# Education and Socio-Economic Status - Estonian Case

## ABSTRACT

The research shows that the social and economic background of students plays a significant role in their educational outcomes – students from lower socioeconomic status families have a lower academic achievement compared to students from families with a higher socioeconomic status. The low socio-economic status, poverty as its extreme form and their effects on academic achievement are of crucial importance for education. Therefore, one of the main educational systems' roles is equipping students with the competencies necessary to achieve their full potential regardless of their social background.

It seems that Estonia with its high percentage of the population that lives in poverty and with the lowest number of low performers in PISA 2015 is very successful in providing equity in education. Moreover, the PISA 2015 results show that Estonia is above the EU average in the percentage of resilient students and shows favourable results regarding the relationship between parents' SES and achievement, which is weaker than the EU average. It can be observed that Estonia is an outstanding case, which is also the reason why this report is focused on the possible explanations for Estonia's success, with a special focus on Estonia's educational (and other) policies. The report assembles the information gathered through the policy questionnaire and study visit in six key messages (Take the autonomy you have and use it responsibly; Shared leadership is an important factor in creating an inclusive school environment; Strive for cooperative and supportive relationships and collaborative problem solving among all stakeholders connected to school and a favourable and positive school climate; Use students as experts, especially in terms of meaningful student involvement in school governance; Use extracurricular activities for enhancing creativity and students' potential; Screen students' and teachers' individual needs and interests at various points and levels in order to best support their potential) and one overarching key message being that universal policies and practices should be implemented in order to successfully tackle poverty in education and thus ensure greater equity in education.

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## INTRODUCTION

The collapse of socialist systems in Eastern and Central Europe and the last economic recession increased the poverty and inequality of the affected countries. The countries in transition are therefore faced with numerous challenges, such as increasing number of people living at risk of poverty and thus not achieving their full potential.[1] The countries involved the BRAVEdu (Breaking the poverty taboo: Roles and Responsibilities of Education) project (Slovenia (SI), Croatia (CR), Estonia (EE) and FYR of Macedonia (MK)) face numerous economic and social challenges, caused by transitions from socialist systems and by the long-term economic recession. The situation, regarding the number of people living at risk of poverty or social exclusion, is particularly grave, as the current data show (EE 24.4%[2], CR 27.9%[1], SI 18.4%[1], MK 21.9%[3]).

The PISA 2015[4] results confirm that a student's socio-economic status (SES) has a significant bearing on their performance, with those coming from low-SES households much more likely to be low achievers. However, the results also reveal that there is progress across Europe in reaching the EU benchmark of less than 15% of low achievers in PISA. Among the countries in the BRAVEdu project (and also among the countries included in PISA 2015), Estonia is performing especially well (for example: in science, the percentage of low achievers in EE is the lowest in Europe at 8.8%, SI is right at the benchmark level (14%), while CR is at 22% and MK 59%). In general, outcomes of the Estonian educational system could be regarded as very good in terms of participation rates (which are comparatively high at all levels of education)[5], the general level of education acquired (90% of 25-64-year-old Estonians have at least a secondary education,

[1] Braithwaite, J., Grootaert, C., & Milanovic, B. (2016). *Poverty and social assistance in transition countries.* Springer.

[2] EUROSTAT 2016

[3] WB 2016 (poverty rate)

[4] OECD (2016). PISA 2015 Results (Volume I). http://www.oecd.org/education/pisa-2015-results-volume-i-9789264266490-en.htm

[5] Santiago, P.; Levitas, A.; Rado,P. & Shewbridge, C. (2016). OECD Reviews of School Resources. Estonia. https://www.oecd.org/edu/school/Estonia%20-%20Summary%20-%20ENG.pdf

which is the highest result in the EU)[6] and quantitative study outcomes (Estonia is one of the best PISA performers in Europe as well as globally).[7]

What is more, in the field of ensuring equity in education, Estonia (EE) is again one of the exceptions. With a high percentage of the population that lives in poverty (Eurostat, 2016) the share of low performers in Estonia is one of the smallest not only among the countries included in the BRAVEdu project but also among the countries participating in PISA 2015[3]. These low performers are not necessarily the students from a low SES background. This result is in line with the percentage of resilient students - students who perform well, despite coming from disadvantaged backgrounds, which is very high (48% of students with a low-SES background achieved very high scores in science). In addition, the relationship between parents' SES and students´ achievement is weaker than the EU average (the home environment affects learning results very slightly, only 8%) and the performance gap between advantaged and disadvantaged students is smaller than the EU average.

The overall objective of the BRAVEdu project is to strengthen the capacity of schools to support disadvantaged learners from a low SES background in their active participation in school life and in achieving better learning outcomes. Therefore, the comparison between the latter EE PISA 2015 results (small differences in education outcomes that are associated with the SES of parents, high percentage of resilient students and small performance gap between advantaged and disadvantaged students) and the results in the same category by other countries participating in the BRAVEdu project provided the starting points of our research. Our analysis of the Estonian educational system was therefore based on two premises: (1) that the students' SES backgrounds play a significant role in their educational outcomes; therefore, one of the main educational systems' roles is equipping students with the competencies necessary to achieve their full potential,

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[6] Lees, M. (2016). Estonian education system 1990-2016. reforms and their impact. http://4liberty.eu/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/Estonian-Education-System_1990-2016.pdf

[7] European Commission (2017). Education and training monitor 2017. https://ec.europa.eu/education/sites/education/files/monitor2017-country-reports_en.pdf

regardless of their social background,[8] and (2) that the attitudes and beliefs of teachers have a direct effect on students' achievement and can support them independently of SES.[9] Based on the PISA 2015 results EE seems to be very successful in both areas. The aim of our research was, therefore, to define and analyse the policies and practices implemented in EE which could be the possible reasons for EE to reduce the effect of low SES on student achievement.

The structure of the report is organised as follows. Firstly, the EE educational system is described briefly, which is then followed by a description of the methodology used (policy questionnaire, focus group protocols). Some contextual information about equity in EE's educational, social care and health care system is presented afterwards. The central part of the report consists of the main findings from our desk research, policy analysis and study visit, which are grouped under six key messages developed within the partner consortium. The report is concluded with a comprehensive summary of the findings and condensed learning points and implications for the development of educational policies in other countries.

## ESTONIAN EDUCATION SYSTEM IN SHORT

According to participation rates, as well as PISA results, the Estonian education system is one of the best in Europe. Participation rates are comparatively high in all education levels[10], 90% of 25-64-year-old Estonians have at least a secondary education, which is the highest result in the EU[11]. Estonia is one of the best PISA performers in Europe, as well as

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8 von Stumm, S. (2017). Socioeconomic status amplifies the achievement gap throughout compulsory education independent of intelligence. Intelligence, 60, 57-62.

Walpole, M. (2003). Socioeconomic status and college: How SES affects college experiences and outcomes. The review of higher education, 27(1), 45-73.

White, K. R. (1982). The relation between socioeconomic status and academic achievement. *Psychological Bulletin, 91*(3), 461-481.; Yeakey, C. C. (2017).

The Power of Resistance: Culture, Ideology and Social Reproduction in Global Contexts. Emerald Group Publishing.

9 Solomon, D., Battistich, V., & Hom, A. (1996). Teacher beliefs and practices in schools serving communities that differ in socioeconomic level. The Journal of Experimental Education, 64(4), 327-347.; Sandoval-Hernández, A., & Białowolski, P. (2016). Factors and conditions promoting academic resilience: a TIMSS-based analysis of five Asian education systems. Asia Pacific Education Review, 17(3), 511-520.

10 Santiago, P.; Levitas, A.; Rado,P. & Shewbridge, C. (2016). OECD Reviews of School Resources. Estonia. https://www.oecd.org/edu/school/Estonia%20-%20Summary%20-%20ENG.pdf

11 Lees, M. (2016). Estonian education system 1990-2016. reforms and their impact. http://4liberty.eu/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/Estonian-Education-System_1990-2016.pdf

globally.[12] The PISA 2015 results showed that Estonian students are 1st in Europe and 3rd among all the participating countries, right after Singapore and Japan, in the field of science. 13.5% of students in Estonia are the top performers in science, which is higher than in previous PISA cycles. Moreover, more than 90% of Estonian students have at least a basic knowledge of science and there are only around 8% of students who are low performers in science. The similar situation is also represented in reading and mathematics (see results in Table 1 below).

*Table 1. Estonian PISA 2015 results*.[13]

| | **Average score** | **% of top performers** | **% of students with basic knowledge** | **% of low performers** |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Science** | 534 (OECD average: 493) | 13.4 (OECD average: 7.8) | 91.2 (OECD average: 78.8) | 8.8 (OECD average: 21.2) |
| **Mathematics** | 519 (OECD average: 493) | 14.2 (OECD average: 10.7) | 88.8 (OECD average: 76.6) | 11.2 (OECD average: 23.4) |
| **Reading** | 520 (OECD average: 490) | 11.1 (OECD average: 8.3) | 89.4 (OECD average: 79.9) | 10.7 (OECD average: 20.1) |

It is especially important to note that PISA 2015 revealed high equity in Estonian education, where almost half of the Estonian students from a low socio-economic background (48%) achieved very high scores in science, which puts Estonia in 1st place in Europe and 6th among the participating countries. PISA 2015 also showed that the home environment in Estonia affects learning results by only 8%.

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12 European Commission (2017). Education and training monitor 2017.

https://ec.europa.eu/education/sites/education/files/monitor2017-country-reports_en.pdf

13 OECD (2016). PISA 2015 Results (Volume I). http://www.oecd.org/education/pisa-2015-results-volume-i-9789264266490-en.htm

These results could be connected to some of the specificities of the Estonian education system, which is characterised primarily by decentralisation and autonomy. These characteristics are seen at all levels of the system and in all its aspects.

At the governance level, the responsibility is shared between the state, local government, and schools and it is clearly defined. The state sets national standards, establishes the principles of educational funding, supervision and quality assessment. Local governments maintain the preschool childcare institutions, the primary schools, the majority of the upper secondary schools, and some of the VET schools. The financing of the institutions depends on the ownership of the institution. The school leaders have the freedom to use the school budget as they see fit, including the adjusting of teacher salaries or the hiring of professional staff.

At the content level, the government sets the universal national outcome-based curriculum and school leaders are responsible for developing and implementing their school's individual curriculum. The schools are autonomous in creating their own curriculum as long as the outcomes defined at the national level are reached. The process of school curriculum development may vary between schools; however, it is most usually carried out in cooperation with teachers and in the context of a specific school.

The autonomy of teachers is another characteristic of the system, including the autonomy in the implementation of the curriculum. This is possible and reasonable, as the educational level of teachers is rather high; all preschool teachers must have a bachelor's degree whilst school teachers are required to have a master's degree.

Another specificity, especially in comparison to the countries of SEE (Southeast Europe), is that the Estonian educational policy is strategically planned and organised, which means that once in an approximately 5-7 year period policymakers, in cooperation with the educational experts and other relevant stakeholders, discuss thoroughly the main challenges and aims of the education system and compile a long-term policy document for the coming period which guides most of the specific policies carried out during that time. The document currently in effect is called "The Estonian Lifelong Learning Strategy 2014–2020" and

the policymakers have already initiated actions to start creating a new one which will be implemented from the 2020.

