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.
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 caractericitics 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: