



The Learning Environment in Schools and Training Establishments

A Strategic Plan for the Learning Environment in Primary and Secondary Education in Norway (2005-08)

LEARNING ENVIRONMENT





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Preface

All children and young people spend a great part of their growing up years at school. Therefore they also have the right to a good environment, both physically and psycho-socially. Work on the learning environment is a constant, never-ending effort. There are no easy short cuts to a good learning environment. To help schools create a good learning environment, the Directorate for Primary and Secondary Education has prepared a Strategic Plan for the Learning Environment in Primary and Secondary Education 2005 - 08: "The Learning Environment in Schools and Training Establishments".

The Strategic Plan is meant to help school owners and the individual school when deciding objectives, making plans and implementing efforts for developing good learning environments. Research shows that comprehensive efforts involving the whole school yield the best results. The Strategic Plan therefore aims to strengthen the competence of school owners and school leaders in order to increase the comprehensive approach to the learning environment. It also aims to stimulate teachers and instructors to acquire increased knowledge about purposeful, continuous efforts for developing the learning environment. The Strategic Plan also includes the learning environment offered to apprentices. Work on a separate strategic plan concerning quality in vocational education is in progress.

The Strategic Plan has been commissioned by the Ministry of Education and Research to follow up Report to the Storting No. 30 (2003 - 2004) *Culture for Learning. The Knowledge Promotion* will create a better culture for learning and develop the learning environment in schools and enterprises as learning organisations. Good learning and a good learning environment are closely connected. A good learning environment contributes to good academic achievements, social competence and well-being. That pupils and apprentices do not show behavioural problems is not a guarantee for a good learning environment in the school and training establishment. Even though substance abuse, bullying, violence and vandalism are not a big problem for the learning environment of the children and young people, the school may all the same have a poor learning environment without satisfactory learning.

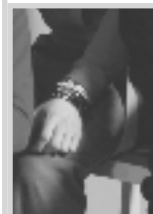
The Strategic Plan emphasises that efforts must be knowledge-based and contribute to disseminating knowledge about what is effective in schools and training establishments. A high quality learning environment demands a great deal from the leaders', teachers' and instructors' competence in developing a good learning environment for the whole school. For schools to achieve this it is necessary to have local freedom of action and local responsibility.

Pupils with difficulties often have complex problems. The Strategic Plan therefore aims to create cohesion between the various areas. With the aid of competence development schools and training establishments are to be strengthened as learning organisations so that they can adapt their contents and working methods and so give each pupil and apprentice an adapted education.

The Strategic Plan for the Learning Environment in Primary and Secondary Education (2005 - 2008) aims to contribute to a good and secure learning environment through local knowledge development, local competence plans and local action!

A Survey of Measures for 2005 is attached to the Strategic Plan. This Survey will be adjusted each year and can be accessed on the area for the learning environment on Skolenettet, <http://skolenettet.no/lom>. The Directorate for Primary and Secondary Education's areas of measures are revised each year in accordance with the annual Proposition No. 1 to the Storting from the Ministry of Education and Research and the annual budget letter from the Ministry of Education and Research.

Petter Skarheim
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The Significance of the Learning Environment



The Strategic Plan for the Learning Environment is based on the Core Curriculum and the Quality Framework. It embraces the physical and the psycho-social environment and is meant to help stimulate the pupils and apprentices in their personal development and identity. The Strategic Plan is furthermore meant to contribute to the development of ethical, social and cultural competence and to the ability to understand and take part in democratic processes.

Both national and international research has thoroughly documented that the learning environment is significant when it comes to school achievements. The assessment of Reform 97 shows that pupils are happy at primary and lower secondary schools. The net-based surveys called the Pupil Inspectors and Apprentice Inspectors show the same results. However, at the same time international surveys indicate that disorder, low motivation and undisciplined pupils are a challenge for Norwegian schools. Many learning environments are characterised by imprecise rules and poor rule enforcement, conflicts, lack of focus on leadership and bad relationships between pupils and teachers. They are also unstructured and have poorly founded efforts for mastering problematic behaviour. (Cf Nordahl et al. 2003)