Regarding years in compulsory education, Estonia does not differ from other European countries greatly. Compulsory schooling applies to children from 7 years of age until they acquire a primary education or until they reach 17 years of age and it is provided by the state for free. However, local governments are obliged to provide all children aged 1.5 - 7 years, the possibility of attending a preschool institution, if their parents so wish[14]. There are two different forms of preschool institutions: the ones defined as educational institutions (i.e. early childhood education and care, hereinafter: ECEC) and the ones focused on the care dimension (i.e. early childhood care, hereinafter: ECC). The average participation rate among children who attend either ECC or ECEC (in all age groups) is 60%, however, there is a great difference between those younger than 3 where the average rate is 28% and the 3-7 age group where the participation rate is 92%[15]. The share of children participating in ECC is approximately 10% of all the children who are participating in the preschool childcare institutions[16]. Even though the share in ECC is quite small, the legal differentiation of ECC and ECEC is considered problematic by both researchers as well as by policymakers, which is why the unification process of these systems has been planned to begin at the end of the current year. It is important to note that the local governments have the right to seek an attendance fee from the parents, but not totalling more than 20% of the national minimum wage[17].

Finally, with Estonia being a global leader in digitalisation, it is no surprise that education records (i.e. both the individual-level-data oriented towards the families (e.g. the students' grades and the verbal feedback about the studies written by the teachers)) and the system-level-data oriented towards policymakers, public officials and researchers (e.g. the participation rates, study outcomes etc. at different study levels) are fully digitalised. This enables the families to be connected to their children's school

14 Local Government Organisation Act. RT I 1993, 37, 558. https://www.riigiteataja.ee/en/eli/506112013013/consolide

15 OECD Education at a Glance 2018

16 Themas, A.; Tarum, H.; Soo, K.; Reisberg, L.; Aksen, M.; Puolokainen, T.; Lauri, T.; Themas, E. (2015). Alushariduse ja lapsehoiu uuringu. Tartu: Tartu Ülikool.

17 Republic of Estonia Ministry of Education and Research. Pre-school education. https://www.hm.ee/en/activities/pre-school-basic-and-secondary-education/pre-school-education

life on the one hand and the researchers and policymakers to be able to monitor, analyse and strategically plan the system on the other hand.

# 1. METHODOLOGY

## 1.1.PROCEDURE

The approach chosen to research the possible reasons behind the low impact of SES on students' achievement in Estonia was an in-depth policy analysis and the conducting of interviews with the relevant stakeholders, altogether, a case study of Estonian good practices. In order to identify the key elements of Estonian education policy and educational system, which might reduce the impact of students' SES on achievement, two instruments were developed:

- o A policy questionnaire and
- o A protocol for focus groups and interviews.

Both were developed after the in-depth research of the literature in the field of equity in education, however literature from wider fields was also included in the research, especially the literature about other factors that might indirectly impact students' SES and that are not directly connected to the field of educational policies. The newly developed policy questionnaire was completed by researchers from PRAXIS (in February 2018), which is a leading socio-economic research centre in Estonia, through extensive and in-depth desk research. The study visit was conducted by the whole consortium; the focus groups were led by researchers from ERI and NEPC and observed by other partners while taking notes.

All the data gathered from the policy questionnaire, focus groups and interviews was subjected to peer review from the experts of participating institutions. Six key messages, which are based on the findings from the policy questionnaire and study visit focus groups, were developed inside the partner consortium. As our research is not an experimental study, we cannot claim that any of these are the reasons behind the Estonian success. Moreover, the key messages should be seen as a way of compiling and summarising the information gathered from the policy questionnaire, focus groups and interviews conducted within the study. The six messages were chosen in accordance with our purpose; to find the possible actions, which could be implemented in all the classrooms (schools) in our consortium, without any additional funding from the state (or elsewhere). Therefore, these messages are only focused on the school level policies, although, many more actions on the systemic level in

Estonia could have served as a better baseline for influencing equity related outcomes in our countries (see chapter 3.1).

## 1.2. MATERIALS

**The policy questionnaire**[18] covers an overview of different systems (educational, social care and health care), legislation, an overview of key stakeholders, different studies in the field of equity in education, general information about school policies, school responsibilities, cooperation between a school and other services, class activities, teacher education and teacher professional development, values in the society etc.

**The protocol for focus groups and interviews**[19] was developed to be used during focus groups and interviews with different stakeholders (political representatives, policy representatives, school leaders, teachers, students and parents). The protocol was designed in order to clarify and deepen the understanding of certain findings from the policy questionnaire. The protocol for focus groups and interviews covers areas of activities for students within the school, activities within the class, the teachers' professional development, cooperation between parents and students etc. Focus groups and open interviews were performed in March 2018 at the ministerial level and in one urban school and one rural school with teachers, leadership team and parents.

## 1.3. PARTICIPANTS

During the study visit, the study visit group composed of 15 members[20] performed focus groups and interviews with researchers in different areas and the representatives of different institutions, which were recognised by PRAXIS, as relevant

18 Veldin, M., Mlekuž, A., Haugas, S., Mägi, E., Jurko, S., Jurlina, P. & Santilli, P. (2017). BRAVEdu Policy Questionnaire. Available at

https://www.researchgate.net/publication/327557371_BRAVEdu_Breaking_the_Poverty_Taboo_Roles_and_Responsibiliti es_of_Education_Policy_Questionnaire

19 Jurko, S., Jurlina, P., Santilli, P., Veldin, M., Mlekuž, A., Haugas, S. & Mägi, E. (2018). BRAVEdu Focus Groups Protocols. Available at

https://www.researchgate.net/publication/327559131_BRAVEdu_Breaking_the_Poverty_Taboo_Roles_and_Responsibiliti es_of_Education_Focus_groups_protocols

20 Three representatives from Network of Educational Policy Centres and two representatives from PRAXIS,

Educational Research Institute, Forum for Freedom in Education, Foundation for Educational and Cultural Initiatives "Step by Step" – Macedonia, Primary School Dane Krapčev, Primary School Tišina and Primary School Vinko Žganec respectively.

stakeholders in the policy questionnaire. The interviewed stakeholders are below, however, some of them wished to remain anonymous and are therefore credited accordingly:

- o two schools, in the text, referred to as School A[21] and School B,[22]
- o two local level public officials,
- o a representative of an NGO (who is also a social science teacher),
- o representatives of the Estonian Student Body,[23]
- o Hanna Vseviov, Head of the Department of Children and Families in the Estonian Ministry of Social Affairs,[24]
- o Kristel Kubber, the coordinator of extra-curricular activities (in School A),
- o representatives of Foundation Innove,[25]
- o representatives of the Ministry of Education and Research,[26]
- o representatives of the Estonian Parents Association,[27]

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21 32nd High School (in Tallinn): It has 1,170 students and 100 teachers. It includes a primary school and high school; therefore, the students are aged from 7 to 18. It could be considered as an urban school. The students, teachers, school leaders and support staff were interviewed separately.

22 Ilmatsalu Basic School (near Tartu): It has 226 students and 25 teachers. It is a primary school and it is situated near Tartu. It could be considered as a rural school. The students, teachers, school leaders and support staff were interviewed separately.

23 By representing approximately 90,000 students from all-over Estonia, the Estonian Student Body is the biggest youth organisation in Estonia. The aims of the Estonian Student Body are to represent the interests and opinions of Estonian students in public, in relations with national institutions and at the international level, to develop cooperation between student representative organs, to contribute to such topics as raising educational quality, improving the study environment and increasing study motivation, etc. Reference: Estonian Student Body (s.d.). What is the Estonian Student Body? Retrieved from: http://opilasliit.ee/opilasliidust/mis-on-eoel

24 The objectives of the Ministry of Social Affairs emerge through compiling development plans for the fields under its control, as well as organisation-based development plans. It operates in the field of social security, where it has set five strategic objectives: to ensure people's economic prosperity and their good work; to ensure people's social coping and development; to support the well-being of children and families; to promote people's mutual care, equal opportunities, and gender equality; to ensure the people's long and high-quality life. Reference: https://www.sm.ee/en

25 The Foundation Innove promotes the sectors of general and vocational education, provides lifelong guidance through career and education counselling services through the nationwide Rajaleidja (Pathfinder) lifelong guidance network and mediates the European Union assistance. Innove is governed by the Estonian Ministry of Education and Research. Reference: http://haridusinfo.innove.ee/en

26 The Ministry of Education and Research develops Estonia's education, research, and language policy and youth field. The Ministry of Education and Research is responsible for the planning of education, research, youth and language related national policies and, in conjunction thereof, managing the fields of pre-primary, basic, general upper secondary, vocational secondary, higher, hobby and adult education, organising research and development activities, youth work and special youth work, and compiling the drafts of corresponding legal acts. Reference: https://www.hm.ee/en/introduction

27 The Estonian Parents Association is a politically and religiously independent non-profit organisation that aims are to appreciate children and parents and to support raising children in Estonian society (Reference: The Estonian Parents Association (s.d.). Who we are? What do we do? Retrieved from: https://laps.ee/kes-oleme-mida-teeme/)

- Maria Erss, lecturer of curriculum theory (in Tallinn University),
- Triin Lauri, an associate professor of public policy (in Tallinn University),
- Triin Ulla, lecturer of school pedagogy (in Tallinn University).

## 2. RESULTS

Firstly, the contextual information on educational, social and health care systems in connection with ensuring equity in education is presented. This is followed by a presentation of the Estonian value system and summarised findings from the study in the form of six key messages. Each key message is further explained initially by the theoretical background, which served as a basis for the questions in the policy questionnaire, focus groups and interviews protocols. Secondly, the concepts and trends underlying the key message, which are further defined in the Appendices, follow. Thirdly, each key message is supported by the evidence from Estonia, the findings from the policy questionnaire and focus groups and interviews. Each key message is concluded with the learning points and warnings, which are not based solely on the Estonian example but also on other literature researched within this topic.

## 2.1. CONTEXTUAL INFORMATION
## 2.1.1. EDUCATIONAL POLICIES ENSURING EQUITY IN EDUCATION

Educational policies in Estonia are defined in The Constitution of the Republic of Estonia,[28] Republic of Estonia Education Act,[29] Basic Schools and Upper Secondary Schools Act[30] and the Preschool Child Care Institutions Act[31]. Estonia is committed to ensuring equity in education especially by guaranteeing the uniformity of the schooling experience for all students.[32] Both the Constitution and Basic Schools and the Upper Secondary Schools Act mention the universal right to a quality education free of charge for all. For example, the Constitution articulates that *"everyone has the right to education. Education for school-age children is compulsory and [...] free of charge in general schools*

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28 The Constitution of the Republic of Estonia. RT 1992, 26, 349.

https://www.riigiteataja.ee/en/eli/530102013003/consolide

29 Republic of Estonia Education Act. RT 1992, 12, 192.

https://www.riigiteataja.ee/en/eli/524042014002/consolide/current

30 Basic Schools and Upper Secondary Schools Act. RT I 2010, 41, 240.

https://www.riigiteataja.ee/en/eli/513012014002/consolide/current

31 Preschool Child Care Institutions Act. RT I 1999, 27, 387.

https://www.riigiteataja.ee/en/eli/520122013003/consolide/current

32 NCEE. (2017). Estonia: Supporting Equity. http://ncee.org/what-we-do/center-on-international-education-benchmarking/top-performing-countries/estonia-overview/estonia-equity/

*[…]*", whereas Basic Schools and Upper Secondary Schools Act determines that *"general education of good quality is equally available for all persons regardless of their social and economic background, nationality, gender, place of residence or special educational needs."* Most of the social care measures are universal and aimed at providing equal study opportunities for all children, regardless of their background characteristics such as a free lunch and study books for all (see the detailed description under the social care system below).

