

# Quality assurance in general education: steering instead of control

In Finland the quality of education and training is seen as a key factor related to the efficiency of education and training as well as the equality of individuals. Local autonomy in education is extensive in Finland. In addition to practical teaching arrangements education providers are responsible for the effectiveness and quality of the education provided.

The evolution towards today's system started already in the early 1990s when the education administration was decentralised. At the same time school and textbook inspections were abolished.

Until the early 1990s, quality assurance was largely based on norms and inspections. The inspections were carried out to ensure that regulations were observed, to provide guidance and to make proposals for improvements.

The current educational legislation is based on a principle of decentralisation where the self-evaluation of education providers and the external evaluations by national expert bodies build the basis of quality assurance.

Today the ideology is to steer through information, support and funding. The activities of education providers are guided by objectives laid down in legislation as well as the national core curricula. The system relies on the proficiency of teachers and other personnel.

The legislation gives the education providers a great deal of freedom in

deciding on quality management. The legislation obliges the providers to evaluate their education and its effectiveness as well as participate in external evaluations. The education providers decide on the methods used and the frequency of the quality assurance measures.

Both education providers and schools are required to have a plan for evaluation and development. The aims of evaluation are generally written into the local and school curriculum or the annual plan. The providers have the autonomy to decide on the objectives by themselves. In general education, the most common methods for quality assurance are different types of surveys and assessments of learning outcomes.

There is a strong focus both on self-evaluation of schools and education providers and national as-

sessments of learning outcomes. Education providers have to evaluate their own education and its effectiveness as well as to take part in the external evaluations. For external evaluation of education there is an independent evaluation body under the Ministry of Education and Culture. This body organises evaluation in a network of cooperation.

## **NATIONAL ASSESSMENTS OF LEARNING OUTCOMES AIM TO DEVELOP EDUCATION**

In addition to the quality assurance that education providers have to carry out, national assessments of learning outcomes are done regularly. There is a test nearly every year either in mother tongue and literature or mathematics. Other subjects are evaluated according to the evaluation plan of the Ministry of Education and Culture. Academic subjects are evaluated, as are subjects such

## Strong focus on self-evaluation

## Education providers decide on methods and frequency of quality assurance measures

as arts and crafts and cross-curricular themes. The assessments are not regular from the school's perspective, as they are sample-based.

The main aim of the national assessments of learning outcomes is to follow at national level how well the objectives have been reached as set in the core curricula.

The assessments are most commonly carried out in years six and nine of basic education.

The national assessment of learning outcomes is linked to the question of equality and equity. Finland is a big country and thus regional equality is pivotal. Also the equity of pupils from different language groups, pupils' social background and gender are central.

The aim with the national assessment is to develop and steer, not to control. Ranking schools has been debated about in the last few years. However, even if the pressure primarily from the media has been hard, the consensus is that results of national assessments will not be publicised.

The assessments are sample-based. The samples are based on a randomised and stratified two-step cluster sample. The stratification is done to ensure the representativeness of different parts of

Finland, different types of municipalities, schools etc. The regular sample comprises ca 10 % of all schools and ca 5–7 % per cent of the pupils. In the schools for Swedish-speaking children every third school is included.

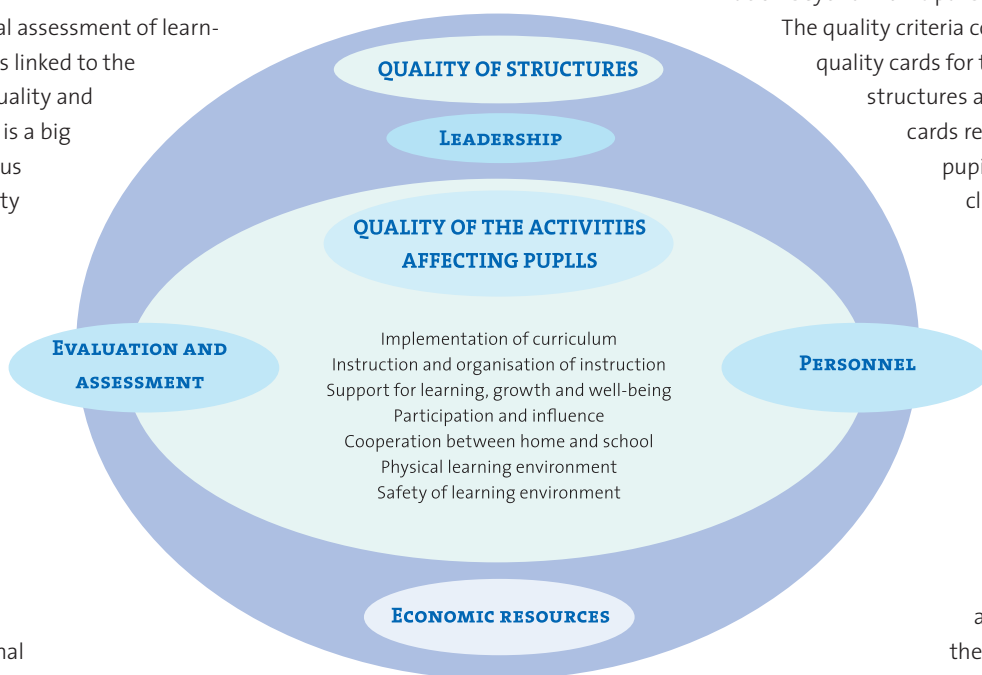
The results are analysed at national level. The participating schools receive their own results in relation to the national outcomes. Schools can

support education providers and schools national quality criteria have been created. The purpose of the quality criteria is to secure the quality and a diverse supply of education and to guarantee the basic educational rights of all children.

Quality criteria offer a tool for local policy-makers for evaluating shorter- and longer-term effects of their decisions on school quality. The information gained helps identify shortcomings and take corrective actions in the yearly planning. Quality criteria also support regional cooperation. A regional action model enables authorities to cooperate in evaluation beyond municipal borders.

The quality criteria comprise four quality cards for the quality of structures and six quality cards relating to the pupils. The latter include issues such as implementation of the curriculum, support to learning, growth and well-being, school-home cooperation and safety of the learning environment. The cards include a description, quality criteria and factors supporting operations. Each card contains criteria for both education providers and schools. The descriptions also comprise questions that support the improvement of quality. These descriptions help the school communities identify the development needs that are essential for the improvement of operations. ●

## National assessments are sample-based and used for development



**FRAMEWORK FOR QUALITY CRITERIA IN BASIC EDUCATION**

use the results for their own development activities. At national level the results are used for national development and as a basis for policy decisions.

### TOOLS FOR SCHOOLS

Quality of basic education has been a policy priority for a number of years. To