

Preventing early school leaving

THE CHALLENGE OF MAKING SURE THAT ALL STUDENTS COMPLETE THEIR UPPER SECONDARY EDUCATION



Swedish Association
of Local Authorities
and Regions



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Foreword

This document contains examples of how municipal schools are striving to help students complete their upper secondary education. There are various reasons why students leave school early and fail to achieve a complete upper secondary education. There are also many reasons why the issue of completing upper secondary education has a high priority. These include the individual's opportunities to obtain work and further education, the labour market's skills requirements, the country's competitiveness and the individual's ability to contribute to society.

This report forms part of the Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions' prioritised areas entitled Better School Results and Jobs for Young People, in which we are working to support municipalities in improving school results and supporting young people in their transition from school to work.

In this document we describe how upper secondary schools by means of strategic management have succeeded in changing attitudes to the work of schools and how staff are working together to meet the individual needs of students. The schools' success factors are very much in line with the factors we identified when we studied municipalities that achieve good results in primary/lower secondary education. The report refers to conditions in Sweden and was originally published in 2012.

We would like to thank head teachers, educationalists, student health service staff, study and careers advisors, quality developers, development managers and many more who have contributed their experiences.

Work on the report was carried out by Moniqa Klefbom in collaboration with J. Henrik Bergström, Tor Hatlevoll and Leif Klingensjö from the Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions.

Stockholm, March 2013

Per-Arne Andersson

Head of Division

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Summary

Using statistics from Statistics Sweden, the Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions (SALAR) has examined the proportion of students who completed their upper secondary education in recent years. We studied the proportion of students who did not achieve a complete upper secondary education within three, four or five years. We also conducted interviews at nine municipal upper secondary schools that perform well in helping students complete their education, in order to investigate how they work to avoid students leaving early. In the light of these interviews, a number of common success factors emerged. They are described in the chapter headings listed below, and can be summarised as follows:

1. **A positive approach is crucial** in making students feel comfortable and able to benefit from their education. This factor is emphasised very strongly by the schools we contacted. A positive approach means, among other things, believing in students' abilities and treating them as unique, equal individuals.
2. **Clear targets and an emphasis on results make a difference** in terms of how schools succeed in educating their students. It is very important that schools measure and analyse early school leavers and take action to ensure that as many students as possible complete their education.
3. **Following the right educational path** is a significant reason for students to feel motivated in their upper secondary school studies. A flexible range of subjects, a good induction process and access to qualified study and careers guidance help students to find the right study path.
4. **Quality through cooperation and participation** is one consistent success factor regardless of in which context it is present at schools. In the interviews, staff describe how they learn from one another, how they involve students in development work and provide examples of well-developed collaboration with the labour market.

5. The ability to identify and meet students' needs is key in systematic work on quality carried out by successful schools. Procedures guarantee close follow-up on students' results, while at the same time effective use is made of the skills of staff in the student health service.

About one student in three requires either longer than three years to complete their upper secondary education or breaks off their upper secondary school studies completely. Upper secondary education in Sweden normally takes three years. One clear pattern is that men are far more likely to leave upper secondary school early than women, that students in vocational programmes are more likely to leave early than students in academic programmes, and that most leave early in year three.

Skills requirements are becoming tougher in the labour market, which means that people who have achieved no more than primary/lower secondary education have difficulties in finding permanent jobs. At the same time, demand for labour is increasing, partly in connection with the numbers of people retiring in the next few years. Preventing early school leaving is an important matter, as there are negative consequences for both the individual and society as a whole.

The reasons for leaving early vary, which means that different measures and initiatives are needed to tackle them. To summarise, the success of schools is determined by how well they succeed in inspiring students to learn and in adapting their courses to the outside world and to the individual needs of students.



Some opening comments

This report is based on the the Swedish National Agency for Education's definition of completing upper secondary education, which relates to students who have achieved a final grade. This means that students must have a grade from courses to the order of at least 2,500 upper secondary school credits, or a final grade from a reduced programme of at least 2,250 credits. In the 2010 upper secondary education reform, final grades have been replaced by the upper secondary school diploma, but as we are comparing statistics for students who started before the reform, we are referring to final grades.

Many students follow national programmes throughout their entire period of study without achieving a final grade. These young people include some who for various reasons found it difficult to achieve 2,500 credits, but who are continuing to study over the expected three-year period or for four years. According to earlier studies from SALAR¹ and the Swedish National Agency for Education², these young people have a far greater opportunity to gain a foothold in the labour market than young people who leave school during years one or two.

There are several sources of data for this report, one of which is SALAR's Open Comparisons for Upper Secondary School. Another source is the analysis performed of statistics from Statistics Sweden (SCB), SALAR and the Swedish National Agency for Education. Data have also been obtained from the Swedish Schools Inspectorate's inspections and the Swedish National Agency for Education's reports.

One source has been the municipalities themselves. The study includes interviews with head teachers, teachers, student health service staff and study and careers advisors at the following municipal upper secondary schools:

Note 1. SALAR (2009) Born 1981:95-27-13

Note 2. Swedish National Agency for Education, Well-prepared. The data refer to young people born in 1980.



Vildmarksgymnasiet in Hylte Municipality, Motorbranschens tekniska gymnasium and Polhemsgymnasiet in Gothenburg Municipality, Stagneliuskolan in Kalmar Municipality, Lindengymnasiet in Katrineholm Municipality, Sunnerbogymnasiet in Ljungby Municipality, Västerhöjd in Skövde Municipality, Forslundagymnasiet in Umeå Municipality and Sydsåkånska gymnasiet in Ystad Municipality. Most of the schools selected offer a large number of both academic and vocational programmes, while a couple of the schools specialise in a small number of vocational courses. The size of the schools varies from around 150 to around 1,500 students. We selected schools that either have a high proportion of students who complete their upper secondary education or have received good assessments in the Swedish Schools Inspectorate's inspections of the schools' ability to help students complete their upper secondary education.

We describe the success factors that the schools themselves highlight as being significant in ensuring that a high proportion of students complete their education. The report is based on the common factors that were identified.

Good treatment is crucial

The clearest common success factor is the staff’s attitude to and treatment of students. A consciously positive attitude forms the basis of how well the school succeeds in educating its students. “A focus on the student” is the expression that occurs most frequently in the interviews and is often described as the school’s main guiding principle.

Umeå Municipality has examined the reasons for students leaving school early in all of its municipal upper secondary schools.³ Students put forward many reasons, but there is no consistent cause of early leaving, although the students do convey a general perception that treatment by school staff is extremely important. Good treatment can determine whether students have their faith in themselves and their future prospects enhanced, while poor treatment from staff can have negative consequences, in the worst case with students dropping out from upper secondary education.

Trust-based relationships with students have a major impact on students’ educational performance. Their significance was emphasised during all interviews conducted in preparation for this report. This is also something that is confirmed by research, not least in the most comprehensive study that has been conducted into what affects educational results, presented in 2009 by educational researcher John Hattie.⁴

Note 3. Umeå Municipality (2011) Early leaving/movements among upper secondary school students in Umeå’s upper secondary schools, school year 09/10.

Note 4. John Hattie (2009) Visible Learning. A synthesis of over 800 meta-analyses relating to achievement.



“The relationship between teacher and student is important. If we can’t make sure that students are happy, it doesn’t matter what kind of marketing we have,” says Tommy Fock, Head Teacher at Vildmarksgymnasiet in Hylte.

Skills development for a change of perspective and a consensus on the undertaking

Successful schools work actively on approaches and attitudes to students. Many schools have carried out extensive skills development work on the basis that schools are there for everyone. Staff believe that this has changed the perspective from an attitude that students must to varying degrees adapt to upper secondary school to a basic view that school must adapt to the students.

The traditional approach based on the fact that upper secondary school is voluntary and that it is up to the students whether they want to put an effort

into their education has been replaced by an attitude that it is up to the school how well it can meet individual conditions and needs. The school's undertaking has been communicated in detail and provided insights into the obligations of staff to create the best possible conditions for students to complete their education.

