

Summary Achieving progress with the funding intended for tackling disadvantage

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The number of children who perform poorly at school is relatively low in the Netherlands. However, children whose background means they are less well equipped for a successful school career do lag behind other pupils. Since the 1970s, the Netherlands has had a policy to tackle educational disadvantage among these pupils. This policy has been changed a number of times over the years, and a complex system of funding has come about. Furthermore, how funding is spent by schools and the results achieved are not transparent.

The Education Council recommends that schools be better positioned to offer high-quality education to the pupils targeted by the policies on educational disadvantage. In our vision, schools could use the funding made available to tackle educational disadvantage to support pupils in reducing the gap between the culture at home and the school culture. Given the stubbornness of the disadvantage, the need for this is great, but the Education Council calls for attainable targets.

Recommendation 1: update and harmonise how funding is allocated

Funding intended for tackling disadvantage should be allocated to primary schools based on the level of educational attainment of the parents as well as ethnicity. These two factors are still the most reliable indicators of educational disadvantage. In the view of the Education Council, the removal of the ethnicity indicator from the 2006 allocation did not lead to improvements, but did result in increased complexity. By periodically monitoring the influence of both indicators on educational disadvantage, it is possible to keep the allocation model relevant. In this context, the Education Council also calls for the ceiling on extra funding based on the level of educational attainment of parents to be raised to the level of the basic qualification. To ease the administrative burden on schools, it is desirable to have the level of educational attainment of parents recorded once, where possible outside the school. The Education Council also recommends lowering the threshold in the weighting system so that schools with large numbers of Dutch children within the disadvantaged group can benefit more from the targeted funding made available. Finally, the way in which funding is allocated in primary education and in secondary education should be more closely aligned.

Recommendation 2: give schools freedom in how they spend the funding, but demand accountability

The Education Council recommends that schools should be left to decide for themselves how they spend their funds for tackling educational disadvantage. The use of these funds would then have to be accounted for within the existing accountability structure. It is essential for quality improvements in policies on educational disadvantage that schools demonstrate what they have done with the allocated funding (and why) and are open to discuss this with internal and external stakeholders. Schools should also be free to use the funding allocated by local authorities for tackling educational disadvantage within their own school policies. Accountability for each municipal project places an excessive administrative burden on schools. And working on projects each with its own accountability requirements would hamper the educational disadvantage policy anchored within the school.

Recommendation 3: develop expertise on providing targeted pupils with a good education

There is still little scientific evidence for the effectiveness of various measures to provide a good education to specific target groups. The Education Council recommends that investment be made in more systematic expertise development. This could help schools to deploy their resources for tackling educational disadvantage with greater precision and achieve the intended effects. Successful expertise development will require collaborative efforts between schools, education developers and researchers.