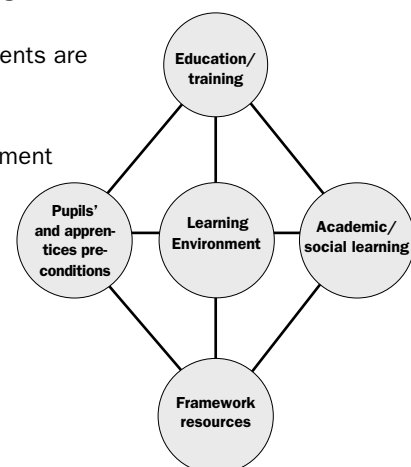
A good learning environment contains few behavioural problems such as bullying, noise and disorder, vandalism, violence, substance abuse, crime, racism and discrimination. Each pupil and apprentice is taken care of, and loneliness, unhappiness and insecurity have been reduced. This applies also to the pupils with special challenges and needs. In a good learning environment the school building is suited to all the pupils' need for learning, and the premises are clean and hygienic. Conditions both indoors and outdoors must be pleasant with few risks for injuries. The good learning environment shows that there is high correlation between well-being, social learning and good physical and mental health. It provides all pupils and apprentices with the best possible conditions for learning and developing.

The teacher is probably the most important resource when it comes to developing the learning environment. The individual teacher must not be left to face behavioural problems on his/her own. These are the responsibility of the school as an entirety. The individual teacher must receive support and guidance from the school's leaders and from colleagues when problems arise. Cooperation with parents is also important. If the school cannot solve problems on its own, it is necessary to seek external help. The learning environment of schools and training establishments depends on the interaction between the school or the training establishment and the other services and support system.

The following aspects of schools and training establishments are central to developing the learning environment:

- The psycho-social environment
- Cooperation between participants in the learning environment
- Relationships between children and young people
- Physical and mental health
- Leadership
- Norms, rules, school organisation
- Values (views on learning and people, democracy, pupil participation, inclusion, well-being)
- Pupil participation
- Parent involvement (inter al. cooperation home - school)
- The physical working environment

The various aspects intersect and must be viewed in connection so as to enable comprehensive work for a good learning environment. Working comprehensively one can offer pupils and apprentices individual adaption, motivation and the will to learn while contributing to an inclusive and health-promoting education. The emphasis placed by teachers and instructors on relationships, leadership, norms and values is essential for the results achieved.



The model shows how the learning environment is connected to the school as a whole

Selection of Models and Measures in Schools and Training Establishments

The Strategy Plan for the Learning Environment in Primary and Secondary Education (2005-08) is designed to give expert support to the development of new models and new knowledge locally and regionally, as well as clarify how knowledge about good implementation strategies can be developed and collected. Greater effort is needed to try out different models and measures in educational practice. The implementation of measures is meant to help pupils and apprentices attain the best possible educational, social and personal development. It is recommended that regional and local binding cooperation agreements are entered upon between the practical field and research institutions such as university colleges and universities.

Norwegian schools have used a number of different models, measures and programmes to develop further the learning environment in schools. Measures have been initiated both nationally and locally in order to stop an undesirable development leading to certain forms of behavioural problems, and a number of preventive measures have also been implemented.

As an aid to analysing the professional quality of the various approaches, we can divide the measures aimed at developing the learning environment into three main groups:

1) Measures based on commitment and intentions

Local initiatives with good intentions without theoretical anchoring and empirical documentation. These measures are sometimes describes as “lifting yourself by the hair”. Strong commitment seldom yields results if it is not based on theory. Besides, the transfer value will be very small.

2) Measures with probable effect

Measures that are based on theoretical knowledge and/or draw pedagogical conclusions from empirical research. These measures will probably have a relatively good chance of achieving the desired results as the strategies have a clear theoretical anchoring. In these cases research-based knowledge is used to develop pedagogical practice.

3) Measures with documented effect

Measures based on theory and empiricism. Assessments have been carried out to document effect within defined result areas. The use of this type of measure facilitates the desired results if implemented and carried out in accordance with the premises.

Many of the approaches that have been taken to develop the learning environment can be categorised as measures based on local commitment and good intentions. Report 2000¹ about programmes and measures concerning social competence and behavioural problems, proves that little assessment and research was carried out in this area. An expert committee evaluated about 50 school programmes dealing with behavioural problems and the development of social competence, and placed 41 of these programmes in the first category. This resulted in an increase in the assessment of certain programmes and strategies. Gradually more models and measures have been developed with a strong theoretical anchoring, and therefore also with probable effect.

Factors that are of great significance for the success of preventive work in schools are:

- a strong professional leadership
- clear rules and consistent enforcement of rules
- a defined approach to preventing and dealing with behavioural problems
- pupil-oriented and adapted education
- pupil participation in decision making
- positive school environments
- group leadership that promotes relationships and increased adult - student ratio

¹ Rapport (2000). *Assessment of Programmes and Measures for Reducing Problematic Behaviour and Developing Social Competence*. Proposal from expert committee appointed by the Ministry of Education and Research and the Ministry of Children and Family Affairs.





