

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The report *Improving lower secondary schools in Norway* aims to help education authorities in Norway and other OECD countries to understand the importance of lower secondary education and to find approaches to strengthen this key education level. It provides an overview of the structure of lower secondary education and the main challenges it faces across OECD countries, develops a comparative framework of the key policy levers for success in lower secondary and adapts it to Norway's specific context. The recommendations focus on teacher quality, school success, student pathways and on the process of effective policy implementation. The report is a result of the OECD's efforts to support making reform happen across OECD and partner countries.

Lower secondary is key to consolidate student achievement in education

Lower secondary is a fundamental level of education with two complementary objectives: to offer all students the opportunity to obtain a basic level of knowledge and skills considered necessary for adult life; and to provide relevant education for all students, as they choose either to continue studying further on in academic or a more vocational route, or to enter the labour market. It is a key stage of basic education, in transition between primary and upper secondary. The first years of secondary education are the best chance to consolidate basic skills and to get the students at risk of academic failure back on track.

Lower secondary education is the level that usually caters to early adolescents between the ages of 10 and 16. It starts between the ages of 10 and 13 and ends between the ages of 13 and 16. It is compulsory across OECD and partner countries. It marks the end of compulsory education in a number of countries. This is typically a time when young people go through profound transitions in their social, physical and intellectual development, as they leave childhood behind and prepare for adult responsibilities. These years are a critical point for maturation as children's roles in school and society change.

10 - EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This level has different configurations and duration across countries, varying from three to six years. The main patterns of provision are:

- a single structure for primary and lower secondary schools;
- distinct structures for primary, lower secondary and upper secondary education;
- distinct structure for primary, with lower and upper secondary grouped together.

In terms of the curriculum, the teaching of reading and writing, mathematics and science take up on average 40% of the compulsory instructional time across OECD. The rest is distributed between foreign languages and other compulsory core curriculum, and a varying degree of compulsory flexible curriculum, which ranges from 40% to none.

This level presents similar challenges across countries

Although there is much diversity across countries, lower secondary education faces some similar challenges: some countries have difficulties ensuring high academic achievement, and many students fall behind at this stage, resulting eventually in their dropping out from upper secondary schools. Also, some evidence shows that there may be lack of motivation from students at these ages and that the configuration and practices for schooling at this level may not cater to the specific development needs of adolescents adequately. There is a noticeable absence of research evidence on the comparative efficacy of the different structures of lower secondary education, especially in comparison with the primary and upper secondary stages of education.

To design suitable policies to improve lower secondary education, it is important to understand the common challenges facing this level of education and provide responses:

- *School practices often fail to engage all students.* On average in OECD countries, one in four students is disengaged with school at age 15. There seems to be a gap between what is taught and the practices most likely to engage students. In addition, this could be a result of students not having consolidated a set of basic skills during primary education. Schools need to be more responsive to the needs of adolescents by providing student centered teaching and learning strategies, challenging and relevant curriculum and support. This can have positive effects on engagement and potentially contribute to higher performance and lower dropout rates.

- *Teaching and learning strategies may not cater adequately to adolescent needs.* Evidence shows that entry to lower secondary schools may lead to gradual decline in academic motivation, self-perception, and school-related behaviours over the early adolescent years. Lower secondary classrooms are characterised by greater emphasis on discipline and less personal teacher-student relationships in a time when students' desire for control over their own life is growing. Teachers need to be prepared to deliver the curriculum effectively, and are required to have solid content knowledge and teaching strategies that specifically cater to this age group.
- *Transitions can have a negative impact on student outcomes.* There is often a decline in academic achievement and engagement in the transition from primary to lower secondary when this level is provided separately. Also, students that undergo two transitions (from primary and from lower into upper secondary) seem to have larger risks of falling behind than those who undergo one. Easing the negative impact of transitions is key to facilitate higher achievement and to prevent students from falling behind and dropping out. Strategies to smooth the transitions, delay the transition or eliminate it and combine primary and lower secondary, reducing total cohort sizes or providing personalised support can help.

Why is lower secondary education important for Norway?

Strengthening the quality of the education provided in lower secondary education in Norway can contribute to overall attainment and to the prevention of dropout, as success in key subjects in lower secondary is a prerequisite to succeed in upper secondary or to enter into the labour market with adequate competencies. To respond to these challenges, the Norwegian Ministry of Education has developed a White Paper on the quality of lower secondary education in Norway. This report provides comparative analysis and contextualised recommendations to support policies to strengthen this key level of education.

Norway's lower secondary education has strengths but also faces challenges

Strengths

- **Student performance is in the path towards improvement.** PISA results for 15-year-old students, which mark the end of lower secondary education in Norway, are high and have improved since 2006, with Norway above the OECD average in reading skills, and have shown some progress for lower performing students.
- **Education is a public priority in Norway** with strong social support and high financial resources per student to invest in education, compared to OECD countries.

- **Norway has a comprehensive education system that emphasises equity and inclusion**, keeps students together until the end of lower secondary education, and student performance is less dependent on socioeconomic factors than in many OECD countries.
- Overall, **schools have positive learning environments**, and there are good relationships between students and teachers.
- **Teachers have strong motivation** to teach. Evidence shows a high sense of engagement and sense of self-efficacy towards their work.
- **Policy efforts and governance are geared towards improvement**. On one hand, there are sustained national efforts targeting school and educational improvement, among which the most recent curricular reform (the Knowledge Promotion) and the new initial teacher education programmes and continuing training support are important dimensions. On the other hand, the decentralised governance approach allows for strong local involvement in the delivery of education and for responses that may be closer to local needs.