Recently, Estonia implemented several policies explicitly aimed at ensuring equity in education in different areas, which are part of the Estonian Lifelong Learning Strategy 2014-2020. The general goal of this strategy is to

> "provide all people in Estonia with learning opportunities that are tailored to their needs and capabilities throughout their whole lifespan, in order for them to maximize opportunities for dignified self-actualization within society, in their work as well as in their family life." [33]

This strategy guides the most significant developments in the area of education, including the ones that are equity oriented. These recent policies are: (1) shifting the general educational programmes[34] by improving the quality of general education[35], (2) improving the study and career consulting programme[36] by providing children and young people with a study and career consultation service[37], (3) consolidating the school network[38] by guaranteeing every capable young person an opportunity to

33 Ministry of Education and Health. (2018). Estonian Lifelong Learning Strategy 2020. Retrieved from

https://www.hm.ee/en/estonian-lifelong-learning-strategy-2020

34 Republic of Estonia Ministry of Education and Research. Üldharidusprogramm.

https://www.hm.ee/et/uldharidusprogramm

35 The aim is to guarantee that everyone can acquire good quality education and to reduce the drop-out rates in general education.

36 Republic of Estonia Ministry of Education and Research. Õppe- ja karjäärinõustamise programm.

https://www.hm.ee/et/oppe-ja-karjaarinoustamise-programm

37 Other aims are the coordinating and guaranteeing of accessibility to a study and career consultation programme, developing educational support services and guaranteeing their quality, informing people about the services and opportunities for studying.

38 Republic of Estonia Ministry of Education and Research. (2017). Koolivõrgu programm.

https://www.hm.ee/et/koolivorgu-programm

acquire high-quality *gymnasium*[39] education and (4) supporting students with special needs[40] where the Ministry of Education and Research has initiated a change in the Basic Schools and Upper Secondary Schools Act to improve access to support for students with special needs, regardless of the type of school or school ownership[41]. The Ministry of Education and Research has also proposed that additional support should be provided to municipalities to increase access to support personnel in schools.

## 2.1.2. SOCIAL CARE SYSTEM AND HEALTH CARE SYSTEM: HOW THEY SUPPORT EQUITY IN EDUCATION

### Social care system

Compared to other OECD countries, Estonia has one of the smallest social spendings (17.4% of GDP vs. OECD average 21% of GDP)[42] and both income inequality[43] and poverty rates [44] are higher than the OECD and the EU average. According to the Social Welfare Act[45], the responsibility of providing social welfare is divided between the Ministry of Social Affairs, the county governors and the local governments. The main state actor is the Ministry of Social Affairs, who is responsible for organising development plans in the fields of health care, labour, social security, children and families, and equal treatment.[46] Local government, on the other hand, is the main agent

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39 Other aims of this policy are guaranteeing primary schools near the students' homes, providing students with (highly) special needs with renovated school houses ("schoolhouses" or "premises"?), preparing the environment where the municipal schools are ready to include the students with (minor) special needs in the conventional study process.

40 Ministry of Education and Research (2017). "Tähtsamad Tegevused 2017/2018. õppeaastal. (Most Important Activities in Study Year 2017/2018)." Ministry of Education and Research. https://www.hm.ee/sites/default/files/2017-2018-oppeaasta_tegevused.pdf.

http://www.innove.ee/UserFiles/Riigieksamid/2016/Statistika%20veebilehele/eesti_keele_teise_keelena_riigieksam_2016_veebi(2).html.

41 The draft of the proposed change focuses on the provision of more individualised support (dismantling the diagnose-based approach); also, the establishment of special classes and groups has been made more flexible.

42 OECD (2018). Social spending (indicator). https://data.oecd.org/socialexp/social-spending.htm

43 OECD (2018). Income inequality (indicator). https://data.oecd.org/inequality/income-inequality.htm

44 OECD (2018). Poverty rate (indicator). https://data.oecd.org/inequality/poverty-rate.htm#indicator-chart

45 Social Welfare Act. RT I 1995, 21, 323. https://www.riigiteataja.ee/en/eli/530062015001/consolide

46 Republic of Estonia Ministry of Social Affairs (2018). Activities and objectives. https://www.sm.ee/en

responsible for guaranteeing the availability of social services in places.[47]

The social care system supports students in many ways. Some measures depend on a student's socio-economic background, their place of residence (municipality) and their level of studies, but some are provided for all students, regardless of the aforementioned criteria, for example:

o *Measures for all of the students:* Psychological help, speech therapy, transportation between home and school and school lunch are available for every student who needs it. A free school lunch has been provided for all primary school students since 2006 and for upper-secondary students since 2015.[48]

o *Measures differentiated by the level of studies:* Free study books, study papers and textbooks are provided for all primary school students, whereas at least study books are provided for free to all upper secondary school students (since 2007).[49]

o *Measures differentiated by the municipalities:* Many local governments offer students free morning porridge, financial support for families who need it[50] and one-time financial support at the beginning of child's schooling path (going to the 1st grade). As a rule, the latter benefit does not depend on a family's SES, but its amount may vary greatly between the municipalities (e.g. 320 euros in Tallinn, but only 50 euros in some municipalities in South-Estonia).

### Health care system

Estonia has **a dual health care system.** On the one hand, there is the executive power, represented by the Ministry of Social Affairs and its agencies, which have almost complete responsibility for the designing and supervising of the system and its policies. On the other hand, there are direct service providers, either

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47 Long term perspectives of the Estonian social welfare system: sustainability of the municipal social welfare as a key question. http://oeiax4.nw.eenet.ee/esso4/20204.pdf

48 Lees, M. (2016). Estonian education system 1990-2016. reforms and their impact. http://4liberty.eu/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/Estonian-Education-System_1990-2016.pdf

49 Republic of Estonia Ministry of Education and Research. Põhikooliõpilased saavad tasuta õppevahendid. https://www.hm.ee/et/uudised/pohikooliopilased-saavad-tasuta-oppevahendid

50 Lees, M. (2016). Estonian education system 1990-2016. reforms and their impact. http://4liberty.eu/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/Estonian-Education-System_1990-2016.pdf

institutions such as hospitals or persons such as family physicians, who operate autonomously as legal persons governed by private law.[51]

The cornerstone of Estonian health care system is the **compulsory solidarity-based insurance**. This means that health care services are provided for free (or almost free) to people who are insured by their employer (workforce), by the state (mothers or fathers currently on parental leave, registered unemployed people) as well as those who are in one of the following categories: children up to 19 years, pensioners, vocational and higher education students who are permanent residents of Estonia. Health care is financed from the Estonian state budget through the means of the Estonian Health Insurance Fund. [52] Compared to other OECD and EU countries, Estonia's **public spending on health care is rather small** (6.7% of GDP in Estonia; OECD average is 9%; EU average is 8.6%).[53]

All the conventional health care services are provided **free to all students**, regardless of their background characteristics, place of residence or level of studies. In addition, students up to 19 years old receive free dental care. For the students in primary schools and *gymnasiums*, additional **free school health care** service is provided in order to offer quick and necessary treatment, to prevent diseases, and to cultivate healthy lifestyle habits among students.[54]

### 2.1.3. VALUE SYSTEM

The general prevailing consensus is that education and the acquiring of knowledge have been historically valued in Estonian society.[55] There has been a high proportion of educated people in Estonia throughout history and, for instance, the former president of Estonia Toomas Hendrik Ilves has said that "Education is the religion of the Estonians" and "The most

51 Eesti Haigekassa (s.d.). Healthcare management system in Estonia.

https://www.haigekassa.ee/en/kontaktpunkt/healthcare-management-system-estonia

52 Eesti Haigekassa (s.d.). Financing of health care. https://www.haigekassa.ee/en/kontaktpunkt/healthcare-

management-system-estonia/financing-health-care

53 OECD (2018). Health spending (indicator). https://data.oecd.org/healthres/health-spending.htm

54 Eesti haigekassa (s.d.). Koolitervishoid. https://www.haigekassa.ee/inimesele/arsti-ja-oendusabi/koolitervishoid

55 Henno, I., Reiska, P. (2012). Estonian success in PISA – what are the reasons behind that? Tallinn University.

important capital today is knowledge and skills."[56] Historically Estonia was successful in terms of education. Under Swedish rule in the 17th century there were already public schools in Estonia and at the end of 19th century, Estonia had one of the highest literacy rates in Europe. Moreover, Maria Erss, a researcher interviewed during the study visit, thinks that the equity in education in Estonia is not only the result of educational policies but also a result of the cultural background and the whole attitude towards education since it is something valued and desirable. Furthermore, the study visit group perceived that in general among the stakeholders we talked to there is an ethic of hard work and a belief in education as a tool to use for a small country like Estonia to prosper. This was further confirmed by Triin Lauri, also a researcher, who was interviewed during the study visit, who sees education as a religion in Estonia and emphasises that the importance of an individual is emphasised and that each individual feels the responsibility of doing well and working hard.

Moreover, education in Estonia is indeed considered as a way out of poverty in general. There are no known surveys regarding this issue but the study visit group perceived that this seems to be the prevailing attitude in society in general, which was confirmed by representatives of the formal institutions interviewed. For example, a representative of Statistics Estonia wrote in one of her papers that "A person can get out of poverty only through education and/or retraining, by building their skill-set, improving their performance and getting a well-paid job."[57]

As Estonians generally "believe" in education and that everyone has the opportunity to get out of poverty by educating him-/herself, society's overall attitude to equity seems to be supportive. One study that focused on the political culture in a broader sense (i.e. values and attitudes prevailing in society) demonstrated that Estonians are not hierarchically minded, but rather support liberal ideas about individuality, everybody's opportunities to achieve and become successful and everybody's

56 Ilves, T.-H. (2015). Independence Day speech by Estonian President Ilves. Estonian World.

http://estonianworld.com/opinion/independence-day-speech-estonian-president-ilves/

57 Laes, T.-L. (). The individual and social nature of poverty. Statistics Estonia.

file:///C:/Users/Sandra/Downloads/IV%20The%20individual%20and%20social%20nature%20of%20poverty.pdf – URL to personal PC file.

equality in terms of people's positions.[58] In Estonia, it seems to be very "natural" to believe that education should be provided equally (equality in opportunities rather than equality in outcomes).

58 Kalev, L.; Jakobson, M.-L.; Saarts, T. (2012). Eesti poliitiline kultuur: alusväärtused. Riigikogu Toimetised.

https://rito.riigikogu.ee/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/Eesti-poliitiline-kultuur-

alusv%C3%A4%C3%A4rtused.pdf

## 2.2.    KEY MESSAGES

The most evident (and at least to the project group also surprising) feature of the Estonian education policy regarding equity in education was that there are **no special measures meant solely for students from lower socio-economic environments** and that **all measures** that could help students from low socio-economic background are **available to all students** (e. g. free meals, school supplies present in the classroom all the time, etc.). Moreover, the study visit group observed that at the school level no records about the SES are collected. Interviewed teachers claimed that poverty and low SES are not something that would be highlighted when talking about the effects on students' achievements and that their approach to students is the same regardless of their SES. These observations are in line with the European Commission's study on national policies in the field of child poverty, where it is stated that Estonia's approach to tackling this problem is so-called "progressive universalism", where overall measures are designed to benefit all children, while supplementary initiatives provide extra support for certain (vulnerable) sub-groups.[59] Furthermore, the PISA 2012 analysis of equity in educational systems shows that countries with a weaker relationship between achievement and SES, which includes Estonia, apply universal policies in order to raise standards for all students.[60] These countries focus on improving the overall quality of educational resources and make them available to all schools and all students. By doing so, they target different sources of inequity, such as a disadvantaged socio-economic background, immigrant status or a non-favourable family structure.

These findings can be linked to Kislev's[61] comparative survey of targeted educational policies and universal educational policies for immigrants, in which he showed that universal educational policies are much more effective than targeted policies since educational achievement is strongly affected by social exclusion, which could be a consequence of targeted policies. Moreover,

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59 European Commission. (2014). Investing in children: Breaking the cycle of disadvantage. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union.

60 OECD. (2013). PISA 2012 Results: Excellence through Equity: Giving every student the chance to succeed (Volume II). PISA: OECD Publishing. http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264201132-en

61 Kislev, E. (2016). The effect of education policies on higher-education attainment of immigrants in Western Europe: A cross-classified multilevel analysis. Journal of European Social Policy, 26(2), 183-199.

many studies show that targeted policies are not effective in terms of tackling poverty, due to the extremely high administrative costs of precisely identifying the poor.[62] Additionally, there is evidence from poor countries, which were able to significantly reduce poverty by implementing universal policies in the field of social provision.[63] In reality, however, the countries (especially the successful ones) mainly implement universal policies, while the targeting approach is less used mainly to make the universalism more effective, meaning that extra benefits are directed to low-income groups within the context of universal policy design.[64]

In the present report, we will try to point out the observed targeted and universal policies and practices in Estonia that could be some of the possible reasons for Estonia's weak relationship between PISA achievement and SES. In order to summarise the findings from the policy questionnaire and study visit the study visit group developed six general key messages, which could be applied to all schools and classrooms trying to improve the well-being and outcomes of students with low SES background, regardless of the educational system. **The key messages developed within this report are believed to be more effective if all basic needs of students are addressed irrespective of the students' SES (without labelling certain students as students with a low socio-economic background), meaning that universal mechanisms should be implemented (at least) at the school level. With all this in mind, we can conclude that the overarching key message of this analysis would be: Implement universal policies and practices to successfully tackle the poverty in education and thus ensure greater equity in education.**

62 Mkandawire, T. (2005). Targeting and universalism in poverty reduction. Geneva: United Nations Research Institute for Social Development.

63 Ghai, D. (ed.). 1999. Social Development and Public Policy: A Study of Some Successful Experiences. Palgrave Macmillan, Houndmills.; Mehrotra, S. and R. Jolly (eds.). 1997a. Development with a Human Face: Experiences in Social Achievement and Economic Growth. Clarendon Press, Oxford.; Mehrotra, S. and R. Jolly (eds.). 1997a.1997b. Social Development in High Achieving Countries: Common Elements and Diversities. Clarendon Press, Oxford.

64 Mkandawire, T. (2005). Targeting and universalism in poverty reduction. Geneva: United Nations Research Institute for Social Development.

# TAKE THE AUTONOMY YOU HAVE AND USE IT RESPONSIBLY

**Theoretical background:**

Data from PISA 2012 show that systems, where schools have more autonomy over curricula and assessment, tend to perform better overall[65]. This can also be concluded from older PISA results[66, 67], which show that in the systems where autonomy is more common students achieve better results in science, even after accounting for the socio-economic background factors and other school- and system-level factors. The results show that greater autonomy has a general impact on the system level, considering that students' achievements are higher regardless of their enrolment in a more autonomous or less autonomous school in systems with overall higher autonomy, where school leaders can be more independent in their responses to local conditions.

Moreover, Pearson's and Moomaw's[68] survey has shown that as curriculum autonomy increases, teachers' on-the-job stress decreases and as general teacher autonomy increases, their motivation, empowerment and professionalism increase. All these factors result in a better and more inclusive school climate, which is favourable not only for low SES students but for other students as well.

<div align="center">

**Concepts and trends underlying this message**
**Autonomy, responsibility/accountability**

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65 Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (2013). PISA 2015 collaborative problem-solving frameworks. Retrieved from http://www.oecd.org/pisa/pisaproducts/pisa2015draftframeworks.htm

66 Bishop, J., Mane, F., & Bishop, M. (2001). How external exit exams spur achievement. Educational Leadership, 1(59), 58–63.

67 OECD. (2007a). Education at a glance: OECD indicators 2007. Paris: Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. www.oecd.org/dataoecd/4/55/39313286.pdf

68 Pearson, L. C., & Moomaw, W. (2005). The relationship between teacher autonomy and stress, work satisfaction, empowerment, and professionalism. Educational research quarterly, 29(1), 38-54.

**Autonomy in creating school curriculum**

In Estonia, the national curriculum for primary schooling (as well as for *gymnasium*) is created and developed by the Ministry of Education and Research. Several stakeholders, such as experts, the representatives of teachers etc., may participate and contribute to the development process. After the Ministry of Education and Research has designed the curriculum, the Government of the Republic approves it. The national curriculum serves as a broad framework, which defines general education aims, the length of studies, a list of mandatory subjects, the requirements regarding the stages of study and school graduation etc.

The actual studies in a school are based on the school's individual curriculum. Every school must create its own curriculum, which is based on the national curriculum.[70] Several school institutions, such as the student council, teachers' council and the board of trustees are incorporated into the curriculum construction process. Schools (teachers and school leaders) have the freedom to choose the study content and teaching methods. In school curriculum values, distinctive features, teaching and educational goals of the school need to be presented, moreover, among other things the school curriculum sets the organisation of studies, the activities planned for diversifying the environment of study, the procedure for the choice of topic (supervision, drafting, assessment), the organisation of supporting and assessing the development and learning process of students, the principles of the organisation of studies for students with special educational needs, the procedure for implementing support services, the arrangement of notifying and counselling students and parents, the procedure for updating and amending the school curriculum, the descriptions of the learning outcomes and the contents of the study of subjects are set out by subject areas and grades etc.[71] Nevertheless, the

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69 More on autonomy in Estonia: Erss, M., Mikser, R., Löfström, E., Ugaste, A., Rõuk, V., & Jaani, J. (2014). Teachers' views of curriculum policy: The case of Estonia. British Journal of Educational Studies, 62(4), 393-411.; Erss, M., Kalmus, V., & Autio, T. H. (2016). 'Walking a fine line': teachers' perception of curricular autonomy in Estonia, Finland and Germany. Journal of curriculum studies, 48(5), 589-609.

70 International Bureau of Education. (2001). The development of education.

http://www.ibe.unesco.org/International/ICE/natrap/Estonia.pdf

71 School curriculum. (2016). https://www.eesti.ee/en/education-and-research/general-education/school-curriculum/

school must strive to achieve the outputs defined by the national curriculum. This means that a school's freedom to choose the study content and teaching methods is only limited by achieving the outputs defined by the national curriculum. However, according to the school leadership team in School A primary schools have less freedom in adding their own content when designing their school curriculum than upper secondary schools.

An example of creating school curriculum in School B: Despite the fact that School B has no obligation to change the school's curriculum at this point, the leaders of the school are using their autonomy to adapt the pedagogical/study methods and, thus, have decided to initiate a change in the school's curriculum, in which the school has set the integration of different subjects (e.g. teaching maths and physics in the same lesson) as a new teaching and educational goal of the school.

### Autonomy of school leaders

Estonian school leaders are relatively autonomous. They have the authority to make decisions about school finances, staff, the working conditions, education priorities and development plans for the school.[72]

In both schools, school leaders claim that they are in charge of designing the school's budget that has to be balanced. The leader in School B, for example, said:

> "The head must make sure that the house is functioning – the heating, the repairs and so on. There is more freedom in the pedagogical part of budgeting."

In School A the school leader said that she can also influence teachers' salaries, however, with the explanation and that she has the freedom to employ teachers and the rest of the staff.

### Teacher autonomy

Estonian teachers' autonomy is quite comprehensive. As long as the outputs defined by the national curriculum are achieved, the teachers are free to choose the study content and methods themselves, this means that the teachers have the freedom to choose the specific study methods and content while keeping in mind that the outputs determined in the national curriculum will be achieved. Moreover, the teachers in both schools included in the study visit, do not need to provide a daily lesson plan or

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72 OECD (2016). Estonia. https://www.oecd.org/pisa/PISA-2015-estonia.pdf

annual work plan. What is more, teachers at both schools claim that they are free to choose textbooks or to not use textbooks at all if they so wish. The study visit group observed that teachers at both visited schools are very independent and confident in the field of preparing for their lessons, they all expressed that the school leaders trust them with carrying out the school curriculum and with the teaching methods that they use. One of the teachers in School B, for example, said:

> *"School leader trusts us/the teachers/that we will teach the students according to the school curriculum and that we will achieve the set goals."*

With this comment the teacher implied the relationship between teacher autonomy and school leadership, which Maria Errs highlighted during the focus group interview. To be specific, she discussed teacher autonomy in light of the quality of school leadership:

> *"When teachers have more autonomy, they are more motivated to try different approaches to teaching. Less autonomy is certainly very demotivating for teachers. But, of course, autonomy itself is not enough. Therefore, I prefer the concept of agency. Teachers need the supportive environment, resources, specific tools to implement these ideas – if they don't have these and the headmaster says 'Well, you have autonomy', this is not enough. It has to come with the package of the whole support which very much depends on the quality of the school's leadership."*

## KEY MESSAGE #1:
## TAKE THE AUTONOMY YOU HAVE AND USE IT RESPONSIBLY

### KEY CONSIDERATIONS

### Choose what type of teacher you want to be

(Even in centralised organisational structure) Teachers and professional staff members may nurture an inclusive culture at the classroom level in designing teaching methods (i.e. use contextualised teaching methods, differentiated instruction etc.) and in establishing supportive relationships with students.

### Define what autonomy means

School autonomy needs to be adequately defined by policymakers and supported by the school leadership to enhance the responsible use of autonomy.

Supporting school autonomy primarily means to develop school capacities in practising autonomy in order to avoid significant differences among schools.

### Autonomy and academic achievements

Autonomy in creating the curriculum does not necessarily result in high academic achievements. This has to be done in combination with structural learning and other factors influencing student achievement.[73]

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73 Maria Erss during focus groups interviews.

# INCLUSIVE SCHOOL ENVIRONMENT REQUIRES SHARED LEADERSHIP

**Theoretical background:**

In recent studies on school leadership shared leadership or distributed leadership, participative decision-making and shared responsibility are emphasised in creating a positive school climate.74 Shared leadership is seen as a strategy for responding to learners' diversity, due to the fact that such leadership implements an interactive process between school leaders, teachers and students, and enables the participants to construct meanings that lead toward a common purpose about schooling75.

**Concepts and trends underlying this message**
**shared leadership, inclusive education**

→ **Evidence from Estonia**

**The development of school curriculum:**

In the process of creating a school's individual curriculum, based on the national curriculum (see KM1), several stakeholders and institutions are included. For example, the student council, teachers' council and the board of trustees are included in the curriculum construction process. The drafted curriculum is finally approved by the school leader. As the school curriculum is being drafted, it also takes into account the needs of the school's region, wishes, intellectual and material capabilities of the school's employees, the parents and the students.76 This is also the case in both schools, which were included in the focus groups. In School A, for example, all teachers are involved in the development of the school curriculum.

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74 Inclusivas, I. P. (2016). School Principals and Parents Who Achieve Optimum Results: Lessons Learned from Six North American Schools that have Implemented Inclusive Practices. Revista Latinoamericana de Educación Inclusiva, 10(1), 61-77.

75 Lambert, L., D. Walker, D.P. Zimmerman, J.E. Cooper, M.D. Lambert, M.E. Gardner, and M. Szabo. 2002. The constructivist leader. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.; Inclusivas, I. P. (2016). School Principals and Parents Who Achieve Optimum Results: Lessons Learned from Six North American Schools that have Implemented Inclusive Practices. Revista Latinoamericana de Educación Inclusiva, 10(1), 61-77.

76 School curriculum. (2016). https://www.eesti.ee/en/education-and-research/general-education/school-curriculum/

### School leadership

In addition to the school leader, who is in charge of the administrative and managerial activities (managing finance, cooperation with a supervisory body and the students' board, staff employment, responsibility for the school's quality assurance and development etc.), Estonian schools also employ a head or heads of studies who have the responsibility for teaching and learning within the school (for example, assuring that the school and national curricula are followed and also supervising teachers).

