

Sweden's schools: lessons from history to build a better future

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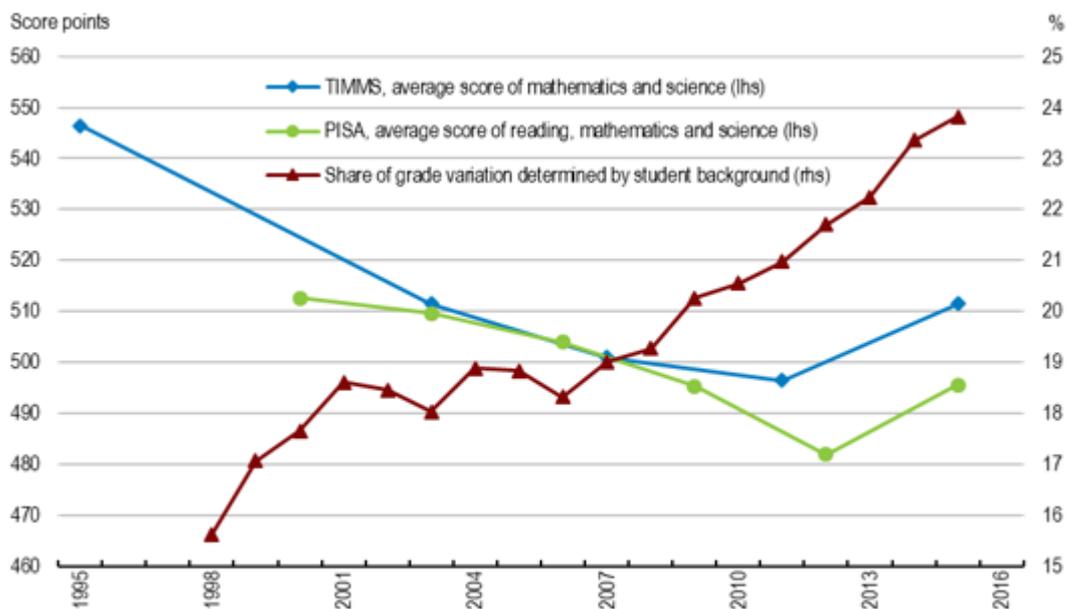
Swedish schools entered the 1990s from a position of strength, as one of the top performers in early international school surveys, including the OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA). School governance was centralised, and implemented locally by regional education boards. A suite of sweeping reforms in the early 1990s decentralised the school system from the central to the municipal level and introduced choice, competition and management by objectives. The general direction of reform was common to several OECD countries at the time, some of which perform well in international comparison.

However, the reforms seem to have contributed to weakening results in Sweden. Implementation was not optimal, as some municipalities were ill-prepared to take on the new tasks, and key stakeholders, notably among teachers and school principals, were opposing the new model. The reform design also had weaknesses. Regional education boards were closed and municipalities were granted full autonomy over school funding, weakening governance structures considerably, at a time

when the introduction of liberal entry for private (for-profit and non-profit) school providers would have called for stronger governance and control.

The latest vintage of PISA points to a brighter future for Sweden's schools. Average results improved, reflecting at least partly recent government interventions. However, today is no time for complacency, as Sweden's educational performance only climbed back to close to the OECD average. Inequalities across pupils and schools are widening, and children are increasingly segregated into schools with pupils from similar backgrounds. These developments are partially driven by broader societal trends, notably increasing income inequality and immigration. Nevertheless, the school system reinforces segregation instead of counteracting it, running the risk of depriving pupils of equal opportunities.

School results and equity have declined



Source: OECD Economic Survey of Sweden (2019).

Against this backdrop, the special chapter of the OECD Economic Survey of Sweden 2019 describes and analyses the challenges facing primary

and lower secondary education in Sweden. A set of recommendations is outlined, focussing on three main areas:

- Economies of scale and the need for coordination calls for a partial recentralisation of some aspects of education policy. A centrally set minimum funding norm based on pupils' socio-economic characteristics would target funding better to needs and equity objectives. The norm should be non-binding and integrated in the existing system for cost- and income equalisation between municipalities, in line with established governance principles in Sweden. A regional arm of the central government governance structure should be re-built to enhance cooperation, improve skill development, promote continuous quality improvements, and instil accountability at every level of the school organisation.
- Competition and school choice can be powerful tools to improve school quality, but private interests in many cases differ from the interests of society as a whole. Effective regulation and governance therefore need to steer private providers to deliver for the public good. Ensuring that grades fairly represent pupils' skills and knowledge would reduce information asymmetries. Private schools' admission procedures need regulation to hold back school segregation. Municipalities should adjust how they assign pupils to schools by promoting more socially mixed pupil groups while toning

down the current strong focus on proximity. Investments in new school capacity can help counteract segregation, notably if coordination between municipalities and private providers improves.

- High-quality teachers are a school's most important asset, and Sweden faces teacher shortages. Teaching needs to become more attractive to recruit motivated and skilled students and retain high quality teachers in the profession. Better teacher education with a stronger research base and more teaching practice would help. Once in a job, teachers should face clearer career paths, incentives to progress, perform and take on challenging tasks as well as clear accountability for key outcomes, coupled with more cooperation, feedback and support between colleagues. A new regional arm of the central government governance structure should have a central role.

Sweden is now moving towards a new round of school reforms, largely along these lines. A clear lesson from the previous three decades of Swedish education history is that reforming complex systems, warranted or not, can also be a risky undertaking. The end result depends on reform design, implementation and intricate interactions within the system undergoing reform as well as with the external environment.

The need to adjust

to unintended consequences as complex reforms progress is inevitable, but accurately identifying strengths, weaknesses and causality is challenging in hindsight, and even more in real time. Not knowing exactly where you are and how you got there reduces the likelihood of ending up where you want to be. Therefore, decision makers should integrate experimentation, quantitative research and evaluations into reform design in the next round of Swedish school reforms.

References:

OECD (2019), OECD Economic Surveys: Sweden 2019, OECD Publishing, Paris.