“We set out this strategy two or three years ago. We wanted to change a culture. Ultimately it's about meeting objectives,” believes Ulf Engqvist, Head Teacher at Sunnerbogymnasiet in Ljungby.

One example of skills development at Sydsåkånska gymnasiet in Ystad is training in mentoring for all teachers. The importance of competent mentorship has been made clear down the years, and mentors have become a hub and a coach for students during their education. Skills development means, among other things, creating faith in students, adopting a positive approach to challenges and supporting them to see opportunities instead of obstacles. School management and staff have developed a common view on the purpose of mentorship, which means that there are clearly defined expectations of mentors, from both students and colleagues.

“It's important to have strategic skills development. To do it together, with everyone involved in the same subject, getting the same picture, the same terms and the same concepts,” says Kristina Petterson, Head Teacher at Sydsåkånska gymnasiet in Ystad.

Staff believe in the ability of students

One important element of treatment is to have genuine faith in students' desire to succeed, not least in young people who have little faith in their own ability. It is a question of encouraging students to feel that staff at the school want the best for them and have the desire and the knowledge to help them. Displaying active commitment to each student's success in achievement their objectives increases students' motivation. This has been proven in, for example, quality surveys and annual appraisals.

According to inspections by, among others, the Swedish Schools Inspectorate, students emphasise that good adult contacts are of major value in terms of their motivation and attendance at school.⁵ The inspection describes positive adult contacts with staff who are committed, have high expectations, are receptive to individual needs and who have faith in their students' abilities as being positive conditions for the school to succeed in the education it provides.

Note 5. Swedish Schools Inspectorate (2009) One in two complete the course. On the (in)ability of upper secondary schools to get all students to complete their education.

No student may be anonymous

Working in various workgroups and dividing large schools into smaller units are ways of counteracting the risk that students perceive the schools to be large and inaccessible. One important element of a successful approach to students is to prevent the feeling of anonymity.

The schools describe how they strive to achieve an atmosphere of familiarity in which staff and students get to know one another and where staff can have a complete picture of each student's situation. This is one of the factors that contributes to teachers being able to build good relationships with students and to get them to feel a sense of affinity and significance. One example is Stagneliusskolan in Kalmar, where staff found it difficult to achieve good contact with a group of students whose first language was not Swedish and who stay together in gangs. The school therefore employed a teacher who was charged with the task of helping staff create good relations. The aim is that the teacher, who comes from an immigrant background, will support staff, students and legal guardians at the school to get to know one another better in order that students and legal guardians will have more faith in the school and its staff.

Values relating to treatment are communicated regularly

Schools with a low level of early leaving work actively on issues relating to values and give consideration to what constitutes good treatment. There is a clarity about which values apply and what is to pervade approaches and attitudes to one another. A clear value base cannot be taken for granted, but requires a regular dialogue between adults and between adults and students.

”All adults in the school are charged with the task of including, seeing, hearing and confirming students on equal terms.”

To create trust-based relationships with students, staff at Västerhöjds gymnasiet in Skövde, for example, believe that they must “practise what they preach” as regards everyone being of equal value and show respect for and interest in students as unique individuals. The school conducts a structured dialogue with students about how they want to be treated and how they themselves are expected to treat others. The students are trained by means of value-based exercises to stand up for their views, to listen to others and to work together.

The value base must pervade the entire school. All adults in the school are charged with the task of including, seeing, hearing and confirming students on equal terms. The workgroups, the student health service and others are actively involved in the task of regularly evaluating and revising the equal treatment plan and in the task of tackling marginalisation and bullying.

Perseverance produces results

The head teachers at Västerhöjdsgymnasiet in Skövde and Sunnerbogymnasiet in Ljungby describe how a change in perspective means breaking with norms, which in turn brings various kinds of resistance. This in turn requires perseverance and purpose, and means that there is still much to be done on the question of attitudes. But they point out that it is encouraging to see how the change in perspective and work on the subject of treatment is making a strong contribution to increased well-being, increased motivation and a high proportion of students completing their upper secondary education.

Clear targets and an emphasis on results make a difference

The majority of the schools we identified work towards a municipal policy target that there shall be a reduction in the level of early leaving from upper secondary school. This target means that each school measures the number of early leavers and conducts discussions about how the results can be improved. School management communicates the school's targets to staff, students and legal guardians, and the communication paths are straight and clearly defined.

School authorities define requirements

In addition to using the national control documents, the municipalities have formulated their own measurable targets in order to achieve high quality in education. Clear statements from local politicians about what is to be achieved add weight to the work carried out by head teachers at each school. This facilitates the setting of priorities and clarifies where the schools should direct most attention.

In these municipalities the proportion of early leavers and course changes are measured, as well as other measurable targets that have a bearing on how students complete their education, such as attendance, proportion of final grades and well-being. Every year the schools report the results they have



achieved and the measures they have taken based on the targets set down by the school authorities.

“The politicians set targets five or six years ago that the number dropping out must be reduced. So we measure it. We then analyse the reasons and learn from the experiences,” says Thomas Winqvist, Head Teacher at Sydskånska gymnasiet in Ystad

“There must be an increase in the proportion of final grades, and this target has made a difference,” believes Head Teacher Ulf Engqvist at Sunnerbogymnasiet in Ljungby.

Schools analyse causes and rectify obstacles

The reasons for early leaving are analysed in order that staff at the schools can understand what they can influence and how they can improve the conditions for students completing their education. This is often done in the form of conversations with students who are considering discontinuing their studies or have decided to do so, for example between student and mentor⁶ or between student, study or careers advisor and head teacher. The documenta-

Note 6. “Mentor” means the teacher who is responsible for monitoring the student throughout his or her entire study path in order to support the student’s educational process and personal development.

tion is used as a basis for identifying various kinds of needs, which groups are at a higher risk than others of not completing upper secondary education and various measures that can prevent early leaving.

One example is Vildmarksgymnasiet in Hylte Municipality, which noticed that students who are boarders at the school and do not feel secure in their leisure time run a greater risk of discontinuing their studies, even if they are happy at school. The school therefore employed a recreation leader who makes sure that the students have meaningful leisure time. There are also staff on duty at night, providing secure adult support around the clock.

Students keep track of their results

The schools describe procedures and work methods to make students aware on a regular basis of where they are in relation to course targets. Students are given control over how their own priorities work, and how they themselves can influence their results. They also provide regular feedback about what they need help with in order to manage their studies. The schools use various models, but the mentors have the main responsibility for ensuring that the dialogue about the results with each student is coordinated and takes place regularly.

“The politicians set targets five or six years ago that the number dropping out must be reduced. So we measure it. We then analyse the reasons and learn from the experiences.”

School management is strong in its educational leadership

Staff at successful schools state that management’s educational concept is known and accepted among staff.⁷ The larger schools with management groups of head teachers describe how they create a consensus on educational leadership and how they cooperate to improve results. Cooperation in the management groups means, among other things, that they help one another to reflect on the challenges and dilemmas involved in individual cases as well as leadership in general.

Note 7. Cf. also SALAR’s Open Comparisons, The art of achieving results – experiences from successful school municipalities.

The head teachers work closely with the workgroups and have an organisation that allows scope for educational leadership. By way of example, Motorbranschens Tekniska gymnasium in Gothenburg and Västerhöjdsgymnasiet in Skövde invested in workgroup leaders or educational leaders to represent the head teachers in administrative work. A high level of accessibility to school management means that staff quickly find out what is happening, which removes any obstacles relating to an absence of mandate.

One success factor is that head teachers have regular contact with students and know the students in their own programmes or in the whole school. Accessibility to students, teachers and student health service staff means that head teachers are familiar with individual student cases ahead of any decisions needed on support measures.

School management has high expectations of the teachers and student health service staff. It is a question of staff as far as possible applying their competence to provide students with the conditions to achieve good results.

“We never settle for well-being and good attendance alone, we must always make sure that students achieve the best possible results,” says Kerstin Persson, Head Teacher at Sydsåkånska gymnasiet in Ystad.