The wider school leadership teams at both schools included in the study visit were composed not only of a school leader and head(s) of studies but also of several other school staff, which is very greatly different to the school leaderships in the countries that the study visit group members came from, where there is only one person – a head leader – who holds the decision-making power in the area of pedagogy and school management. School A's leadership team is composed of:
- o Leadership: the school leader, the head of studies for $1^{st}$ to $9^{th}$ grade, the head of studies for $10^{th}$ to $12^{th}$ grade and the head of leisure.
- o The school's executive board consists of the school leader, both heads of studies, the head of leisure activities, the IT team representative and the housekeeper.

School B's leadership team is composed of:
- o Leadership: the school leader, the head of studies, the head of leisure activities; additionally, the social pedagogue, secretary and teacher for special needs are also very involved in the leadership process.

The study group found it surprising that some job profiles, such as housekeepers and secretaries, employed in Estonian schools are considered as part of the wider school leadership team, in contrast to their own countries.

To conclude, several teachers included in the focus groups stated that the school leadership trusts them to achieve the set goals (see KM1, Teacher autonomy). The study visit group also attributed this perception to the high level of cooperation and interaction between school leadership and teachers. Based on this, it was perceived by the study visit group that the Estonian

model, due to its shared responsibilities and the wide inclusion of different stakeholders at school, allows a more horizontal and pedagogically oriented approach to leadership without neglecting the management as opposed to the more narrow, hierarchical and managerial approach prevailing in the rest of the countries included in the project.

**KEY MESSAGE #2:**

# INCLUSIVE SCHOOL ENVIRONMENT REQUIRES SHARED LEADERSHIP

## KEY CONSIDERATIONS

### Share leadership according to expertise

To be effective shared leadership needs to be distributed by functions and expertise (i.e. the school social pedagogue could be responsible for the pedagogical process). This assumes a team in which everyone is responsible for his/her own area of expertise.

### Make decisions and find solutions through the whole school approach

The plurality of expertise and the high degree of responsibility and cooperation within the team will provide school policies that consider all aspects and 'voices' of school life.

### Define and discuss school values

School policies, procedures, as well as the behaviour of school staff and students, should be based on the common understanding of school values. School values should guide the decision-making process and relationships in schools. School staff should also be supported in raising their own awareness of how personal values may affect their own behaviour in school.

### Shared leadership needs a mediator

A school principal needs to build their own ability to lead the negotiations between all parties to reach a satisfactory compromise if there is no clear agreement among the rest of the leadership team.

# SUPPORT COOPERATION AND BUILD TRUSTING RELATIONSHIP AMONG SCHOOL STAKEHOLDERS

## Theoretical background:

Many empirical surveys have shown that warm and supportive relations with teachers are particularly beneficial and motivating for low-SES students.[77, 78] Moreover, the sense of school community obtained by building a caring and supportive environment, showed its strongest positive relationships with students' achievements in the high-poverty schools, which supports the premise that a caring, supportive and responsive school climate would be particularly important for students from a low socio-economic background. [79]

### Concepts and trends underlying this message
### positive school climate, cooperation

### → Evidence from Estonia:

Representatives of the Ministry of Education estimate that there is quite a large share of unhappy students since some schools lack student well-being. In order to tackle the problem, the Ministry has begun to assess/measure school climate – how students feel at school. This initiative demonstrates the importance for Estonian policymakers to address the question of student well-being in schools.

## Cooperation as a value

Based on Vihma's study[80] the most common formally declared value in schools was cooperation, which was the case for 89% of the participating schools, where almost two-thirds of the

77 Brophy, J. E., & Good, T. L. (1986). Teacher behavior and student achievement. In M. C. Wittrock (Ed.), Handbook of research on teaching (3rd ed., pp. 328-375). New York: Macmillan.

78 Solomon, D., & Kendall, A. J. (1979). Children in classrooms: An investigation of person-environment interaction. New York: Praeger.

79 Battistich, V., Solomon, D., Kim, D. I., Watson, M., & Schaps, E. (1995). Schools as communities, poverty levels of student populations, and students' attitudes, motives, and performance: A multilevel analysis. American educational research journal, 32(3), 627-658.

80 Vihma, P. (2017). Koolijuhid ja maailmaharidus. MTÜ Mondo. http://www.maailmakool.ee/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/koolijuhtide-uuring-2017.pdf

participating schools (67%) not only declared it as important but also implement and teach this value in practice. We can see that Estonian schools highly value cooperation, which is one of the key elements of supportive school environments and a positive school climate. For example, in School A the members of the leadership focus group, teachers and students attested that in the school mutual respect and peer-to-peer help are encouraged, which contributes to a school's positive climate and a school's values. Moreover, representatives of the Estonian Student Body think that teachers in Estonia are actively working to get to know their students' families, especially at the beginning of a student's educational pathway. They believe that the relationship between the students and a school's staff is very important. However, they feel that the interactions between teachers and parents are not as active as they could be and, thus, these relationships should be fostered.

### Support staff

According to the law, social aid, psychological aid and study aid personnel are available for all students.[81] Also available is a school health professional, who informs a student's parents about the necessity of a student to visit the family physician and dentist regularly. A school's health professional is also the mediator in case of an already emerged illness, by sending a student for further medical control, by calling an ambulance when necessary and by informing parents of all these kinds of cases. A school's health professional also has the obligation of notifying a student's parents, family physician, school leader and, if necessary, the Health Board if there is the suspicion of an outbreak of a contagious disease. The post is financed by the social department. This professional is not physically present in every school, however, the service is guaranteed in each school (some health professionals visit different schools). In both visited schools, a head of leisure activities is additionally employed (more detail about this in KM5).

### Inclusion of parents

Parents are included in school life through both school-level- as well as class-level-meetings. The first ones focus on the discussions about general school-related issues and plans, and

81 Basic Schools and Upper Secondary Schools Act. RT I 2010, 41, 240.

https://www.riigiteataja.ee/en/eli/513012014002/consolide/current

the second ones are oriented towards specific issues about the class a student attends. Schools are increasingly trying to include parents in the education process because doing so has shown to be an effective method of reducing early school leaving[82]. Parents are informed of changes to the curriculum, methodology etc. and, in some cases, are invited to contribute to discussions regarding education, the well-being of students (physical and mental health, sexual harassment, bullying), at school. Despite the fact that there lacks evidence to prove it, there are implications that in some public schools parents are included in supporting the school financially as well.

Example from School A: Teachers in this school try to create and develop caring relations in the class, between all students in the school (also through peer support) and with parents. They organise in-school training for parents on various topics. Teachers report that the parents are more involved in school life in primary school – the school organises various events or some other activities when parents are invited to the school.

In School B they conducted their own study, asking the parents about the well-being of the students. It focused on the curriculum and the satisfaction of the parents and students with the school. The survey showed that the parents' and students' views were similar. The parents were satisfied with the direct contact with the school's staff, as this is a small school, it meant that they were able to approach the teachers or certain problems immediately and directly. However, more hobby activities were requested in the afternoons, so that their children would be able to attend all of them. The school tries to include the parents in school life: parents occasionally deliver lessons on specific topics, help during the celebrations and participate in other similar activities. Moreover, parents are free to come to the school whenever they wish (e.g. they can visit lessons, talk to the teachers etc.).

Nevertheless, the parents' and school's perceptions of how much the school is inclusive may differ; for example, parents' associations in Estonia feels that parents should be able to

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82 School Education Gateway (2015). Lapsevanemate ja kohaliku kogukonna kaasamine haridussüsteemist varakult lahkujate vähendamiseks.

https://www.schooleducationgateway.eu/et/pub/practices/involving_parents_and_local_co.htm

participate in the life of schools more, but the schools visited felt that they include parents in school life enough. [83]

## Support for teachers

The financing system for teacher training in Estonia was recently reformed and the Ministry for Education does not finance the schools directly (it finances the service providers) and the amounts are constantly changing. There is also the possibility that teacher training for schools is financed by the local government and then another system applies. It was observed that both schools provide support for teachers in several areas. Moreover, all stakeholders (representatives of government, researchers, school leaders and teachers themselves) see a teacher's professional development as a key element in providing support to teachers.

In School A the school had a budget of 4,000 euros annually for teacher training, however, it was not clear from the focus group interviews whether the ministry or the local government provided the finances. School A organises one to two teacher training sessions a year which all employed teachers must attend. In addition, half of the employed teachers are also included in several other teacher trainings. The support staff organises seminars, trainings and counselling for teachers. The psychologist organises several trainings for teachers on the following topics: communication skills, workshops for the teachers' self-analysis, on strategies to keep the students' attention, self-esteem, how to deal with teenagers, and how hot to spot the symptoms of depression. The support staff particularly emphasised that communication was the main problem and that they focussed upon it. Workshops are organised during the school day, once a week. Which of them are obligatory, is a decision made by the management. Teachers claim to like the training because they see this as an occasion to establish good relations with other colleagues and gain new knowledge at the same time.

In School B the management tries to organise in-service trainings according to the needs expressed in the teachers' annual development conversations (more detail about this in KM6). Moreover, a few years ago, special emphasis was placed

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83 Rajamets, M. (2014). Lastevanemate hinnangud enda osalusele lapse hariduse omandamisel Valga maakona linnade haridusasutuste näitel.

on special needs and special needs support, and the school organised several lectures and trainings in this field for teachers as well as team building events on this topic.

Teachers at both schools attested that they have good support from the support staff in the respective schools in the field of teaching children with special needs and teaching children who have problems.

It was observed at both schools that apart from the teachers' professional development their general well-being is also considered important. In School A, for example, a yoga class for teachers is organised by the school. This is especially important to develop friendly and supportive relations among school staff, which is very beneficial for a positive school climate.

For School B the members of the study visit group perceived that relationships between teachers are warm and supportive. Teachers in this school said that if they have problems or they feel stressed they discuss the issues with their colleagues:

> "We get together; we sit together, get a coffee and talk. We are a small school and everyone knows each other."

An example of a supportive relationship among school staff at School B was the case when the youngest teacher in the focus group needed a mentor to finish her studies and all the teachers in the school offered help:

> "I ended up with not needing one (mentor) because all of the teachers offered help. I was able to go to anyone and they helped me. I am really happy. For me, it could not have worked out better even if I would have had a formal mentor. People would step into my classroom and ask me, how are you, how is life treating you now?..."

### Support for students

In School A study help that can take place in the class during the lesson or in smaller groups out of the classroom is organised. Students, with more difficulties, can stay after school to have extra lessons. Each teacher also has a consultation time – one lesson a week. In this lesson, they help students who need extra help with their work or extra explanation of the subject matter (which is also linked to KM6). Peer support, where better

students help those with lower achievements, is also present and encouraged in the school. According to the interviewed students in School A, there are very friendly relationships between students and teachers. One of the students even said:

> "The teachers are just like friends to us. There is at least one teacher to whom we can always turn to."

Even if there are different specialists available, the teachers know the students better and they can have a more personal relationship. In this school, the support staff and teachers try to offer emotional support to students. When a problem arises, there is always a team tackling it - students work together with the leader of studies, social workers, teachers and the support staff (more about this under Collaborative problem-solving in this chapter). Students are encouraged to come to any of the teachers and/or support staff for help.

In School B study help for students is also available in a similar way as in School A (more detail about this in KM6). They also encourage peer support, which is sometimes also a part of the lessons. However, the teachers in School B emphasised that in order to best support the students it is important to nurture good relationships with them. This is the reason why students and teachers often go outside and have lessons in the countryside; they also spend a night in the school – all this allows them to see the students in a different light and in different roles, which enables them to understand their students better. One of the teachers said:

> "These activities strengthen the relationship between us and the students because the students can feel that the teacher has made an extra effort and put more energy into organising such activities."

## Collaborative problem solving:

During focus groups with the teachers, school leaders and support staff shared some examples of collaborative problem solving.

In School A the teachers said that they initially discuss issues with students between the teachers themselves. In the secondary school they discuss issues at regular meetings after each term, in the primary school, on the other hand, the

meetings are arranged only when there are problems. In such cases, the teachers, students and parents are present at the meeting and they try to find solutions together. The teachers especially emphasised the importance of communication between the teachers and parents. When serious problems arise, a psychologist and a social worker are included in the problem-solving team as well. Teachers provided an example of problem solving:

> "In most serious cases the class teacher, a psychologist, social worker, the parents and student get together at a meeting and try to discuss what the most serious issues with the student are. The student can also add how he or she sees the picture. And then they try to write down steps or a plan on how to proceed and what needs to be done to improve the situation. If the situation doesn't improve, they meet again and try to find another solution."

As observed at both of the visited schools, they try to find solutions for the emerged issues themselves or with the additional support from the local governments as the owners of the schools. For example, when a school discovers certain difficulties indicating special needs, they try to mobilise their own support staff. If the staff team is insufficient, or the school cannot manage the problems on its own, they seek help from the local government. The latter may organise further finances and/or recruitments to provide support (e.g. establishing special classes and/or individualised curricula) for students who need it at school. The overall logic is that the local governments create the opportunities and the schools' principles organise the service/measure. Where it is needed, a social pedagogue can establish cooperation with the local government, for the protection of the children's rights.

## School environment

It was observed that both of the schools visited had plenty of small corners (with pillows, chairs, tables etc.) for students to socialise during breaks. In School B, the children also sew the pillows on their own in a sewing class. All the doors were open, students could go to the gym (the older ones even unattended), the instruments (piano) were accessible, the children could go and play if they wished. Both schools were decorated with the students' paintings, photos, written texts etc.

In School A the staffroom was very comfortable, a place where teachers could relax and tal among themselves.

Moreover, there was no school bell in School B to signify the start and the end of the lessons, whereas in School A the school bell played different tunes (incl. thematic songs – at Christmas time Christmas songs etc.).

The members of the study visit group concluded that all these examples of a warm and welcoming school environment are also very important in building an overall supportive and inclusive school climate, where students and school staff could feel at home.

# SUPPORT COOPERATION AND BUILD TRUSTING RELATIONSHIP AMONG SCHOOL STAKEHOLDERS

## KEY CONSIDERATIONS

### Share knowledge and experience

School leaders, teachers, professional support staff and parents should be encouraged to actively participate in school life through peer learning, common work on the challenges that a school may face. A collaborative approach to problem solving instead of compartmentalised and secluded approach would provide a more appropriate and successful solution.

### Create comfortable and peaceful spaces

Value cooperation by also providing welcoming spaces where students, school staff and parents can relax and talk.

### A conflict-free environment does not exist

A favourable school climate does not mean the absence of conflict, however, a cooperative environment will positively affect conflict transformation. The professional development of school staff should be also committed to building a school's staff capacity to manage and transform conflicts

### Participation & expectation

Enhancing participation also means dealing with different stakeholders' expectations. A school principal (as for key message 2) should balance them and try to always provide an environment of open communication.

## USE STUDENTS AS EXPERTS, ESPECIALLY IN TERMS OF MEANINGFUL STUDENT INVOLVEMENT IN SCHOOL GOVERNANCE

### Theoretical background

Young people who perceive themselves as having agency may feel they have the ability to change something about themselves or their environment for a valued goal; this may increase their resilience and adaptability to life challenges84. Moreover, this feeling may help students towards increasing engagement with their own development and their community85, which can increase their well-being.86

### Concepts and trends underlying this message:
### meaningful student involvement, school governance, resilience, adaptability

### → Evidence from Estonia:

According to Estonian legislation students are allowed to discuss and make decisions regarding student life in schools, they can form organisations or join already existing organisations, to contact and cooperate with other student organisations, organise events, career days etc. Students can elect a class leader or a representative who may voice whatever concerns the students have to a teacher or the school leader. Students are allowed to form a student organisation the purpose of which is to further the interests and concerns of students. These organisations may receive funding from the school budget.87 The members of the organisation are elected by students of the school.

Both the schools visited have a student council. In School A one representative of every class is a member, in School B, however,

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84 Russell Sharp (2014) Ready, steady, action: what enables young people to perceive themselves as active agents in their lives?, Educational Psychology in Practice: theory, research and practice in educational psychology, 30:4, 347-364, DOI: 10.1080/02667363.2014.939143

85 Welzel, C., & Inglehart, R. (2010). Agency, values, and well-being: A human development model. Social Indicators Research, 97, 43–63.

86 Seligman, M. (2011). Flourish: A new understanding of happiness and well-being – and how to achieve them. London: Nicholas Brealey.

87 Basic Schools and Upper Secondary Schools Act. RT I 2010, 41, 240. https://www.riigiteataja.ee/en/eli/513012014002/consolide/current

two representatives (one boy and one girl) per class are members.

In School A the student council has a huge impact and is an important stakeholder in decision making. They organise different events, school visits, they discuss weekly issues with the canteen and alike, they prepare questionnaires and collect feedback, etc. The last school council's action was a "veto" on the school's development document because it did not include a vegetarian menu in the school's canteen.

In School B the student council arranges different events, actions (for example, road safety action – checking if each student has a reflector when going home in winter when it is already dark) and projects to make the school better. The projects are usually initiated by the students. For example, the pillows used to decorate the small corners for students to relax in was a student council's project (see KM3; School environment).

For the members of the study visit group, one of the most surprising examples of meaningful involvement in governance on the system level came from the representatives of the Estonian Student Body: they have a meeting with the Minister of Education on a regular basis (every three months).

## USE STUDENTS AS EXPERTS, ESPECIALLY IN TERMS OF MEANINGFUL STUDENT INVOLVEMENT IN SCHOOL GOVERNANCE

### KEY CONSIDERATIONS

### Active participation in school builds active citizens

Opportunities for the students' participation could be created to enhance their participation in designing school policies and rules, to express their ideas and wishes. Such an environment makes students experience the possibility of having an impact on school life and build their sense of belonging to the school, community and society. Active participation also implies a responsibility that requires school staff to be careful regarding age and maturity of students while sharing it.

### Students as experts

Students can support teachers in creating a high-level learning experience. Teachers can use their professional knowledge of didactics and pedagogy and motivate/facilitate students to use their competencies in the classroom. At the same time, teachers can learn from the students as well.

### How to say "no"

Nurture dialogue and provide feedback even when the students' ideas are not acceptable for school.

## CREATE EXTRACURRICULAR ACTIVITIES PLAN TO BOOST CREATIVITY AND STUDENTS' POTENTIAL

**Theoretical background:**

Several surveys have shown that the participation of students in extracurricular activities can have many positive effects, such as higher student self-esteem, higher student resiliency, and lower rates of depression,[88] lower dropout rate, lower delinquency and less frequent substance use.[89] Participation in extracurricular activities is linked to better academic outcomes, higher grades, test scores, school engagement and educational aspirations.[90]

**Concepts and trends underlying this message:**
**extracurricular activities**

→ **Evidence from Estonia:**

### National funds

The government has designated funds from the Estonian national budget for various hobbies as additional learning opportunities available in youth centres and schools. The purpose of this is to make various extracurricular activities (art, music, sports etc.) more accessible to students between the years of 7 and 19, which is especially important for students from low SES students, who cannot afford to attend them. According to the data from the local governments approximately 40% of the young people (aged 7-26 years old) participate in non-formal education such as hobby education or other activities.)[91] . Moreover, long day groups (pikapäevarühmad) are available for

88 Fredricks, J. A., & Eccles, J. S. (2006). Is extracurricular participation associated with beneficial outcomes? Concurrent and longitudinal relations. Developmental psychology, 42(4), 698.; Eccles, J. S., & Barber, B. L. (1999). Student council, volunteering, basketball, or marching band: What kinds of extracurricular involvement matter? Journal of Adolescent Research, 14, 10– 43.; Mahoney, J. L., & Stattin, H. (2000). Leisure activities and adolescent antisocial behavior: The role of structure and social context. Journal of Adolescence, 2000, 113–127.

89 Mahoney, J. L., & Cairns, R. B. (1997). Do extracurricular activities protect against early school dropout? Developmental Psychology, 33, 241–253.; Youniss, J., Yates, M., & Su, Y. (1997). Social integration: Community service and marijuana use in high school seniors. Journal of Adolescent Research, 12, 245–262.

90 Eccles, J. S., & Barber, B. L. (1999). Student council, volunteering, basketball, or marching band: What kinds of extracurricular involvement matter? Journal of Adolescent Research, 14, 10– 43.; Marsh, H. W., & Kleitman, S. (2002). Extracurricular school activities: The good, the bad, and the non-linear. Harvard Educational Review, 72, 464–514.

91 (Villenthal, A.; Kaunismaa, I.; Veemaa, J.; Žuravljova, M.; Varblane, U. (2016). Huvihariduse ja huvitegevuse pakkujad ning noorsootöötajad kohalikes omavalitsustes. Tartu Ülikool, RAKE

students in basic education level to provide supervision, study aid, or an environment to complete homework.92 However, these are not free for students and their fee varies between municipalities.

## Leisure time manager

There is a professional employed as a leisure time manager in every Estonian school, this is a relatively new profession (implemented since the 1990s). The leisure manager's salary is funded by the local municipality and is not fixed. Their tasks are to design the image of a school (including its reputation, symbols, originality), to make and improve a school's traditions, to organise events to support different talents and the feeling of a school community, to organise interest clubs, to support students' initiatives and interests etc. This position helps a school to move away from understanding formal education as something mechanical and in line with the labour market needs, towards education being a full experience of learning and taking into account the development of skills for life where the student is the one leading the process.93

There is a leisure manager (hobby manager) employed at both the schools visited.

The role of a leisure manager in School A: She coordinates the extracurricular activities. The majority of the activities for older students are organised by students themselves, her role is supervision, giving advice when needed etc. While at school, students work on different projects, school papers, some of the students attend the school council, filming, regular study session. One of the teachers at School A said:

> "The students like to be active since this is a popular thing to do. They can participate in different activities and make friends - they stay at school at night, watch movies, camp out..."

Most activities are funded by the local government (which receives the funds for extracurricular activities from the state). Other activities are funded through fundraising events. If

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92 Basic Schools and Upper Secondary Schools Act. RT I 2010, 41, 240.

https://www.riigiteataja.ee/en/eli/513012014002/consolide/current

93 Kubber, K. (2018). Extra-curricular activities and initiatives – based on Tallinn No. 32 Secondary School [Power Point Slides]. NEPC Summer School 2018.

necessary, the school also relies upon an alumni network to provide students with additional activities or contacts.

There are many extracurricular activities in School B (e.g. robotics, dancing, sport, arts and handicrafts). Over a hundred students participate in school activities, which is around 50% of all the students. All the activities organised within the school are free. School B has a budget to organise extracurricular activities. Usually, the content teachers run these activities, but they also hire external staff when needed. Twice a year teachers write a synopsis of the activities they could or wish to run, how these activities are connected to the curriculum and how many students they anticipate will participate. Based on this synopsis the school leadership decides on which extracurricular activities will be organised at the school.

