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STATSREVISORERNE
RIGSREVISIONEN



Extract from Rigsrevisionen's report on
the reform of the Folkeskole
submitted to the Public Accounts Committee



1849
147.281
237
1976
114.6
22.480
908

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1. Introduction and conclusion

1.1. PURPOSE AND CONCLUSION

1. This report concerns the reform of the Danish Folkeskole (public school - primary and lower secondary education) and how the Danish Ministry of Education has supported and followed up the implementation of the reform. The reform to improve the quality of the public school system is the result of a broad-based political agreement from June 2013. An agreement that led to several amendments to the Folkeskole Act, most of which took effect in the school year 2014/15, which means that they have been in force for three full school years.

The political agreement sets forth three national, overall goals for the development of the Folkeskole:

1. The Folkeskole must challenge all pupils to realise their full potential.
2. The Folkeskole must lower the significance of social background on academic results.
3. Trust in the Folkeskole and the wellbeing of the pupils must be enhanced through respect for professional expertise and practice.

Achievement of these three overall goals is supported by the following three focus areas:

1. A longer and more varied school day with more lessons and improved quality of teaching and learning
2. Competence development of teachers, pedagogical staff and school leaders
3. Few, clear objectives and simplification of rules.

The reform led to several amendments to the Folkeskole Act: minimum number of lessons (section 14b), exercise and physical activity during the school day (section 15), number of lessons by subject (section 16), assisted learning (section 16a) and competency requirements for teachers (chapter 4 of the act).

THE FOUR NATIONAL PERFORMANCE TARGETS SET FOR THE REFORM OF THE FOLKESKOLE

- 1.1. Minimum 80% of the pupils must be proficient in reading and maths.
- 1.2. The number of high-performance students in Danish and math must be increased year by year.
- 2.1. The number of pupils performing poorly in the national tests on reading and math must be reduced year by year.
- 3.1. The wellbeing of pupils must increase.

2. The Ministry of Education is responsible for the Folkeskole, including reforms in the area, whereas the municipalities manage and run the just under 1,300 municipal public schools in Denmark. In the term 2016/17, the public schools served just under 550,000 pupils and employed approximately 45,000 teachers, and the municipalities' total spending on the Folkeskole was approximately DKK 41 billion. The reform of the Folkeskole will increase public spending by approximately DKK 6 billion in the period up to 2020, and from then on by approximately DKK 430 million annually.

It falls upon the Ministry of Education to provide support and counselling to the municipalities and schools on rules and requirements concerning the Folkeskole. Furthermore, the ministry develops various tools for the schools, like IT systems, and it has authority to demand that the municipalities employ certain instruments in support of knowledge sharing and evaluation in the Folkeskole. To these tasks should be added the ministry's responsibility for supervising the quality of the Folkeskole and monitoring the performance and state of the Folkeskole, in general.

3. The purpose of this study is to assess whether the effort made by the Ministry of Education to support the implementation and follow-up on the reform of the Folkeskole has been sufficient to ensure improvement of the academic standards of the Folkeskole. The report answers the following questions:

- Has the Ministry of Education provided an appropriate basis for implementing the reform of the Folkeskole?
- Has the Ministry of Education's effort to follow up on progress made in the three focus areas been sufficient to ensure that they support achievement of the goals set for the reform?

Rigsrevisionen initiated the study in August 2017.

CONCLUSION

The Ministry of Education's evaluation of the reform after it had been in place for three full school years, showed that the academic performance targets set for the reform had been achieved to a limited degree, whereas the pupils' wellbeing had not changed significantly.

The effort made by the Ministry of Education to provide appropriate conditions for local implementation of the reform has generally been satisfactory, but Rigsrevisionen finds that the ministry's effort to follow up on progress in the focus areas and implementation of the goals set for the reform has been insufficient.

The Ministry of Education has developed, and made available to the municipalities and schools, various supporting tools for implementing and following up on the individual elements of the reform. The ministry has also launched a targeted information campaign, supported coordination of the implementation of the reform and supervised the implementation systematically.

Yet, Rigsrevisionen finds that the Ministry of Education's knowledge of whether the counselling and guidance it has provided so far have covered the requirements of the individual municipalities and schools and had the desired effect is limited. The ministry has therefore, so far, only had limited options to launch targeted, supporting initiatives to meet local challenges. Rigsrevisionen notes that the ministry failed to establish a reliable baseline for the national tests, which therefore had to be changed in the second year of the reform. Last, Rigsrevisionen notes that the legal framework concerning measurement of the pupils' well-being was not available at the time of the first measurement after the reform took effect.

Unreliable data reported to the Ministry of Education concerning scheduled lessons provide the basis for the ministry's follow-up on the implementation of the longer school day. Rigsrevisionen's analysis of the registered data indicates that a significant and probably growing number of planned lessons are not provided with the scheduled teachers. At the same time, Rigsrevisionen's analysis shows that the hourly-paid substitute teachers do not meet the qualification requirements defined for the public schools. The reform of the Folkeskole calls for competency development of teachers, pedagogical staff and school leaders, and statistics on the competencies held by the teachers that provide the scheduled lessons provide the basis for the ministry's monitoring of developments in this field. Overall, Rigsrevisionen's analysis indicates that the ministry overestimates the degree to which lessons are provided by teachers with the required competencies.

Section 16b of the Folkeskole Act permits the schools to shorten the school day by reducing the time reserved for assisted learning and transferring resources to subject-specific lessons, subject to approval by the local council. The act prescribes that this provision can be applied only at pre-school level and levels 1 to 3, and only in exceptional cases at levels 4 to 9. However, Rigsrevisionen's study shows that exemptions are mainly granted for levels 4 to 9, which is not consistent with the provisions of the act. The Ministry of Education has not acted on this knowledge, but has informed Rigsrevisionen that it is currently considering its response.

The Ministry of Education has adapted the national tests so that they can be used to follow up on the academic performance targets defined for the reform. The adaption was necessary, but has had the consequence that test results before and after the reform are no longer directly comparable. This makes it difficult to implement systematic measurement of progress made within each target in the first period after the reform took effect.

Rigsrevisionen notes that the Ministry of Education has implemented several initiatives in the focus area concerning few, clear objectives and simplification of rules. However, it took more than three years after the reform was put into practice to implement a simplification of the rules; it happened with the adoption of an amendment to the Folkeskole Act in December 2017 that reduced the number of binding common objectives in the Folkeskole.