The Directorate for Primary and Secondary Education has presented several of these theoretically based models and measures in guidance material about the development of social competence and behavioural problems in schools. Comprehensive work against bullying has for example been implemented by means of The Manifesto against Bullying. A number of school measures have been presented in the Government's Strategy Plan for the Mental Health of Children and Young People and in the Knowledge Platform for School Measures for the Prevention of Substance Abuse. Several measures aimed at learning social competence have been developed and assessed, and are currently being used in kindergartens and schools.

When working for the development of a good learning environment emphasis must be placed on how change is to be engineered in schools and training establishments. Today we know that traditional approaches such as sending teachers to courses without requiring them to reflect over and change their personal practice will to a very small degree yield the desired results with respect to developing the learning environment. Similarly, neither will the development of information material on its own lead to change. An important question is how knowledge about the learning environment and its significance best can be implemented in schools and training establishments. The lack of clear plans for implementation may lead to models and measures not being anchored in the pedagogical work and not being worked with over time. Research shows that school leaders play a decisive role when it comes to whether the individual school is to succeed with the implementation of measures or not. Efforts must become part of the pedagogical work so that they are a continual task at each school and training establishment. Furthermore we need more knowledge about how schools and training establishments can make use of external support in a way that is pertinent to their development work.

The development of and work with documented models and measures connected to the learning environment may increase schools' and training establishments' significance as preventive arenas for children and young people to grow up in. They can also help increase development possibilities and learning yields for the individual pupil and apprentice. Cooperation with parents in preventive efforts is important to ensure that children and young people have good conditions to grow up in. It is also important to develop collective cultures with a high content of professional reflection and analysis, and here competence development is essential.

Areas of Measures

The overall objectives of the Strategic Plan

All pupils and apprentices are to be ensured a physical and psycho-social learning environment that promotes health, well-being and learning. Primary and secondary education is to promote the pupils' and apprentices' value awareness in a positive and accepting learning environment. A good learning environment must take into account the diversity to be found among pupils, apprentices and parents, and comply with the variations in preconditions and needs of pupils and apprentices.

Areas of measures:

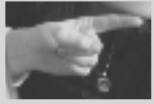
- ensure a physical and psycho-social working and learning environment that promotes health, well-being and learning
- help pupils and apprentices develop into value-aware, socially committed and learning-oriented individuals
- improve competence in schools, training establishments and teacher training in order to achieve a health-promoting and accepting learning environment for all
- help reinforce quality assessment of the learning environment
- disseminate research-based knowledge about various aspects of the learning environment
- strengthen international cooperation

I Ensure a physical and psycho-social working and learning environment that promotes health, well-being and learning

Primary and secondary education is to contribute to academic and social learning and promote children's and young people's physical and mental health. All education in schools, enterprises and other educational arenas is to be adapted to the abilities and preconditions of the individual pupil and apprentice. All pupils in primary and secondary schools have an individual statutory right to a good school environment². Any pupils that feel the indoor climate or other aspects of the school, from buildings to grounds, as a hindrance to their well-being, can address themselves to the school and ask for faults and deficiencies to be rectified. Steps must similarly be taken to ensure that the school's indoor/outdoor areas are designed so that development of the learning environment is possible; that there for instance are adequate outdoor grounds adjacent to the school, and that these in addition have a design and a size to inspire all-round activities. These are framework conditions that facilitate a learning environment that promotes physical and mental health. In addition, any pupils who feel they have been subjected to offensive words and actions such as bullying, violence, discrimination, racism and exclusion, can address the school and demand a reaction. Both pupils and parents can address the school and ask for faults and deficiencies in the school environment to be rectified. The request is to be dealt with as an individual decision in accordance with the Administration Act. For apprentices, the Act concerning the Working Environment applies.

²The Norwegian Education Act was in 2003 extended by a new section: "9a. The pupils' school environment", which gives "All pupils in primary and secondary schools [...] the right to a good physical and psycho-social environment that promotes health, well-being and learning. [...]" Schools are to work actively and systematically to promote a good psycho-social environment where the individual pupils can experience security and social belonging. A guide to Section 9a has been prepared: http://odin.dep.no/ufd/norsk/dok/andre_dok/veiledninger/045051-990068/dok-bn.html. Apprentices and journeyman candidates are employed by the enterprise. Section 9a does not apply to them, whereas the Act concerning the Working Environment does.