Challenges

- **Students' learning needs along their learning pathways are not currently being addressed**. While the 2009 PISA scores suggest that a good number of these students are catching up by age 15, too many are still entering lower secondary with weak basic skills and decreased motivation for learning.
- **Norwegian adolescents do not feel sufficiently engaged with learning in schools**. Studies have shown that there is a decline in student motivation in lower secondary schools, perhaps triggered by external factors and lack of incentives, but also by the way in which schools are responding to their specific learning requirements.
- **Conditions that nurture excellent teachers need to be strengthened**. Norwegian teachers in lower secondary are not sufficiently prepared in their subject areas, in pedagogy of instructional skills and practices, or in adolescent development. They receive little guidance or support from the school or school owners and have a relatively low salary, combined with low teaching hours.
- **Imbalanced governance and inefficient use of resources make implementation challenging**. Norway's decentralised education system has advantages in promoting local engagement and control, but the governance of the system is not adapted to this structure. There is no clearly defined implementation strategy for education reform throughout the different levels, including municipalities and schools.

Norway can work on four policy levers to improve lower secondary education

Norway is already on the path to improvement, and has been making relevant reforms. The Knowledge Promotion, which introduced a new curriculum for basic education in 2006, is one of its main pillars, as are the current priorities set out in the White Paper on Quality Education. Nonetheless, Norway needs to have a clearer strategy to improve lower secondary education. It can do so by building on existing policy pathways, prioritising and targeting them to the specific challenges faced by pupils and teachers. A set of recommendations brings together the key four policy levers of governance, teachers, schools and students, to improve the quality of lower secondary education in Norway.

Aligning policy with governance...

R1: Align the different levels of governance and resources to ensure effective policy implementation.

Action Steps

- **Define and develop clear implementation strategies:** Define a vision and communicate a few key priorities for lower secondary education to achieve higher student engagement and performance. Use the Norwegian Directorate to develop clear implementation strategies that engage those working across the system. Develop public information campaigns and ensure student and parental engagement in the process.
- **Reinforce the role and capacities of policy makers at the different levels of the system:** In a decentralised environment, striking an appropriate balance between central direction and local flexibility requires strengthening the role of key players, such as the county governors and municipality education authorities, to ensure the implementation and adaptation of priorities and the curriculum from the Knowledge Promotion reform for lower secondary. This requires ensuring that they have the appropriate information, support and skills to manage and deliver education services effectively.
- **Build a culture of evidence using data strategically:** Data needs to be used and managed systematically to signal priorities and support improvement of students in lower secondary education by tracking and reporting on a limited set of key progress indicators. It would be useful to create incentives for municipalities and counties to improve information management (for example, on the financing of lower secondary education) and thereby improve the system's accountability, shared responsibility and efficiency.

Nurturing excellent teacher quality...

R2: Raise the status of teaching and improve teacher performance through better initial teacher education, professional development, standards and incentives.

Action Steps

- **Strengthen the profession by building up teachers' skills** in content, adolescent development and teaching strategies, raising the initial education level to a master's degree and linking it to incentives for quality people to enter the profession.
- **Enhance teachers' skills** to implement the Knowledge Promotion curriculum in lower secondary a) requiring **participation in continuing education and professional development** to update pedagogical and content knowledge and b) providing them with **a set of concrete teaching** strategies, especially in mathematics and science, which gives them options to respond to different needs of their students.
- **Define what is an effective lower secondary teacher in Norway is, using clear professional expectations or standards for teachers**, and ensure that teachers receive regular feedback and evaluation on their ability to meet those standards.

Promoting school improvement...

R3: Ensure that every school has the capacity and is effective in meeting the learning requirements of all its lower secondary students.

Action Steps

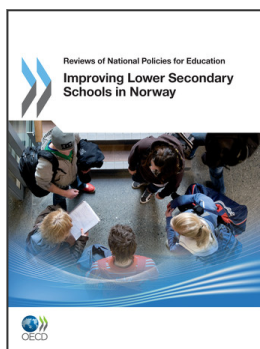
- **Develop a national strategy to strengthen schools as organisations** to help build their collective capacity for engaging and motivating youngsters and to continuously improve their learning.
- **Strengthen and support instructional leadership** at the school level and across schools by requiring initial and on-going training for leaders and fostering collaborative support among schools.
- **Ensure that schools provide a challenging and yet supportive environment** and offer a relevant curriculum that gives some flexibility and choice to make it attractive to adolescent needs.

...And ensuring student success throughout education

R4: Ensure that all primary school leavers are prepared to succeed in lower secondary, and that lower secondary students are prepared to succeed in further education and later in their professional lives.

Action Steps

- Prepare all students to enter lower secondary education by **intervening in early childhood education and care as well as primary school** and providing support as soon as learning difficulties are identified.
- **Support the transition** to lower secondary school by **creating a culture of assessment**, self-assessment, and feedback for improvement in all primary school classrooms; this will allow students to understand their learning profiles and to become self-regulating within an optimal framework of improvement.
- Ensure **alignment of curriculum sequences and student supports** by establishing vertical teaming in the content areas, and assessing individual student needs as students move from early childhood education and care to primary, and to secondary school. Also, ensure effective transitions into upper secondary/VET (county to municipality) by enhancing advice and curricular alignment.



From:

Reviews of National Policies for Education: Improving Lower Secondary Schools in Norway 2011

Access the complete publication at:

<https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264114579-en>

Please cite this chapter as:

OECD (2011), "Executive summary", in *Reviews of National Policies for Education: Improving Lower Secondary Schools in Norway 2011*, OECD Publishing, Paris.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264114579-2-en>

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