Following the right course

To be an attractive school that attracts and retains students, schools are focusing on being able to offer courses that students want. But many students are unsure about their choices, which means that they switch programmes, and mobility between programmes means that flexibility is required in the organisation and the range of courses on offer.

Flexible range of options meets students' demand

Studies⁸ show that those who leave upper secondary school early are less likely to have started the programme they initially applied for than other students. The differences are not enormous, but they are consistent, and they apply for both women and men and for students in all subject areas.

Schools with a high proportion of students who complete their education have a high proportion of students who follow the course they chose initially. The schools we contacted accepted about 90 to 100 per cent of students for their first choices ahead of the school year 2011/2012.⁹

In Kalmar and Ljungby, for example, the schools focus on flexible opportunities to switch programme if students want to change course. It is widely known that many students feel unsure about their upper secondary school

Note 8. Allan Svensson (2007), *Modern upper secondary education, better than its reputation*.

Note 9. Compare with the national figure ahead of the school year 2011/2012, when 78 per cent of the country's young people were accepted for their first choice on 1 July 2011. The Swedish National Agency for Education, www.skolverket.se/statistik-och-analys

choices during the initial period of their course. Opportunities to change programme and specialisations are therefore important in order that students who want to change course continue with their upper secondary education. A questionnaire-based survey from Statistics Sweden also reveals that a change of upper secondary school programme is a circumstance that might have made one student in three who discontinued their studies choose to complete them.¹⁰

The opportunities to change course have also been more generous in recent years because there have been fewer students and increased competition for students. This is confirmed in a report by the Swedish National Agency for Education about the consequences of increased competition.¹¹

“If students have applied, competed for a place and been accepted, it’s our responsibility to organise things as well as possible for them. Even those who think they made the wrong choice,” believes Ann-Katrin Wijk, workgroup leader at Stagneliuskolan in Kalmar.

Good induction process provides reassurance and inspiration

Another significant factor is the induction process. A well planned and implemented induction process at the beginning of the course minimises the risk that students will leave school if they do not settle down. As well as giving students an understanding of the programme content, student involvement and work methods, the induction process serves to create a secure, positive working climate within the programme. The induction process has been given a higher profile in many municipalities in recent years and has been extended in terms of the number of days and activities.

Study and career guidance to make the right choices

There is a major need for qualified study and career guidance, but the quality of the guidance on offer is uneven.¹² Studies also show that students’ expectations of guidance ahead of their upper secondary school choice are high, but after they have made their upper secondary school choice they have not received the expected help in recognising their own strengths and weakness and what they have an aptitude for.¹³ At the same time, competition between

Note 10. Statistics Sweden (2007) Young people who failed to complete upper secondary education.

Note 11. Swedish National Agency for Education (2010) Competition for students, how municipalities deal with falling student numbers and an expanding education market.

Note 12. Swedish National Agency for Education (2007) Quality audit of study and careers advice at primary/lower secondary school.

Note 13. Lisbeth Lundahl (2008), The individual, paths, choices. Career choices and guidance in a social, multicultural and gender perspective.

upper secondary schools means that students in primary/lower secondary schools are faced with extensive marketing and a large number of alternatives that are difficult to comprehend and process.

TOUGHER DEMANDS ON STUDY AND CAREERS GUIDANCE

The new Swedish Education Act places tougher demands on study and careers guidance. Students in all kinds of schools except pre-school and pre-school classes must have access to staff with the necessary competence to ensure that their needs for guidance ahead of making choices of future educational and vocational activities can be satisfied.¹⁴

Of students who switch programme, only 29 per cent achieve a final grade within three years, according to a study conducted by the Swedish National Agency for Education.¹⁵ One important success factor is therefore how well the need for guidance is satisfied at primary/lower secondary school. The better the information given to students to help them make their choice, the less risk there is that they will drop out because of false expectations and a loss of motivation.

Study and careers advisors at upper secondary schools help students who regret their choice of programme or specialisation to look at alternatives and to consider the consequences of various decisions. They support mentors, teachers and head teachers ahead of decisions relating to an individual student's study plans. Cooperation between management, teachers and study and careers advisors at upper secondary schools is significant for students who need to adapt in order to be able to complete their upper secondary education.

The head teachers at Sydsåkånska gymnasiet and Västerhöjdsgymnasiet in Skövde, for example, point out that study and careers advisors at upper secondary schools play an important role in connection with both the choices that students make within the framework of upper secondary education and choices ahead of studies and careers after leaving upper secondary school.

Note 14. Swedish Education Act (2010:800), Chapter 2.

Note 15. Swedish National Agency for Education (2011) Upper secondary school students who switch programmes and schools.

Quality through cooperation and involvement

One important element of achieving success is constructive cooperation. A focus on results has resulted in various forms of cooperation between workgroups, teams and networks. Work to create upper secondary education for all requires involvement and creative educational solutions. This in turn requires faith, it requires adults to provide help and to listen to students.

Staff learn from one another and give students influence

One success factor that schools highlight as being significant is that teachers have close cooperation and are accessible at school, not only to students but also to one another. Teachers have organised themselves in various ways into workgroups, and cooperation between different teaching categories has removed informal borders. This enables them to become aware of each other's abilities and competences, to share experiences and to work more effectively to provide students with an individually adapted education.

Special needs teachers have been given a clearer role in offering support to other teachers in educational work, which has added legitimacy to their work.

Head teachers and staff at, for example, Stagneliuskolan in Kalmar, describe how they expect teachers, the student health service and other adults at the school to help one another and to strive to achieve new solutions. They believe that coming together to take action, reflect and learn new lessons is an important part of the job.



“It’s about daring at all times to try new things and to think constantly about how work can be improved. Everyone must give some thought to what he or she can do better to help students succeed at school,” believes Bengt Larsson, Head Teacher at Stagneliusskolan in Kalmar Municipality.

Research¹⁶ shows that teachers who share knowledge and experiences with one another gain an increased insight into how they can develop students’ abilities. Teachers obtain greater variation, fine-tune their methods and acquire a greater understanding of how students learn difficult things. The effects of the work method are most clearly evident in students who find it difficult to achieve the knowledge targets at school. The work method also benefits other students, as evidenced by improved results in national exams at schools that have adopted a long-term approach to work on sharing knowledge among teachers.

Students are involved in various ways to contribute to both their own and the school’s development. Students are involved in planning courses, take part in health and safety inspections and other work on the working environment, participate in employment interviews, help to draw up local work plans and formulate values. The Head Teacher for the Health and Care programme

Note 16. Ulla Runesson (2010) The second stage: Teachers’ research results as a shared resource. Jönköping University School of Education and Communication.

at Västerhöjdsgymnasiet in Skövde describes one of their most significant success factors as being the fact that teachers of specialist subjects and core subjects plan courses together and that they collaborate with students on their structure. The attitude of viewing students as competent, involved individuals lays the foundation for their being content and completing their education.

Staff also learn from one another between schools and municipalities. For example, Motorbranschens tekniska gymnasium in Gothenburg is part of a network in the automotive industry in which specialist subject teachers, core subject teachers and head teachers from Gothenburg, Kungälv, Östersund, Västerås and Kalmar hold joint skills development days. The school's head teacher believes that it is more important than ever, in view of the rapid pace of technical developments, that specialist and core subject teachers learn new things together. They also need to work in partnership to achieve an overall education, in order that students understand the relationships between different subject areas. The network will also result in beneficial interaction between students in different schools and municipalities.

Collaboration with the outside world raises status and increases motivation

There are many examples in which the ability of schools to get all students to complete their upper secondary education is connected to how well they succeed in their cooperation with the labour market and society.

Västerhöjdsgymnasiet in Skövde has about 300 places on its Health and Care programme and has succeeded in getting virtually all students to complete their education. The programme has reversed what was previously a negative trend and increased interest in the course by means of, among other things, close collaboration with the labour market and society. The Head Teacher believes that the structured partnership with prospective employers means that the course is adapted in line with developments. Relations between teachers and labour market representatives have resulted in a wide variety of workplaces for workplace-based learning and a consensus on what students should be learning.

“It's important that teachers and staff from the workplaces understand each other's different worlds, that they talk a lot to each other and thus contribute to developing the course together,” says Ewa Hjerpe, Head Teacher at Västerhöjdsgymnasiet in Skövde Municipality.

Motorbranschens tekniska gymnasium in Gothenburg Municipality is one of the municipal schools with the highest proportion of students who com-

plete their upper secondary education within three years. The Head Teacher believes that their collaboration with the labour market is of decisive importance for this outcome. The school specialises in the automotive programme with a number of specialisations, and by means of quality-oriented cooperation with companies in the industry it has significantly increased interest in the course and the proportion of students who achieve the targets. Companies contribute to the course by means of, for example, offering guidance at a number of workplaces, involvement in the school's steering group and active involvement in the programme council and networks with teachers.

“Collaboration with the industry is a major reason why we're able to retain our students. Without this partnership with the labour market, we wouldn't have been as successful,” believes Kaj Sandgren, Head Teacher at Motorbranschens tekniska gymnasium in Gothenburg Municipality.

Another example is Lindengymnasiet in Katrineholm Municipality, which has a high proportion who complete their upper secondary education and a strong tradition of collaborating with the labour market. School management describes how teachers' commitment to their students' success is evident in, among other things, a well-developed partnership with companies and organisations. The teachers who have the most highly developed contacts with the labour market inspire other teachers at the school. There is cooperation on both academic and vocational programmes, and the courses have effective programme councils in which industries are involved in planning the course content and the skills development of teachers.

“Collaboration with the industry is a major reason why we're able to retain our students. Without this partnership with the labour market, we wouldn't have been as successful.”

“We've brought back several medals from the World Skills Competition, which is stimulating. It wouldn't work if our teachers hadn't been so committed,” says Bengt Lind, Head Teacher at Lindengymnasiet in Katrineholm.

The head teachers in the above examples describe how collaboration with society and the labour market contributes to students feeling motivated in their studies. Representatives from the labour market help students to capture their interest, show them that they are wanted and that they have access to several different vocational options once they have completed their educa-

tion. Initiatives to train instructors mean that instructors at the workplace are aware of the course targets and integrate them into their practical instruction. They are also trained to deal with young people on the basis of their situation so that they are given the right conditions to meet their targets.

PROGRAMME COUNCIL FOR ALL VOCATIONAL PROGRAMMES

One of the major changes in the upper secondary education reform is that the labour market has been given a formalised influence over upper secondary education. There must be national programme councils for all vocational programmes. With the aid of the programme councils, the Swedish National Agency for Education can obtain help in assessing vocational courses, and assess developments in vocational areas in order to monitor and obtain advice on what needs to be developed in the courses. Programme councils must also contribute analyses of how students who have completed their upper secondary education have succeeded in establishing themselves in the labour market.¹⁷

Note 17. Swedish National Agency for Education (2011) Tougher requirements and quality for future challenges.

The ability to identify and satisfy students' needs

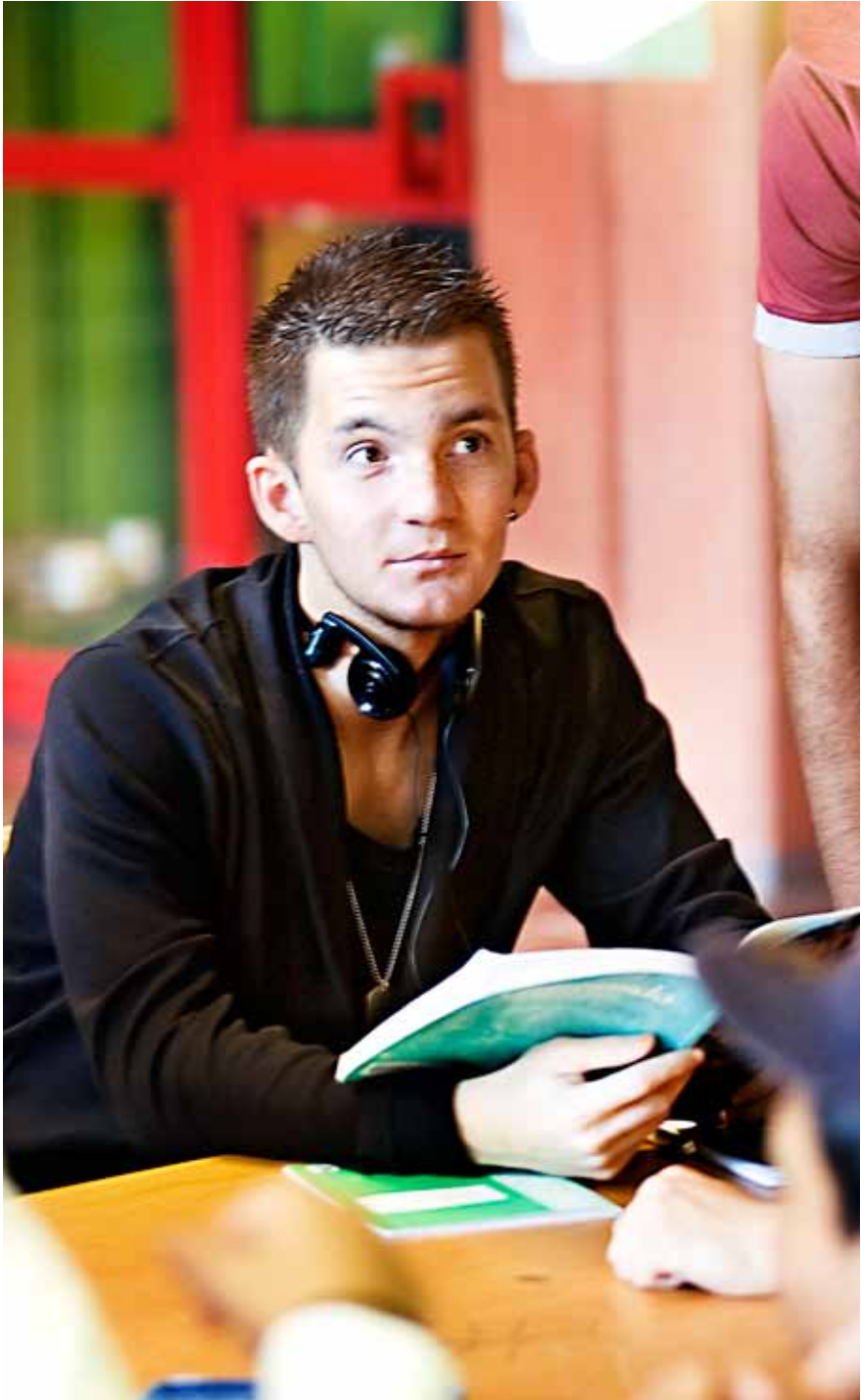
One important observation is how schools organise their work to capture needs as early as possible and to quickly implement individual measures. The sooner action is taken, the greater the opportunities for students to complete their education. Early action is also a clear signal showing that the school takes its students' studies very seriously.

Fine-meshed safety net captures needs

Established procedures to quickly develop measures adapted to the individual are extremely important for capturing students' needs. The overarching aim is to achieve effective cooperation between students, legal guardians, teachers, mentors, student health service staff, study and careers advisors and head teachers in order to give each student the right education initiatives and flexible solutions to allow him or her to perform to the best of his or her full ability.

The protective net around students starts with the mentor and then takes different forms, depending on the school. If a student risks not achieving his or her targets, investigations and follow-up take place to find out what needs to be done and which competence/s is/are needed to provide the student with the conditions to achieve the minimum pass level.

The significant feature of the work method is frequent, regular meetings between mentors, students and various members of staff before decisions are made and follow-up takes place on measures for students who risk failing to



achieve their targets. The role of the mentor is important, not least in terms of being aware of each student and eliminating the risk that an individual student might fail because the school has not noticed the needs and employed resources to help him or her.

For example, all workgroups at Sydsåkånska gymnasiet meet every Monday to check on students and then hold follow-up meetings every Wednesday.

Another example is Umeå Municipality, which has developed an IT system that aims to capture students who for various reasons do not appear to be doing well. All members of staff have the opportunity to make an anonymous entry in the system if they are concerned about a particular student. The student's mentor then receives a message and is obliged to follow up on the case immediately and take action together with other members of staff concerned.

There are several examples of preventive measures:

- › Special times every week when all teachers at the school are available to assist students.
- › Full resource days when students are offered assistance with tasks they are finding difficult or have not been able to complete.
- › A “Support Corridor”, open certain times during the week with special needs teachers and so-called “support teachers” in various subjects who are available to students.
- › Streaming of lessons, allowing students to study recorded lessons afterwards.
- › Access to summaries and notes from lessons via email.
- › Summer school for students who need more time to complete their courses.

NEW SWEDISH EDUCATION ACT ON STUDENT HEALTH

The New Swedish Education Act on Student Health came into force on 1 July 2011.¹⁸ Among other things, the Act means that students must have access to staff who can perform medical, psychological, psycho-social and special needs measures. Student health must primarily be preventive and promote good health, and the development of students to achieve their educational targets must be supported.

Note 18. Swedish Education Act (2010:800), Chapter 2.

Effective use of student health service's competence

Student health service staff have a prominent role in helping students complete their education. Their skills are highlighted by the head teachers we interviewed as being crucial in giving students the right support and measures. In many successful schools there has long been a conscious investment in special needs teachers, counsellors, psychologists, school nurses and school doctors. The aim is to have access to various skills in order to be able to meet as many needs as possible.

”Systematic improvement work is carried out in order to promote health among students in both general and individual initiatives.”

Staff in the student health service work in teams close to the workgroups and the mentors. They have a consultative role in which they support mentors, teachers and head teachers in their work with students. They also work directly with students, individually or in groups, offering instruction, information and advice.

Systematic improvement work is carried out in order to promote health among students in both general and individual initiatives. The student health service teams strive to adopt a holistic view of the students' situations and help one another to provide students and staff with help that is as prompt and as good as possible.

By way of example, Västerhöjdsgymnasiet in Skövde carries out work on the subject of stress and stress management, with student health service staff planning the content together with teachers. The subject is included in all programmes in the form of communal activities with student health service staff and teachers. The student health team then continues this work with individual initiatives based on the needs of individual students.

At Sunnerbogymnasiet in Ljungby and Stagneliuskolan in Kalmar, for example, the task of special needs teachers has been clarified in the first instance in order to help teaching colleagues to adapt their tuition according to individual students' needs. It is above all a question of including students as far as possible in regular teaching, and providing teachers with support in the use of methods and aids to make this possible.

“The management group and the student health service have been resolute. We're working to increase the legitimacy of special needs teachers. Special needs teachers are now working more on consultations with colleagues,



in the role of instructors for them. When they're working with students they should be working on investigations, not special needs teaching," says Cecilia Eklund, Head Teacher at Sunnerbogymnasiet in Ljungby.

Access to compensatory aids is described as high and an absolute must. As an example, Umeå Municipality has for some years now invested in ensuring that all students, regardless of need, shall have computers equipped with all of the aids available in the municipality. Based on their needs, students are provided with instruction and assistance by teachers or special needs teachers in using the programs.

A focus on attendance and rapid responses to absence

In schools with a high proportion of students who complete their upper secondary education, students are given information at an early stage about the importance of attending school. The schools prevent unauthorised absence by making students aware of the link between attendance at school and achievement of targets. By way of example, head teachers meet all classes to talk about the importance of attendance and the consequences of absence.

Unauthorised absence is monitored carefully and followed up by quick responses. This is also an obligation under the new Swedish Education Act.¹⁹ To give an example, Motorbranschens Tekniska gymnasium in Gothenburg Municipality uses an IT system that immediately sends an automated text message or email to the legal guardian in the event of unauthorised absence. The mentor then gets in touch with the student and contacts the legal guardian. Whichever methods the schools employ, they place great emphasis on contacting both students and legal guardians as quickly as possible in connection with unauthorised absence.

It is often the mentors or student health service staff who are responsible for following up on the reasons for the absence. The reasons are analysed by mentors, student health service staff, workgroups and/or head teachers. Depending on the cause of the absence, schools take action in order to support the students in attending school and preventing truanting.

Note 19. Swedish Education Act (2010:800), Chapter 15.

What do the statistics say?

In this chapter we describe in an overall perspective what proportion of students discontinue their upper secondary school studies. The results vary significantly between municipalities, and there are also major differences between different programmes.

The statistics and conditions on which this report is based refer to data for the years before the upper secondary education reform. Changes are being implemented in the new upper secondary education system that aim to increase the proportion of students completing their education in the intended time. It is, however, too early to say what the effect of these changes will be.

We have referred to data on all upper secondary school students who started in 2005, 2006 and 2007 and who completed their upper secondary education within three, four or five years. On the basis of these data, we calculate the proportions of students who did not complete their education.

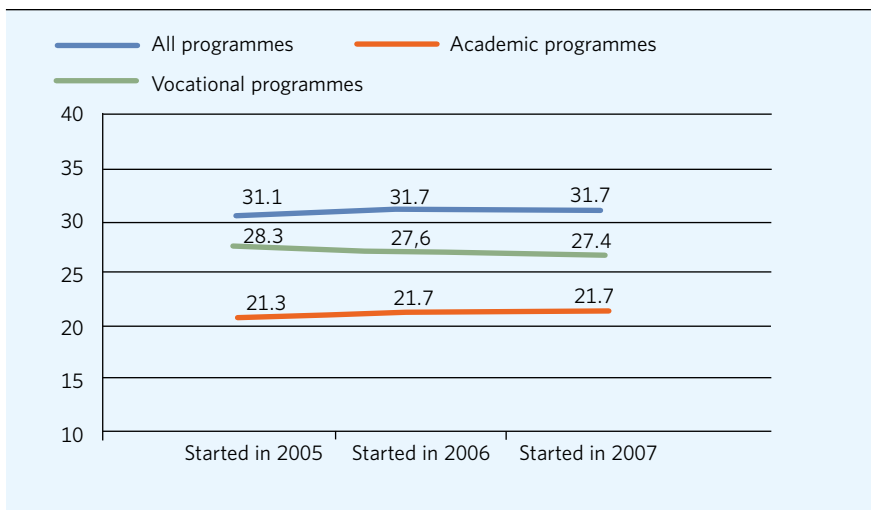
The data are taken from information provided by Statistics Sweden, which were compiled partly at municipal level and partly at school level. SALAR has compiled the data at municipal level, available in an appendix of tables on SALAR's website under the heading Open Comparisons – Upper Secondary School. Official statistics at school level are available under the heading Open Comparisons – Compare Upper Secondary Schools. Supplementary information is also available on the Swedish National Agency for Education's website.

The proportion of students who fail to complete upper secondary education within three years

In a comparison between recent years and students who began in October each year, a weighted average²⁰ reveals that around 31 per cent of students do not achieve a completed upper secondary education within three years. This proportion has remained relatively stable for students who started their upper secondary education in the years 2005 to 2007.

The differences in results between the municipalities over these three years are large, however, as municipalities with the lowest proportion of students who complete their studies within three years is about 43 per cent, while municipalities with the highest proportion have a result of around 88 per cent.

DIAGRAM 1. Proportion of students who fail to complete studies within three years.



Source: Statistics Sweden

The proportion of students who do not complete their upper secondary education in individual programme IV is far higher than is the case in other programmes. According to the Swedish National Agency for Education’s statistics, four to six per cent of students in programme IV complete their upper secondary education within three years. This means that the total proportion of students who do not complete their upper secondary education is higher than the proportion of students in academic and vocational programmes respectively.

Note 20. Each municipality contributes to the average in proportion to the number of students.

Statistics show that the proportion of students who do not complete their upper secondary education in the vocational programmes is generally six to seven per cent higher than the proportion who do not complete their studies in the academic programmes.

The proportion of students leaving early within four or five years

Even if the target is that students should complete their education within three years, there are various reasons why students need more time. For example, students might have transferred from the individual programme to a national programme or made a new choice and restarted from year one on another national programme. Other common reasons are that students were attending courses at other places but choose to move back home to study there, or students who have been exchange students and spent a year abroad. For natural reasons there are no statistics on these various reasons.

One important issue is when students discontinue their studies and do not pursue any other upper secondary education. Below we describe the proportion of students who have not completed their upper secondary education after three, four or five years. The figures show a weighted average from all municipalities.

TABLE 1. Proportion of students who did not complete their upper secondary education after 3 to 5 years, those starting in 2005.

| | All students | Academic | Vocational |
|---------|--------------|----------|------------|
| 3 years | 31% | 21% | 28% |
| 4 years | 24% | 15% | 23% |
| 5 years | 23% | 14% | 23% |

Source: Statistics Sweden

One additional year of secondary education from three to four years results in the proportion of early leavers in total falling by about seven percentage points. A fifth year of upper secondary education, however, does not have the same effect, as the difference is only one percentage point in relation to the proportion who did not complete their upper secondary education within four years.²¹

Note 21. Swedish National Agency for Education, Grades and education results in upper secondary education 2010/11.

The difference between academic and vocational programmes increases with the length of time required by students to complete their upper secondary education. This may be due to the fact that students on academic programmes are more likely to be striving to achieve university qualification, which requires a final grade from upper secondary school.

Of students who started the individual programme in 2005, about 20 per cent completed their upper secondary education within four years, i.e. 80 per cent failed to do so. This means that only one fifth of these students transferred from the individual programme to another programme or completed their education within the framework of IV.

There are consistently more women than men who complete their upper secondary education. The proportion of men who fail to complete their upper secondary education is about three to five percentage points higher than the corresponding proportion of women, whether within three, four or five years. There are differences within both academic and vocational programmes, and the differences are similar if we compare those starting in the years 2005 to 2007.

The organisation of upper secondary schools

A large proportion of upper secondary schools are operated by parties other than municipalities and county councils.

According to statistics at school level, it appears that students who chose to study at an independent school are more likely to complete their education compared with those who chose municipal schools. There is, however, good reason to critically examine what lies behind this difference. When SALAR examines differences between schools, it emerges, among other things, that the spread of results is greater among municipal schools compared with independent schools.

TABLE 2. Breakdown between school authorities for students who completed upper secondary education in 2010.

| | Schools, Number | Schools, Proportion | Students, Number | Students Proportion |
|--------------------------------|--------------------|------------------------|---------------------|------------------------|
| Municipal schools | 503 | 57% | 103,500 | 80% |
| Independent schools | 356 | 40% | 24,200 | 19% |
| Schools run by county councils | 22 | 2% | 400 | 1% |

Source: Statistics Sweden



Municipal schools have a significantly higher number of students per school than independent schools. The municipalities have a broader undertaking than other school authorities, for example offering the individual programme to a greater extent than is the case among independent schools.

As mentioned earlier, about five percent more women than men complete their upper secondary education. The distribution between the genders is the same in municipal schools, independent schools and schools run by county councils, which means that the kind of organisation has no bearing on the difference in the results between women and men. There are probably other factors that determine that fewer men than women achieve their targets.

When students leave early

As noted earlier, about 31 per cent have no final grade after three years of upper secondary studies, and many students need longer than three years to complete their upper secondary education. In the table below we look at the students who did not complete their upper secondary education within five years, in order to see what proportion of students do not return to upper secondary education. The purpose is to describe at what point during their education they leave early.

TABLE 3. Proportion of early leavers for those starting in 2005.

| | Year 1 | Year 2 | Year 3 | Total early leavers |
|----------------|--------|--------|--------|---------------------|
| All programmes | 6% | 4% | 13% | 23% |
| Academic | 2% | 2% | 10% | 14% |
| Vocational | 3% | 4% | 15% | 23% |

Source: Statistics Sweden

The table shows the latest year for which students were registered. Of all students registered, six per cent registered for year one at the most, and so on. The figures show that about half of the students who dropped out of upper secondary education did so in year three.

There are far more, about nine per cent, who discontinue their studies in the vocational programmes compared with those who drop out from the academic programmes. One reason why most leave early in year three may be that many students who are finding it difficult to achieve their targets leave upper secondary school for tactical reasons. With an incomplete upper secondary education, there are greater opportunities of a second chance in the adult education system.²²

Proportion who finish education but lack qualifications for higher education

Among those who complete their upper secondary education, it is interesting to see the proportion that do not have qualifications to continue studying in higher education despite the fact that achieved a final grade.

BASIC QUALIFICATION FOR HIGHER EDUCATION

In order to achieve basic qualification for higher education, the student years in this study must have, among other things, a final grade with a Pass in at least 90 per cent of courses, i.e. 2,250 credits. Students who received the grade Fail in more than 10 per cent of the courses are therefore not qualified to continue studying in higher education.

Note 22. Swedish National Agency for Education, Grades and education results in upper secondary education 2010/11.

TABLE 4. Proportion with final grade within three years without basic qualification for higher education.

| First year | All students | Academic | Vocational |
|------------|--------------|----------|------------|
| 2005 | 6.5% | 5.4% | 9.0% |
| 2006 | 5.6% | 5.1% | 7.6% |
| 2007 | 7.4% | 5.1% | 11.2% |

Source: Statistics Sweden

The proportion of students who complete their upper secondary education without achieving qualifications for higher education has increased in total at a national level. The figures in the above table are calculated for students by category, showing clearly that there has been an increase in the vocational programmes. The increase that took place between those starting in 2006 and 2007 shows that students on vocational programmes found it more difficult to achieve grades that were high enough to qualify them for higher education.²³

The proportion of men who do not achieve qualifications for higher education is two percentage points higher than the proportion of women. Of those starting in 2007, for example, 4.6 per cent of men and 2.8 per cent of women out of all students completed their upper secondary education without basic qualifications for higher education.

Note 23. See also appendix of tables on SALAR's website - Open Comparisons - Upper Secondary School.

The importance of completing upper secondary education

The proportion of students achieving grades within three years has remained largely unchanged over time at a level of just below 70 per cent. Increasing the proportion of those completing their upper secondary studies is therefore not a new challenge. Below is a discussion of the reasons for putting more effort into tackling the problem of discontinued studies and early leaving.

A foothold in the labour market

People who have no qualification higher than primary/lower secondary school find it very hard to get permanent jobs. In recent years the number of people registered as job seekers at the Public Employment Service with primary/lower secondary education only has almost doubled. The proportion of job seekers with limited education is expected to increase further, partly due to young people without final grades from upper secondary education.

Demand for qualified labour has increased in many sectors, while most of the jobs that do not require at least upper secondary competence have largely been lost through rationalisation. Developments in the labour market have thus created a high risk that people who only have a primary/lower secondary education will suffer long-term unemployment. This risk is particularly high among young people, as they have not been able to gain any experience of work and are thus unable to compete with competence acquired at work.



Research²⁴ confirms that young people who have discontinued their upper secondary education have a lower activity rate, are less likely to study as adults and are more likely to receive unemployment benefit than those who have completed their upper secondary education, despite the opportunities offered by society for additional qualifications. It also takes a long time before people who have left upper secondary school early become established in work.

Tougher requirements in the school system

Reforms are currently under way in the school system that will have consequences for young people who do not complete their upper secondary education. Introduction programmes at upper secondary school have replaced the individual programme and are only open to students without qualifications from primary/lower secondary school. This means that qualified students

Note 24. Hall Caroline, Extending vocational courses at upper secondary school – effects on early school leaving, educational level and income, Uppsala: IFAU, report 2009:7.

who drop out of upper secondary education are not permitted to pursue introduction programmes. The consequence may be that qualified students who are not pursuing national programmes may be referred to look for jobs on the open labour market, a market that in turn demands upper secondary competence as a minimum.