### Open school

The study visit group found the opening hours of the School A very interesting. The teachers said that students are usually in school from 8 am to 2-3 pm, after that the free extracurricular activities begin. The teachers in School A estimated that active students are in school from 8 am to 8 pm, but an average student is in school from 8 am to 3 pm. The school itself is opened from 8 am to 11 pm. The study visit group believes that this characteristic is especially important for low SES students, because it gives them the opportunity to stay at school and be a part of several academic or extracurricular activities, especially if they do not have privacy at home or they lack other opportunities to develop their interests for reasons resulting from low SES.

# CREATE EXTRACURRICULAR ACTIVITIES PLAN TO BOOST CREATIVITY AND STUDENTS' POTENTIAL

## KEY CONSIDERATION

### Tailor-made activities

Students may be involved in planning activities to make sure their wishes and ideas are taken into consideration. School staff should also provide adequate guidance to students to support them in recognising their preferences, discovering new interests and developing creativity.

### Teacher's expertise

In order to provide extracurricular activities a teacher's knowledge and competencies in different areas should/could be used, meaning that they can create and lead the content

### Extracurricular & inclusive

While planning extracurricular activities school staff should also focus on any possible obstacles which students may face in attending certain activities and develop adequate measures to overcome them. (i.e. transportation; equipment…)

### Fundraising for activities

A school may build a network of partners that could support extracurricular activities as well as apply for national and international funds that support the education system. Building school staff capacity in fundraising for school activities should also be prioritised in the professional development plan.

# SCREEN STUDENTS' AND TEACHERS' INDIVIDUAL NEEDS AND INTERESTS AT VARIOUS POINTS AND LEVELS IN ORDER TO BEST SUPPORT THEIR POTENTIAL

## Theoretical background
Students have different levels of motivation, different attitudes toward teaching and learning, and different responses to specific classroom environments and instructional practices. They come from different environments, with different values and different personal goals. The more thoroughly instructors understand the differences, the better chance they have of meeting the diverse learning and personal development needs of all of their students. This way the teachers can help the students to develop resilience and adaptability.[94]

### Concepts and trends underlying this message:
### personal development, professional development

#### → Evidence from Estonia:

According to the Ministry of Education and Research nowadays teachers in Estonia are not just the mediators of knowledge, but rather the constantly learning and evolving mentors who help to create associations and values among students and to support every student's personal development.[95] By treating students in accordance with their individual specific needs, teachers have a high potential of contributing to the equity of education.

## In-service training for teachers
A study[96] which focused on the necessity of a teacher's continuing education (in-service trainings) showed that a teacher's participation in trainings is mostly random and derives from a teacher's own initiative. In both schools it was also reported that teachers were able to choose their in-service trainings based on their own wishes and needs. For example, in

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94 OECD (2017), The OECD Handbook for Innovative Learning Environments, Educational Research and Innovation, OECD Publishing, Paris, https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264277274-en; OECD (2015), Schooling Redesigned: Towards Innovative Learning Systems, Educational Research and Innovation, OECD Publishing, Paris, https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264245914-en.

95 The Ministry of Education and Research (2015). Õpetaja. https://www.hm.ee/et/tegevused/opetaja

96 Kallas, K.; Tatar, M.; Plaan, K.; Käger, M.; Kivistik, K.; Salupere, R. (2015). Õpetajate täiendõppe vajadused. http://dspace.ut.ee/bitstream/handle/10062/45196/Opetaja_taiendoppe%20vajadus.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y

School A the primary school teachers had participated in in-service trainings in the field of ensuring equity for children with low SES – it considered low SES as a special need. The training emphasised taking into account the children's individuality, but at the same time also providing equity for everyone.

### A teacher's role in observing the students

The teachers in the focus groups claimed that in the Estonian system, the teacher is the first person that notices what is going on with a certain student, especially the class teacher. Much emphasis is therefore put on early screening as soon as the children start attending school. The teachers, therefore, need to see all the children as individuals with their own problems, needs and potential.

### Teacher development meetings

Similar to student development meetings teachers also need to attend teacher development meetings, which are led by the school leader. At these meetings, they talk about their professional development, their strong and weak points, their needs and their overall work. Teachers at both schools included in the study visit reported that they attend these meetings once a year and sometimes multiple times a year.

### Individual report card and e-diary

The support staff in both visited schools were asked to provide objective feedback via the e-diary that needed to be compiled very carefully. The class teacher, any member of the staff who contributed information, other support staff, the school leader and parents were able to see it. Every teacher wrote information about the covered content in the school, about the homework and sometimes other details as well (for example if a student could not do well in certain subjects) for every class they teach. It is compiled every day. One of the teachers at School A said: "Sadly, negative feedback prevails because it is expected from students to do well and not be problematic, meaning they are usually not praised for something they are supposed to do anyway."

### Assistance in learning

In both schools visited during the study visit the teachers and support staff organised help for students who had problems learning or faced financial issues. For example, students got help in class, if they were absent or if they struggled with

understanding they were able to join the 'help class' or 'study programme'. In some cases in School A, the school created a specially tailored study programme for specific students. For example, if someone had issues with maths, during a regular maths class this student goes to a maths-support class. Teachers also organised consultation hours for students. One of the teachers in the focus groups in School A, unfortunately, said: "The students do not come very often. Most of the time we need to ask them to come. However, it was observed that in the primary school more students did attend." The support staff in School B even said that they were trying to include students who have average achievements but could do better to help them study. In School B the study help for struggling students is carried out by a special pedagogue who emphasised the development of successful learning strategies.

### Individual curriculum

According to the ordinance[97] given out by the Ministry of Education and Research, an individual curriculum should be provided for students with special needs (including talented students). The implementation of an individual curriculum is based on a specific action plan. The process of creating an individual curriculum for a specific student can be initiated by the student (or his/her representative) himself/herself or by the school (study council). If the proposal comes from the student's side, the process is as follows: (a) the student or his/her representative applies a thoroughly explained request to the school's school leader, (b) the school leader has 30 days from the day the request was submitted to look the request through and decide whether to approve it or not, (c) the school leader confirms the decision (whether positive or negative) with the directive, (d) if the request was approved, the school organises the construction of an individual curriculum within 30 days from the day the decision was made. An individual curriculum is constructed collectively via the collaborative work of the teachers, school leader, student and the supportive staff (psychologist, medical professional, social worker and speech therapist). If the initiative to create an individual curriculum comes from the school, the student has the right to refuse and the school has to accept it (this could be also linked to KM2 and

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97 Haridus- ja teadusministeerium (2004). Individuaalse õppekava järgi õppimise kord.

https://www.riigiteataja.ee/akt/824971

KM3). The individual curriculum serves as a prerequisite for needs-based funding. Specific measures used are determined by schools based on needs and availability.

## Student development meetings

Student development meetings must be arranged (at least once a year at the primary school level; at the secondary school level development meetings are voluntary) with each student to discuss the development, study results, weak and strong points, further development and behaviour of the student with the parents in the presence of the student. Additional parent-teacher conferences (or, if required, a social worker/school psychologist may be included) can be arranged if necessary. This is done in both the schools visited.

Schools in Estonia also need to organise career counselling for students from 9th grade on, which is also the case in School A, which includes grades from 9 onwards (School B only has children up to 9th grade).

## Special needs

School counsellors have a highly important role in the field of providing equity in education. When a school's staff discovers that a student needs any kind of special approach, one of the school counsellors (a school's coordinator for students with special needs) initiates the necessary pedagogical studies and starts using the appropriate supportive measures. The most frequently used measures to support students with special needs are differentiated teaching in special classes, the creation of individual curricula and providing a speech therapist or special pedagogical help in the groups that help students with special needs.[98] If a student is confirmed as having special needs, he or she will be able to follow an altered study programme (an individual curriculum may be created), receive remedial lessons, plus guidance and psychological support. It is up to the parent to decide whether or not the child should attend a regular school or a school for students with special needs.[99] According to the law, there is an individual report card system that tracks the development of students with special needs. It is an electronic

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98 Students with special educational needs (2016). https://www.eesti.ee/en/education-and-research/general-education/students-with-special-educational-needs/

99 The Ministry of Education and Research (2016). Haridislike erivajadustega õpilane. https://www.hm.ee/et/tegevused/alus-pohi-ja-keskharidus/haridislike-erivajadustega-opilane

system, organised on three levels: the teacher level, the support staff level (all of them can see it; the individual curriculum is part of this process), and the third level is an out-of-school stage that can involve a psychiatrist and other medical staff.100

At School B, the support staff (social pedagogue and special needs teacher) strive for early interventions (between 1st and 4th grade) among students with special needs. The importance of early screening was often emphasised at the focus group. They offer support in the designing of an individual curriculum, study help classes (50% of the time), they also help with learning, individual advising etc. For older students, they organise remedial classes (extra help). The social pedagogue focuses on different learning strategies for students, where he/she cooperates with subject teachers.

A general observation of the study visit group was that Estonia focuses a lot of attention on struggling students, which is also in line with Maria Erss's research, who exposed a difference in the policy regarding struggling students between Estonia and Germany. Estonia tries to keep struggling students in the school they are enrolled in and supports them, whereas Germany shifts such students to a less demanding school.101

100 Support staff during the focus group at School A.

101 Maria Erss during focus group interview.

# SCREEN STUDENTS' AND TEACHERS' INDIVIDUAL NEEDS AND INTERESTS AT VARIOUS POINTS AND LEVELS IN ORDER TO BEST SUPPORT THEIR POTENTIAL

## KEY CONSIDERATIONS

### A teacher's professional development

Professional development should be planned according to a teacher's needs to build their capacity in recognising students' needs, providing constructive feedback.

### The school as a supporting system

Early screening is very important. The teacher is one of the first people who recognise students' needs and interests, therefore the support for the teachers to report such problems at an early stage should be ensured. Students should be seen as individuals, with their own needs, potential, problems etc. Individual discussions with each student should be organised and led by the class teacher, where the personal development of the student should be discussed, her/his weak and strong points, her/his plans for the future, career etc.

## CONCLUSION

The link between socio-economic background and students' achievements in PISA assessments in Estonia is marginal and decreasing. The share of low-performing students is the smallest in Europe. Estonia belongs to the group, where excellence is combined with equity. Furthermore, the relationship between socio-economic background and students' achievements has decreased within the last few years.[102]

One of the main discoveries of this study case is, as already stated in the introduction to the key messages, that there are no special measures in Estonia targeting students from low socio-economic environments. All families are supported equally. The main resources are provided for all, with no segregation at any point - most of the health and social care policies are universal and together with the education system, work together to facilitate equal study opportunities for all children, regardless of their background characteristics (as explained in more detail in: 3.1.2 Social Care System and Health Care System).

Moreover, no statistics are being gathered on SES at the school level. The rationale behind this is that all families should receive the same support, not only those on a low income. This means that all children receive free books for school, a free lunch in school, and free transport to school (or it is partially subsidised, depending on municipality). In Estonia, there is a strong cultural norm, which says that every child has a right to a good education and that support should be universal. Although the percentage of people in poverty in Estonia is not low, children's basic needs are supported by the policy "same support for all", at least during school age. Therefore, one of the main conclusions from this discovery is that support from the educational (and other) policies should be provided to all, equally and universally.