II Help pupils and apprentices develop into value-aware, socially committed and learning-oriented individuals



The underlying thought behind the Report no. 30 to the Storting 30 (2003-2004) *Culture for learning* is to create equal possibilities for all pupils. Schools must meet these challenges with a principled attitude towards diversity and the management of difference. There must be equal opportunities for all pupils to acquire the basic skills that are a necessary foundation for active participation in the school/training establishment and in society as a whole. Emphasis must be put on dialogue with parents, on user participation and mutual respect. Active citizenship and international joint responsibility are key words in this connection. Furthermore, education must give pupils and apprentices knowledge about human rights and democracy, so as to facilitate their participation in the democratic system.³



III Improve competence in schools, training establishments and teacher training in order to achieve a health-promoting and accepting learning environment for all

The Strategic Plan for Competence Development⁴ places special emphasis on competence development, model development, development projects, and programmes and measures involving the whole school. Competence development is meant to improve the school's ability to master the challenges posed by the requirement of ensuring all pupils a good physical and psycho-social environment both at school and in their local neighbourhood. Fortified adapted education, development and maintenance of positive learning environments and good school cultures are especially demanding on the leaders, the staff and the individual teacher and instructor. Efficient prevention requires high competence on the part of both those planning the efforts, and those responsible for their practical implementation. Most school measures with documented positive effects show that the planners have had in mind that this is a complex task where one's competence is continually being broadened, in addition to providing guidance, follow-up and feedback about whether the efforts yield results. Competence development should be system-oriented and closely tied to challenges faced in daily pedagogical practice. At the same time the individual pupil's and apprentice's abilities and needs must be considered.

³ This point refers to *Strategy for Active Citizenship in Primary and Secondary Education 2005-2009*. The main reason for a strategy for active citizenship is to strengthen the pupils' will and ability to participate actively in democratic processes, during education and later in life. Schools are important arenas for democracy. Learning about democracy takes place both in classrooms, breaks and through pupil participation in official bodies such as school boards and student councils. Active citizenship in education integrates knowledge about human rights with work on creating a good learning environment and for counteracting bullying, racism and other undesirable conduct.

⁴ The Ministry of Education and Research (2004). *Competence for Development. Strategic Plan for Competence Development in Primary and Secondary Education 2005-08*. http://odin.dep.no/filarkiv/222876/kompetanseutvikling_bokmal.pdf

IV Help reinforce quality assessment of the learning environment

The national quality assessment system is to promote quality development by facilitating informed decisions which are significant for the learning environment in primary and secondary education. In order to develop schools and training establishments as learning organisations, it is essential to strengthen the ability of leaders and staff to evaluate their own practice. Making good use of the national quality assessment system presupposes knowledge about analysis and how to exploit the information about resources, learning environments and learning yields that amongst other places can be found on the website skoleporten.no. The possibilities schools and training establishments have for offering adapted education, a good learning environment and learning yield, depend on knowledge about strong and weak sides of the individual school and training establishment and on a culture for learning and development. The national quality assessment system is to be an instrument for achieving this.

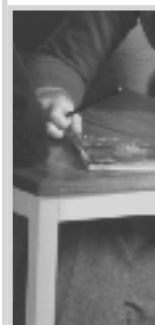
V Disseminate research-based knowledge about various aspects of the learning environment

During this period priority will be given to research that, based among other things on data from the national quality assessment system and from international surveys, offers knowledge about the connection between the learning and working environment (leadership, organisation of the education, working methods), adapted education and the learning yield of pupils and apprentices. It is also necessary to develop further our basic knowledge about the learning environment in schools and training establishments and the significance of the learning environment with respect to the pupils' development and learning. Research that is oriented more towards practice and results may give a foundation for a more knowledge-based practice in schools. Research based on utilising existent knowledge about the learning environment and closely following school development work, will be of central importance. Research about the learning environment and the conditions children grow up in must be both quantitative and evidence-based, but will also encompass qualitative studies. During this period the Directorate for Primary and Secondary Education will focus especially on research approaches that emphasise the documentation of results and effects.

VI Strengthen international cooperation

In cooperation with the Ministry the Directorate for Primary and Secondary Education will continue to cooperate with the OECD, the EU, UNESCO, the Nordic Council of Ministers and other organisations in order to ensure the exchange of knowledge and experience about the learning environment, through comparative studies amongst others. It is furthermore important to stimulate internationalisation in education as an important factor in the development of the learning environment.

Internationalisation in schools and training establishments concerns both encouraging positive attitudes and developing international competence. It will be important for this country to acquire better knowledge about which factors other countries prioritise in order to achieve good learning environments.