The changes have also resulted in institutes of higher education tightening their rules on qualification, with fewer alternatives available. The new rules on qualification mean that the path to higher education studies has been made longer for those who do not complete their upper secondary education compared with the previous rules. For example, the opportunity to apply to an institute of higher education with a reduced programme has been removed as of 1 July 2010.²⁵

In this context it may be added that the changes in the higher education rules probably contribute to the fact that virtually no students pursue reduced programmes, i.e. programmes in which students are exempted from courses corresponding to a maximum of 250 credits because of difficulties at school. Over the last three years the proportion of students with final grades from a reduced programme has fallen from 2.6 per cent to 0.4 per cent. Many students who find it difficult to achieve their targets leave upper secondary school with incomplete grades, with a view to supplementing and achieving final grades at an institute of adult education. Instead of achieving a final grade with the reduced programme, 16–17,000 students left year 3 of upper secondary school without a completed upper secondary education, but with an overall grade certificate.^{26,27}

Shortage of labour

In Sweden it is estimated that around 1,600,000 people will leave the labour market for reasons of age during the period 2010–2025, compared with around 1,350,000 people retiring because of age during the previous 15 years.²⁸ Despite rationalisation measures and productivity increases, this generation shift will probably result in a shortage of labour in many parts of Sweden. This means that everyone who completes their upper secondary education will in various ways contribute to an increase in the labour supply. Encouraging more young people to complete their upper secondary educa-

Note 25. Swedish National Agency for Higher Education, www.hsv.se/densvenskahogskolan/utbildningspauniversitetochhogskolor.

Note 26. Document certifying which courses have been completed.

Note 27. Swedish National Agency for Education, Grades and education results in upper secondary education 2010/11.

Note 28. Public Employment Service (2010) Generation shift in the labour market – in a national and regional perspective.

tion and become established on the labour market is a question of making use of labour, contributing to economic growth and guaranteeing tax income and welfare.

A country with a high proportion of young people with only primary/lower secondary education finds it difficult to maintain a high level of employment and to retain social cohesion and a high level of competitiveness. If the EU in general has a high proportion students leaving school early, the Union will find it difficult to compete on the global market and to achieve the target of smart, sustainable growth for all. According to the EU Commission's calculations, it would take a one per cent increase in the proportion of students completing their upper secondary education to add about half a million additional qualified young employees to the EU economy every year.²⁹

”If the EU in general has a high proportion students leaving school early, the Union will find it difficult to compete on the global market and to achieve the target of smart, sustainable growth for all.”

Students' future quality of life

Young people with a high level of absenteeism and a low level of education are more likely than others to have a negative self-image and run a higher risk than others of developing destructive lifestyles. This is confirmed in a number of different investigations and reports. Recently, for example, the Swedish National Board of Health and Welfare and the Swedish National Institute of Public Health have issued a joint report that aims to provide a current overview of developments in public health.³⁰ The conclusions of the report include the fact that people with a long education are more likely to have healthier living habits than people with a short education. People who only have a primary/lower secondary education run a higher risk of mortality from all common diseases than people with upper secondary education.

Note 29. Directorate-General for Internal Policies of the Union (2011) How can we prevent students leaving school early in the EU.

Note 30. Directorate-General for Internal Policies of the Union (2011) How can we prevent students leaving school early in the EU.

More than half of the factors that influence how students succeed at school depend on factors within the school.³¹ A successful school therefore has major opportunities to compensate for factors that restrict a young person's living conditions in general, such as difficult domestic conditions. All schools also have a responsibility to self-critically examine the norms within the school that either facilitate or restrict young people's conditions. This means that education is extremely significant for how young people perceive themselves and their potential to choose a positive lifestyle.

Students' right to complete their education

The Swedish Education Act³² is clear about the right of students to complete their upper secondary education. A student who has started a national programme, a national specialisation or a special variant, has the right to complete the education, either with the school authority or, if the school authority is a municipality or a county council, within an area of collaboration. This also applies if the conditions that formed the basis of the student being accepted are changed during the study period. Students who have started upper secondary apprenticeship courses have the same rights. If it is no longer pos-

Note 31. Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions (2011) Visible learning.

Note 32. Swedish Education Act (2010:800), Chapter 16.



sible to arrange workplace-based learning, they must be offered education within school-based learning in the programmes that they had started. As a final option, they must be offered education on other vocational programmes.

Students also have the right to complete their upper secondary education after a break in studies of no more than one year to study abroad. There is an exception if the school authority clearly stated, when the course in question was offered, that it does not include entitlement to a break in studies.

A student who moves to another municipality to start a national programme or specialisation is entitled to complete his or her education in the same programme or specialisation in the new municipality of residence. If the new municipality of residence does not offer the course in question, the student has the right to complete his or her education in a different municipality or in a county council that does offer the course.

A student who has started an introduction programme has the right to complete his or her education with the school authority in accordance with the plan in force when the course started, or in accordance with a modified plan if the student gave his or her permission for the plan to be changed.³³

The right to upper secondary education applies for qualified students up to and including the first half of the calendar year in which they reach the age of 20.³⁴

A major concern

The challenge of reducing youth unemployment contains at least two perspectives. One is to work preventively to avoid young people becoming unemployed and dependent on benefits. The other is to target initiatives at those young people who are currently neither working nor studying.

Municipal initiatives in the area of education play a vital role in young people's opportunities to establish themselves in the labour market. In connection with SALAR's prioritised areas, it is emphasised that the proportion of students who complete their upper secondary education with complete grades must be increased. This is also emphasised in the EU's growth strategy, EU 2020.

Getting young people into work is a priority issue for SALAR. Within this initiative, broad-based work is being carried out to create better conditions for young people to gain a foothold in the labour market when they have finished their education. In addition to this report, for example, also being implemented are a collaborative project involving five regional associations to

Note 33. Swedish Education Act (2010:800), Chapter 17.

Note 34. Swedish Education Act (2010:800), Chapter 15.



reduce early secondary school leaving, methodological support for improved study and careers guidance with a view to reinforcing the link between school and the labour market, a guide on the responsibility of municipalities to provide information and a national system for reporting health consultations with students and their effects.

SALAR has also had Better School Results has a priority issue for several years. A starting position is that the Swedish school system is not as bad as public debate would lead people to believe, but nor is it as good as it should be. If results are to improve, all students must be given the support they need in the form of initiatives as early as possible.

Reasons for leaving school early

Early school leaving is one of the most important – perhaps the most important of all – indicator of failure in the school system, for the individual, for the school and for society. According to research, discontinued studies can be explained by structural and individual factors. Structural factors can, for example, have an ethnic or social background, while individual factors can be school burnout or ambitions. It is, however, not easy to differentiate between individual and structural factors.

Research from Sweden

Early school leaving from Swedish upper secondary schools results from a number of different causes and differs greatly between individuals.³⁵ Swedish research confirms that the group of students who discontinue their upper secondary education is heterogeneous and includes both students who are just a few credits short and students who dropped out at an early stage of their education. Students in the former individual programme and students pursuing courses with an over-representation of the opposite gender tend to drop out to a greater extent than others.³⁶

Note 35. Swedish National Agency for Education (2008), Early school leaving and support initiatives in upper secondary education.

Note 36. Government (2003), School failure – what happened next? Stockholm: Fritzes

The fall in numbers passing through school over time can be linked to the introduction of the target-based grading system, which visualises the proportion of students who do not complete their education as they did not achieve passes. In the previous grading system, corresponding performances could be awarded a grade 1 and be counted as a pass. The inclination to complete their education is also lower for students with low primary/lower secondary school grades. This is true for both academic and vocational courses. Researchers believe that all in all this increases the risk of studies being discontinued.

International and Swedish research reveals that unauthorised absence is an early sign of future early school leaving.³⁷ There are even researchers who believe that the process leading to early school leaving starts even before a student begins at school. Such factors can include deficiencies in the care provided by legal guardians and difficult domestic conditions.

Researchers talk of school failures and early leaving from upper secondary school being an indicator of a high risk of future problems in the individual and costs for society. What Swedish research has so far failed to explain is – put briefly – why some people succeed despite both leaving school early and having poor grades.