As stated in the introduction to the key messages, the overarching key message of the study visit is that universal policies and practices should be implemented to successfully tackle poverty and as a result ensure greater equity. This is confirmed by the PISA 2012 secondary analyses, which show

102 OECD. (2016). PISA 2015 Results (Volume I). Available at http://www.oecd.org/education/pisa-2015-results-volume-i-9789264266490-en.htm

that countries with a weaker relationship between achievement and SES apply universal policies in order to raise standards for all students.[103] In addition, the scientific literature confirms that universal approaches are more successful and effective than targeting approaches in tackling the issues related to poverty.[104]
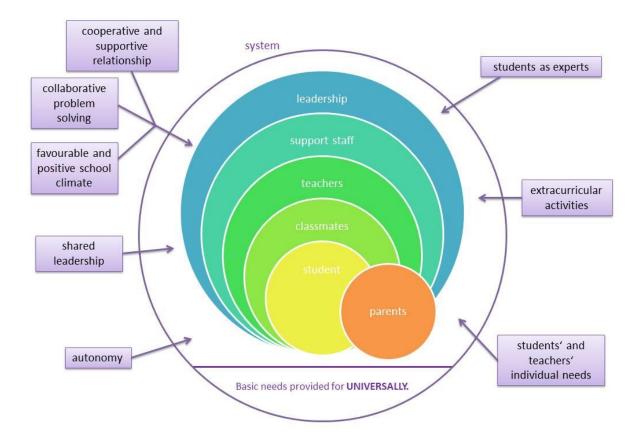
One of BRAVEdu´s main goals is to find good practices that could be easily adapted in school settings across different countries. The research group tried to find key components on the school level, which could support students, without having to find additional financial resources - under the assumption that each (educational, social, state) system is to a certain extent flexible and allows a certain level of autonomy, flexibility and adaptability, where these practices could be implemented. However, data suggest that some basic needs need to be universal (e.g. free meals, school supplies present in the classroom all the time, etc.) in order to reach the maximum potential for all. Therefore each stakeholder could use the good practices from this report in his/her own area and in his/her own systemic scope in order to enhance equity in education/school/classroom (see below Figure 2).

103 OECD. (2013). PISA 2012 Results: Excellence through Equity: Giving every student the chance to succeed (Volume II). PISA: OECD Publishing. http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264201132-en

104 Kislev, E. (2016). The effect of education policies on higher-education attainment of immigrants in Western Europe: A cross-classified multilevel analysis. Journal of European Social Policy, 26(2), 183-199.; Mkandawire, T. (2005). Targeting and universalism in poverty reduction. Geneva: United Nations Research Institute for Social Development.

*Figure 1*. The interplay of the system, basic needs and stakeholders in providing equity in the school/classroom

An example of the good practices that schools in other countries could adopt is the meaningful use of autonomy. We conclude that every stakeholder has the autonomy or at least the possibility of using it to ensure equity within a school, a class or outside/around a school. Moreover, shared leadership is a strategy in which different stakeholders from different levels are included and their views on different topics are considered. All this contributes to equity within a school or classroom. Shared leadership is closely connected to cooperative and supportive relationships among all stakeholders, so collaborative problem solving will contribute to a (more) positive and inclusive school climate, where all stakeholders feel accepted. Another way to ensure equity is using students as experts, especially in terms of meaningful student governance and providing extracurricular activities as a tool for enhancing students' creativity and developing their full potential. In the end, it is important to screen students' and teachers' individual needs with different developmental activities.

To conclude, there is no single policy that links socio-economic background and students' achievements, neither in PISA assessments nor in this report. The authors, however, provide a few possible explanations about what contributes to the decrease of SES effect on achievement and student well-being. What is more, the added value of this report is the hope that at least some practices described here could be transferred to other settings and implemented in order to enhance equity in schools and classrooms. Assuming that most educational systems are flexible to a certain extent and allow stakeholders to act upon the key messages presented in this report, thus providing equal opportunities for the academic and personal development of anyone involved in the educational process. In order to reach the maximum effect, early screening, personal/individual approach and good relationship among stakeholders working in education are very important, based on universal policies and practices, which provide an equal starting point and hence raise standards for all students.

# APPENDICES

## APPENDIX 1: Definitions of concepts

### General definitions of equity

**Equity** refers to the optimisation of policy-amenable factors for specific sub-groups of students (e.g. students with high and low socio-economic backgrounds).[105] More specifically, **equity in education** is, therefore "the extent to which individuals can take advantage of education and training, in terms of opportunities, access, treatment and outcomes. Equitable systems ensure that the outcomes of education and training are independent of the socio-economic background and other factors that lead to an educational disadvantage and that treatment reflects individuals' specific learning outcomes."[106]

### Definitions of equity and equity-related terms in Estonia

**Equity**: Estonian legislation does not define concepts as fundamental as equity, but rather relies on them implicitly. For instance, The Constitution of the Republic of Estonia[107] highlights equity (and equity-related concept, namely justice) by manifesting that the country is founded on liberty, justice, and the rule of law.

**Low socio-economic background:** Material deprivation is used to report on income and living conditions[108], which covers indicators relating to economic strain, durables, housing, and the environment of the dwelling. Severely materially deprived persons have living conditions severely constrained by a lack of resources, they experience at least four out of nine of the following deprivations items: cannot afford to pay rent or utility bills, keep their home adequately warm, face unexpected expenses, eat meat, fish or a protein equivalent every other day,

105 Definition of equity in education was adapted for the purposes of this study from OECD:

Programme for International Student Assessment. (2005). School factors related to quality and equity: Results from PISA 2000. OECD Publishing.

106 Wö⊠mann, L., & Schütz, G. (2006). Efficiency and equity in European education and training systems. Analytical Report for the European Commission prepared by the European Network on Economics of Education (EENEE) to accompany the Communication and Staff Working Paper by the European Commission.

107 The Constitution of the Republic of Estonia. RT 1992, 26, 349. https://www.riigiteataja.ee/en/eli/530102013003/consolide

108 Commission Regulation (EU) No 112/2013 http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32013R0112&from=EN

a week-long holiday away from home, a car, a washing machine, a colour TV, or a telephone[109]. In 2017, 4.1% of people in Estonia were severely materially deprived[110].

**Poverty:** Poverty is regarded as economic deprivation and poor people are the ones with a lower income. Estonia's formal interpretation of poverty is largely in accordance with the approaches of international organisations such as the OECD and the European Union.

To conclude, the most important national laws in the field of education (The Constitution of the Republic of Estonia[111], Republic of Estonia Education Act[112], Basic Schools and Upper Secondary Schools Act[113] and Preschool Child Care Institutions Act [114]) **do not define equity in education.** The Constitution articulates that *"everyone has the right to education. Education for school-age children is compulsory and [...] free of charge in general schools [...]."* The Basic Schools and Upper Secondary Schools Act determines that *"general education of good quality is equally available for all persons regardless of their social and economic background, nationality, gender, place of residence or special educational needs."*

**Definitions of other concepts used in the report in alphabetical order**

**Adaptability:** capacity to respond to uncertainty, change, and novelty[115]

**Autonomy:** the authority of the provider to make decisions independently and carry out a plan of care. It is based on the provider's scope of practice and individual[116]

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109 https://www.stat.ee/57181

110 Eurostat (2017).

http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/tgm/refreshTableAction.do;jsessionid=OkhqooZ7PWIX_H075gEkfJnFUk5eAiJaB5bPZtIz04P3 xu5kKEmQ!-503751436?tab=table&plugin=1&pcode=t2020_53&language=en

111 The Constitution of the Republic of Estonia. RT 1992, 26, 349.

https://www.riigiteataja.ee/en/eli/530102013003/consolide

112 Republic of Estonia Education Act. RT 1992, 12, 192.

https://www.riigiteataja.ee/en/eli/524042014002/consolide/current

113 Basic Schools and Upper Secondary Schools Act. RT I 2010, 41, 240.

https://www.riigiteataja.ee/en/eli/513012014002/consolide/current

114 Preschool Child Care Institutions Act. RT I 1999, 27, 387.

https://www.riigiteataja.ee/en/eli/520122013003/consolide/current

115 http://theconversation.com/coping-with-change-teaching-adaptability-will-help-kids-grow-19726

116 https://meds.queensu.ca/central/assets/modules/seipcle-01/mod/autonomy__responsibility_accountability.html;

https://www.edglossary.org/autonomy/ ; https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.3402/nstep.v1.28841

expertise. Autonomy is not contrary to collaboration and serves as a complement to shared work. Without the ability to work independently, the provider becomes inefficient and work becomes unmanageable.

**Collaborative problem solving:** the capacity of an individual to effectively engage in a process whereby two or more agents attempt to solve a problem by sharing the understanding and effort required to come to a solution and pooling their knowledge, skills and efforts to reach that solution[117]

**Extracurricular activities:** activities sponsored by and usually held at school but that are not part of the academic curriculum, they often involve some time commitment outside of the regular school day[118]

**Inclusive education:** an environment that supports and welcomes diversity among all learners[119]. The aim of inclusive education is to eliminate social exclusion that is a consequence of attitudes and responses to diversity in race, social class, ethnicity, religion, gender and ability[120]

**Meaningful student involvement:** the process of engaging students as partners in every facet of school change for the purpose of strengthening their commitment to education, community, and democracy[121]

**Personal development:** covers activities that improve awareness and identity, develop talents and potential, build human capital and facilitate employability, enhance the quality of life and contribute to the realisation of dreams and aspirations; however, it can also include developing other people, which may take place through roles such as those of a teacher or mentor, either through a personal competency (such as the alleged skill of certain managers in developing the potential of employees) or through a professional service (such as providing training, assessment or coaching)[122]

**Positive school climate:** is a broad, multifaceted concept that involves many aspects of the students' educational experience; a positive school climate is the product of a school's attention to

117 Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (2013). PISA 2015 collaborative problem solving frameworks. Retrieved from http://www.oecd.org/pisa/pisaproducts/ pisa2015draftframeworks.htm

118 http://shodhganga.inflibnet.ac.in/bitstream/10603/20822/8/08_chapter%203.pdf

119 UNESCO. 2001. The open files on inclusive education. Paris: UNESCO.

120 Vitello, S.J., and D.E. Mithaug, eds. 1998. Inclusive schooling: National and international perspectives. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

121 https://soundout.org/resources/meaningful-student-involvement/

122 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Personal_development

fostering safety, promoting a supporting academic, disciplinary and physical environment, encouraging and maintaining respectful, trusting and caring relationships throughout the school community no matter the setting[123]

**Professional development:** it may be used in reference to a wide variety of specialised training, formal education, or advanced professional learning intended to help administrators, teachers, and other educators improve their professional knowledge, competence, skill, and effectiveness[124]

*Resilience:* the ability to adapt and recover from adversity or incidences of change that arise in life[125]

**Responsibility/accountability:** involves being accountable for decisions made and actions taken[126]

**School Autonomy/School leader's autonomy:** the degree of freedom of authority of school communities to improve student-learning outcomes through a formal governance structure which allows local decision making in the allocation of human and physical resources, curriculum implementation and collaboration with other schools[127]

**School governance:** management of all the financial, human and other resources to attain the short-term objectives and long-term goals of the school[128]

**Shared leadership:** is the practice of governing a school by expanding the number of people involved in making important decisions related to a school's organisation, operation, and academics[129]

**Student autonomy:** refers to various theories of education that suggest learning improves when students take more control or responsibility for their own learning process[130]

**Teacher autonomy:** professional independence of teachers in schools, especially the degree to which they can make autonomous decisions about what they teach students and how they teach it[131]

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123 https://safesupportivelearning.ed.gov/safe-and-healthy-students/school-climate

124 https://www.edglossary.org/professional-development/

125 Zeiger, S. ( 2014). Developing Resilience: A workbook for teens. Createspace.

126 https://meds.queensu.ca/central/assets/modules/seipcle-01/mod/autonomy__responsibility_accountability.html

127 https://www.edglossary.org/autonomy/

128 http://www.oecd.org/education/school/44374889.pdf

129 https://www.edglossary.org/shared-leadership/

130 https://www.edglossary.org/autonomy/

131 https://www.edglossary.org/autonomy/