Steps in making the profession more attractive may include: a distinct career structure for school leadership (linking career progression to specific leadership responsibilities as underpinned in school leader professional standards); an independent salary scale for school leadership; and appraisal results to inform career advancement. Also, there is a pressing need to develop and ensure implementation of a regular and more coherent approach to school leader appraisal. The challenge is to develop appraisal processes, frameworks and conditions that do not require an excessive investment of time and effort, that serve as an effective tool for improving practices and that are perceived as useful and relevant by school leaders.

Enhance the use of teacher resources in the school system

In Estonia, there is considerable autonomy for the management of the teaching workforce at the local level. This is a strength in a system where schools are individually judged on their ability to improve student learning. Teacher appraisal processes internal to the school are established, include the observation of practices in the classroom and have an impact on the professional development of teachers. There are also indications that there is no inequitable distribution of teachers across schools and school locations. A positive development has been the introduction of a new competency-based teacher career structure but its potential is not being adequately used. At this stage it essentially remains a voluntary instrument to formally recognise teacher competencies and with no direct association with compensation and the specific roles performed at the school. Teacher professional development is well established even if its operation raises a number of

concerns such as its limited links to teacher appraisal and the insufficient relevance of programmes. Finally, the criteria used to establish teacher compensation, partly defined at the school level, lack transparency. In this context, it would be beneficial to make external periodic teacher certification a requirement for teachers using the existing competency-based career structure. The idea is that the certification process (alongside the competency-based career structure) is integrated, in ways to be defined by individual schools, in school-based approaches to human resource management. This would involve requiring schools and/or municipalities to design salary scales which recognise the competency-based career structure defined nationally. In parallel, the emphasis on school-based teacher appraisal, which is predominantly for teacher development, should be maintained and strengthened. A further priority should be to ensure the relevance of professional development programmes through their accreditation.

While there is a need to both ensure the continuous entry of new talent into the teaching profession and to constantly motivate in-service teachers, there is no need to increase the overall size of the teaching workforce. On the contrary, the needed school consolidation is likely to require a certain degree of teacher redundancy. This entails developing strategies for reallocating, redeploying and retiring teachers currently employed in schools who will be affected by school (or class) consolidation. Also, given that not a lot of new teaching posts are likely to be available in the coming years, it is clear that entry into preparation programmes can be much more selective to ensure only high-quality graduates fill the available teaching posts.



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