The Main Stakeholders



The responsibility for following up the *Strategic Plan for the Learning Environment in Primary and Secondary Education* (2005 - 08) follows the general distribution of responsibility between national authorities, municipalities and counties. Joint efforts should be encouraged so that national authorities, county councils, municipalities and schools coordinate their efforts in the target areas in order to facilitate greater local adaptation and exploitation of resources. The Pupils' Organisation, the National Parents' Committee for Primary and Lower Secondary Education (FUG) and other bodies with responsibilities, tasks and interests connected to the learning environment of children and young people, should also be central partners in the coordination of efforts.

The task of the Ministry of Education and Research is to:

- decide objectives and national priorities for the learning environment

The main responsibility of the Directorate for Primary and Secondary Education regarding the learning environment is to:

- follow up the strategic plan for the learning environment and children's growing-up conditions, based on the annual national budgets
- make sure there are information services to support school owners and the school sector's work in this area
- take part in ministerial cooperation fora for children and young people to ensure the coordination of measures concerning the learning environment and growing-up conditions, plus participate in fora with relevant directorates
- cooperate with universities and university colleges, school owners and labour organisations to aid competence and development work
- cooperate with professional and interest organisations in initiating, implementing and coordinating measures (projects, programmes and assessments)
- carry out result reporting and provide the Ministry with expert initiatives
- initiate and follow up research and assessments in this area and disseminate this knowledge to the school sector and other partners
- follow up Nordic and other international work and cooperation in this fields

It is the County Governor's task to:

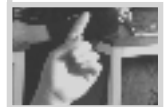
- follow up the strategic plan for the learning environment on the basis of the annual national budgets and official tasks
- stimulate cross-sectorial sectors to help ensure the coordination of measures concerning the learning environment and growing-up conditions
- stimulate cooperation about competence development and local development work between school owners and between school owners, universities, university colleges and other professional circles
- supervise school owners to ensure they fulfil their responsibility for the learning environment
- deal with complaints in accordance with the Administration Act
- supervise alternative municipal school schemes
- ensure that school owners secure home-school cooperation

It is the school owner's task⁵ to:

- follow up *The Strategic Plan for the Learning Environment in Primary and Secondary Education* (2005-08)
- seek professional support for competence development and local development work from universities, university colleges or other relevant professional circles when necessary
- when necessary cooperate regionally between municipalities, both about charting competence needs and about organising and implementing specific measures
- monitor the national quality assessment system by ensuring that schools assess the learning environment, and ensuring that the results are followed up
- help strengthen the role of the support system as an innovative partner in primary and secondary education
- contribute to cross-sectorial efforts and cooperation in this field

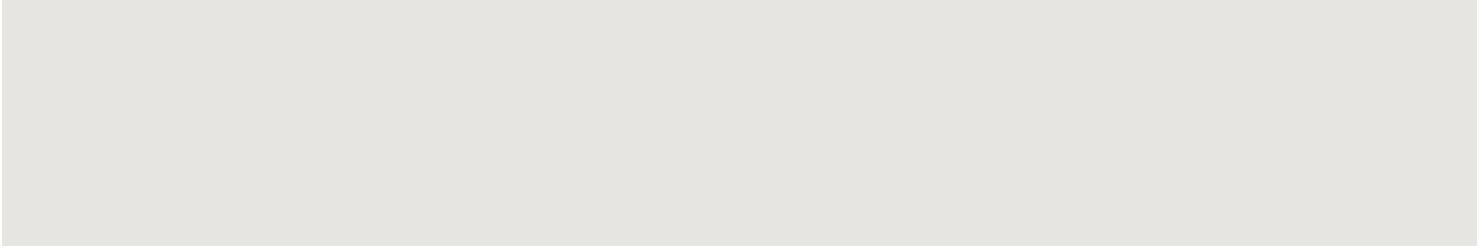
It is the task of universities and university colleges⁶ to:

- ensure that members of their professional staff have the necessary competence and understanding with regard to the learning environment and the challenges it raises in primary and secondary schools
- help create cohesion and unity between teacher training and challenges in the practical field
- develop relevant competence development courses for the practical field in cooperation with municipalities and counties
- cooperate about and coordinate competence development for primary and secondary education in order to ensure breadth in the collective regional and national efforts
- carry out research and development in cooperation with school owners and the rest of the schools' support systems
- help disseminate and spread results of research and development work to schools and other relevant partners



⁵ With respect to apprentices the division of responsibility and the role of the county councils will be drawn up in the Directorate for Primary and Secondary Education's Strategic Plan for Quality in Vocational Training

⁶ The role of universities and university colleges in work on the learning environment is to be seen in close connection with the competence development strategy and programmes for practical R&D work



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