

A firm foundation for every pupil

20 June 2011

The Education Council was asked for its opinion on the action plan entitled "Basis voor presteren" ("*Foundation for Performance*"). The aim of the action plan is to raise performance in primary education through a more outcome-oriented approach. The action plan includes measures aimed at fostering excellence, professional development and assessment. The statutory role of primary education is to lay a broad foundation for the future school career of pupils. This requires ambitious education that goes beyond mere high achievement in language and arithmetic, as well as a professional school culture. With this vision in mind, the Education Council has formulated four recommendations that aim to improve on the action plan.

Ensure that pupils in primary education are offered broad-based development

The broad remit of primary education means that attention must be paid to both cognitive and intellectual aspects as well as to the social and emotional development of pupils. The Education Council regards a good command of language and arithmetic as a prerequisite for further development. It is therefore appropriate that special attention is devoted to these subjects in the form of reference levels. The Education Council also recommends that reference levels are also developed for English and that these are introduced in due course. It is important that the attention devoted to language and arithmetic does not lead to a deterioration in the quality of other subjects or to reduced attention for the social and emotional development. The Education Council advocates an integrated approach to learning and development.

Use assessment as a diagnostic tool

To offer pupils the best possible development opportunities, the education offered must be adapted to their level. Assessment and a pupil tracking system are needed to gain insight into this level. The Education Council favours assessment at the end of the primary education cycle for Dutch language, maths and, in time, for English too. We recommend that guidelines are developed to moderate the assessments in line with the reference levels. This would make the introduction of a single, uniform final assessment unnecessary. However, the Education Council does consider it desirable that a non-compulsory final assessment is developed by the government and made available to all schools. The assessment could also serve as a national survey at the system level of pupils in group eight. If a school were selected for the national survey, use of the government assessment would be compulsory. Moderated assessments would make it possible for schools to compare their learning outcomes with a larger group and to learn from the approaches of other schools.

Establish a professional learning culture

The Education Council regards the strengthening of the quality of the entire school organisational chain as a crucial factor in improving educational performance. We therefore endorse the measures for professional development. To strengthen an ambitious learning culture in schools requires a professional dialogue at all levels and among all participants. The Education Council sets great store by mandatory in-service training as part of the register of teachers. In addition, the Education Council believes it is desirable that a compulsory register is also introduced for school leaders. In the Education Council's view, strict requirements for the competence of teaching staff and the school leader represent a condition that would give schools a better chance to step up to their professional responsibilities.

Strengthen the educational offering from schools for three and four year-olds.

To achieve a continuous line of development, there would need to be a good educational offering for all three and four year-olds under the responsibility of primary schools. The Education Council therefore recommends that the pilot project involving places in schools for three year-olds with a language impairment be expanded to include three year-olds without any language impairments. If this proves successful, it could be expanded to all pupils. A stimulus is also needed for the quality of child care and preschool education. The Education Council supports the use of a child tracking system and recommends that at least one member of every team of

teaching staff should have completed a programme of higher professional education. The Education Council does not advocate compulsory attendance at preschool and early years education.