Examples from Denmark

The Danish Research Council and a number of Danish universities have conducted a research project to find out why students at Danish vocational colleges drop out at the upper secondary stage.³⁸ Reasons range from “they don’t teach you enough” to school burnout, but it is generally a combination of factors that causes a student to discontinue his or her studies. It can be seen that one factor of particular importance is the student’s social background, which has the biggest influence on a student dropping out.

Research also shows that drop-outs often mean that they leave the education system entirely. But while society views an early school leaver as a failure, students sometimes have the opposite perception. Students themselves view the joint first and second terms of the vocational course as a trial period. If they choose to drop out, it is not seen as a failure, they view it rather as the fact that they are simply trying things out.

There are also more early leavers from schools located in inner suburbs or large cities. It is also a fact that Danish young people who are outside the la-

Note 37. Sundell, Knut, Bassam El-Khoury and Josefin Månsson Stockholm (2005) Students out and about – who are the truants? Research and Development Unit.

Note 38. Bäckman, Olof, et al, Dropping out in Scandinavia – social exclusion and labour market attachment among upper secondary school drop-outs in Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden Stockholm: Institute for Future Studies, report 2011:8.



bour market are obliged to go into education, and if you have not chosen your course voluntarily this contributes to an increase in early school leaving. The shortage of work placements also has a negative effect on early school leaving, as one in three to one in four vocational students have not found a work placement after the first year. Finding a work placement is also vocational students' own responsibility, and this adversely affects, for example, socially deprived students, immigrants and students from ethnic minorities.

Danish research has also shown that there is a strong connection between students with a high level of absenteeism at primary/lower secondary school and those who eventually drop out of school entirely. One important conclusion is therefore to focus on measures aimed at this group. There are clear action plans, support and requirements – based on the individual's circumstances – which are stated to be important success factors in preventing and reducing drop-outs.

Preventing early school leaving

Several national programmes have been implemented in the UK to reduce unauthorised absence, early leaving and the most common exclusions in the UK. The results achieved through these programmes are generally considered to have been satisfactory, although there are exceptions and the results can vary locally.

In the Netherlands, special action plans to tackle problems of discontinued studies have been successful. The reason for the significantly lower rates of early school leaving in Dutch schools can be partly explained by the fact that students can choose easier exam levels at upper secondary school. This enables schools to retain students and have them complete their studies.

In the Netherlands they also work a lot with public statistics from a national level down to school level and put public pressure on schools to tackle drop-outs. They also have fact sheets, documents and the like published with various kinds of information, for example about the proportion of students who complete their education.

Closing reflections

The success of each upper secondary school is determined by how well it succeeds in inspiring students to learn and how open it is to the individual circumstances of students and changes in the outside world. These are challenges that require constant inquisitiveness about what can be improved.

It is interesting to confirm that the question of what makes a school successful is in many respects the same in different kinds of schools. In a comparison with SALAR's studies of primary/lower secondary education, many of the success factors that we have noted in this report reappear. Open Comparisons, with experiences from successful primary/lower secondary schools, describes, for example, how clear management, a focus on results, strategic skills development, high expectations, good relations, the ability to identify needs for support and to take the right action are all important success factors for the students' results. These might appear self-evident, and maybe we should instead look at how the success factors that schools highlight can become preconditions for education with which all schools should comply.

What we identify as success factors are confirmed by research, for example in John Hattie's meta-analysis of what produces good results at school. It is very alarming to see as many as around one third of upper secondary school students not completing their education within three years. It is time for all schools to start working in the way that has been proven to work and to use it as support in helping all students to complete their upper secondary education.

One of the success factors is early, relevant initiatives to identify and satisfy individual needs. We can confirm that many students need more than three



years to complete their upper secondary education. A fourth year of study means that far more students complete their upper secondary education. A fifth year, however, has virtually no effect on the proportion of students who complete their education. The question we ask is: what impact would it have on future study results if the costs of a fifth year at upper secondary school were instead invested in supporting students at primary/lower secondary school level?

The requirements of the labour market mean that upper secondary education is in practice necessary, even though in formal terms it is voluntary. Schools that do not work on the premise that school is voluntary, but invest time and resources in skills development that relates to the necessity of upper secondary education, are also schools with good conditions to help students complete their education. Our conclusion is that students are helped by an attitude among adults that expresses a view that all young people need at least an upper secondary education.

To create a school system for all, we require cooperation across borders, openness and constant reassessment, and also the recognition of success and the visualisation and dissemination of work methods that work well. In

this context, we at the Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions hope that we can contribute to a constructive sharing of experience, including through the EU project Plug In, which will continue until 30 June 2014.

Municipal schools with the highest proportion of students who complete their upper secondary education have strong links with the labour market and society. The ability to collaborate with the outside world is an indicator of how great an interest a school takes in the rapid changes taking place in the world at large. If education is to be perceived as meaningful, it is a requirement that students receive both inspiration and understanding of the links between the knowledge targets in upper secondary education and the outside world's skills requirements. The ability of schools to create good relations is therefore important, not just internally between staff and students, but also to a very great degree externally between school staff and representatives of companies, the public sector, organisations and institutes of higher education.

The proportion of students who switch programmes has increased in recent years, indicating a high level of uncertainty among young people about what they want, what the courses contain and what they lead to. This uncertainty contributes to students losing motivation and risking discontinuing their studies. Improved study and careers orientation throughout the whole primary/lower secondary process, with initiatives from all staff at the school and greater collaboration with the labour market are required to achieve better upper secondary school choices. In this development work it is also important to improve communication and collaboration between primary/lower secondary schools and upper secondary schools, so that students can make better informed choices.

”To create a school system for all, we require cooperation across borders, an absence of status and constant reassessment, and also the recognition of success and the visualisation and dissemination of work methods that work well.”

Upper secondary education is divided into different programmes and specialisations, in which students are free to make choices between programmes on the condition that they are qualified and can compete for the places. This freedom of choice is limited by the social norms that govern the students' choices of education or school. One example is that students who choose a

course with over-representation in the opposite gender run a higher risk of discontinuing their studies than other students. There are also consistent differences between women and men in terms of study results. In this study we have not analysed the underlying reasons for this. Differences give rise to questions about relationships between gender distribution at upper secondary school level and the proportion of students who do not complete their education. One important challenge is to create a culture that tackles the norms that create various conditions for students to succeed at school, for example depending on gender.

In Sweden we have reliable statistics for students who start and complete their upper secondary school studies, but there are no summary data on what happens to students who discontinue their upper secondary school studies. The quality of municipal responsibility to provide information is therefore important to capture young people who have discontinued their studies. We can also draw the conclusion that adult education performs an important function in providing young people over the age of 20 with a second chance. With better achievement of targets in primary/lower secondary and upper secondary education, however, far fewer people would need adult education.

Every single student's study results are an important matter for the whole school system. By the same token, the school system should be an important matter for the whole of society. Although this report is limited to development work within the framework of the school system, we would like to emphasise that tackling early school leaving is also dependent on how society in general works. Politicians have an important role to play in defining the quality of what schools must achieve, but also of other organisations that contribute to providing young people with good conditions for learning. The State, municipalities, county councils, and trade and industry need to transform words into action and in various ways contribute to giving young people better conditions to succeed at school.

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Preventing early school leaving

The challenge of making sure that all students complete their upper secondary education

Only around 70 per cent of upper secondary school students complete their education within three years. Other students either need more time to achieve their targets or discontinue their upper secondary studies entirely. Far too many students leave upper secondary school without having obtained an education that meets the labour market's demands or qualifies them for higher education. What do the drop-outs mean? What can municipalities and schools do to make all students both want and manage to complete their education?

These are questions to which SALAR is attempting to find answers in this report. We have conducted interviews in municipal upper secondary schools in order to find good examples of how schools are working to counteract students discontinuing their upper secondary school studies. We have also analysed statistics and summarised the importance of more students achieving a complete upper secondary school education.

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