

Summary

State supervision of schools – contributing to
improved learning outcomes (RiR 2013:16)



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State supervision of schools – contributing to improved learning outcomes

The Swedish National Audit Office has examined the state supervision and quality audit of primary and secondary schools. The National Audit Office's overall conclusion is that state supervision is currently not working in a sufficiently active manner to provide good conditions for all pupils to receive the same high quality of education. The regular supervision can therefore be developed. As it stands, the quality audit covers too small a portion of the education provided in Swedish schools for it to be able to compensate for deficiencies in this area within the supervision. The National Audit Office also believes that the Government's steering of the regular supervision and quality audit can be strengthened.

Assessment background

Reasons: Both national and international evaluations indicate declining learning outcomes among Swedish pupils and an increasing disparity between Swedish schools. One of the state's instruments for contributing to an equal high quality of education is an inspection of the activities of the school's principal organisers through supervision and quality audit. Since 2003, the state's audit of schools has been both strengthened and expanded. As part of the new Education Act that entered into force in 2011, both supervision and quality audit were prescribed by law, and the Swedish Schools Inspectorate gained expanded and strengthened sanction opportunities. Since no evaluation of the supervision and quality audit has been performed since the Schools Inspectorate's formation, there is little knowledge of the inspection's results.

Aim: The aim of the National Audit Office's assessment has been to examine whether or not the Schools Inspectorate's supervision and quality audit of primary and secondary schools promotes an equal high quality of education, and whether it contributes to favourable conditions for improved learning outcomes. The assessment has also aimed to investigate whether the Government steering has created favourable conditions for the Schools Inspectorate's activities. In this assessment, 'effective' refers to the supervision and quality audit contributing in an active way to all pupils having access to the same high quality of education. The National Audit Office's assessment has primarily focused on the regular supervision. The quality audit has mainly been examined based on the question of how it complements the supervision.



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Assessment results

The assessment has resulted in the following findings and conclusions.

There is a gap between expectations and reality

The Schools Inspectorate has a demanding and broad mandate. The agency shall examine principal organisers' school operations based on comprehensive legislation with sometimes considerable room for interpretation. The Parliament (Riksdag) has expressed that an equivalent school requires that the quality can be ensured, and that this will be achieved through supervision and quality audit. One of the Schools Inspectorate's main goals is for the agency to contribute to favourable conditions for improved learning outcomes. The citizens, and not least the pupils and guardians, may also have expectations that the Schools Inspectorate ensures the quality of the schools that have been subject to supervision and/or quality audit. However, the National Audit Office believes that there is a gap between the expectations that both the Parliament, the Government and the public have of the Schools Inspectorate's supervision and quality audit, and what the Schools Inspectorate in reality has the capacity to achieve, taking into account resources and the current approach.

The supervision reaches indirect prerequisites for learning rather than direct prerequisites

The National Audit Office's assessment reveals that the Schools Inspectorate, in its supervision, has difficulty assessing the quality of the way in which instruction is carried out, for example, if the teaching at a school is generally structured and characterised by active teacher support. This means that opportunities to influence the conditions for pupil learning outcomes are limited and the supervision is therefore, according to the National Audit Office, insufficiently active. Both the Parliament and Government, as well as the Schools Inspectorate, express that supervision should focus on those aspects that are important for pupils' learning outcomes. The research strongly supports the idea that what happens in the classroom has the greatest impact on learning outcomes. The planning and implementation of the tuition are examples of so-called direct prerequisites for improved learning outcomes. For example, only a fifth of the principals who responded to the National Audit Office survey state that they believe that the quality of teaching would improve if the school addresses the deficiencies pointed out by the Schools Inspectorate during supervision. In contrast, three quarters state that the quality regarding plans and documentation could be improved.

To assess how teaching is carried out at a school requires a lot of resources.

The National Audit Office believes that the current assessment performed by the Schools Inspectorate, of both principals' pedagogical leadership and certain aspects of the teaching, would have a more clear connection to the quality of education and learning outcomes if the assessment



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was also based on an observation of certain teaching situations within the framework of the regular supervision. The classroom visits that often took place during the period of the National Audit Office's assessment can be developed methodologically in order to better serve as a basis for evaluations in the supervision. However, the National Audit Office's assessment shows that the Schools Inspectorate focuses on evaluating and criticising schools and principal organisers' quality work. While this is an important prerequisite for a well-functioning school, it is a more indirect condition for equivalence and improved learning outcomes for the individual pupil. The Schools Inspectorate is also able to generally evaluate whether documentation, such as action plans and individual development plans, live up to the law's requirements, something which is important for the pupils' legal rights.

The quality audit addresses the teaching to a greater degree but is limited in scope

The Schools Inspectorate's quality audit is, according to the National Audit Office's assessment, more focused on the conditions that may contribute to the development of pupils' learning outcomes, when compared with the focus of the supervision. According to principal organisers and principals, the supporting documentation on which the evaluations are based is also of higher quality in the quality audit than in the corresponding areas within the supervision. The quality audit's ability to influence learning outcomes is however limited, as only a small proportion of the pupils are reached by this type of scrutiny. In 2012, only four per cent of the pupils were the focus of these quality audits deemed likely to contribute to improved learning outcomes. At the same time, the National Audit Office's assessment reveals that the combined quality audit reports are used by a much wider group. The principal organisers and principals surveyed, where many have not personally been the subject of quality audits but only of supervision, state that they use the reports to develop their own operations. That being said, the National Audit Office has not examined the quality audit in as much detail as the supervision. For example, the cost of the quality audit is considerably higher than for the supervision, which is an issue that has not been covered by the National Audit Office's assessment.

Unclear whether the needs analysis is accurate

The supervision of schools requires a lot of resources. Therefore, it is effective that available resources are allocated so that schools and principal organisers with the greatest risk of deficiencies also receive the most supervision. The Schools Inspectorate is responsible for this allocation. One shortcoming, however, is that the Schools Inspectorate has not evaluated whether the factors on which the risk and materiality analysis is based are functioning in a satisfactory manner. The Schools Inspectorate does not know if it actually is the schools with least deficiencies that receive the least amount of supervision. However, the Schools Inspectorate is planning to carry out such an evaluation in 2014.



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There is room to develop the supervision of how schools and principal organisers work to ensure that education is of equal standard

The National Audit Office's assessment finds that the supervision's ability to contribute to greater equivalence can be more effective. The issue of equivalence in education is of prime significance in the Education Act. It is the principal organiser who is responsible for the education in the organiser's schools being equivalent. Within the context of the regular supervision, the Schools Inspectorate has difficulty highlighting the shortcomings that involve the actual work with compensating for the pupils' varying preconditions. In contrast, there is often criticism directed at the documentation of specific support (action programmes) or the differences in learning outcomes between schools, which in itself is valuable, but which is assessed by the National Audit Office to be less effective than the examination of more direct prerequisites for greater equivalence.

The Schools Inspectorate's concretisation of legal requirements can be strengthened

Since the Education Act contains numerous constitutional requirements that are not clearly defined by the legislature, this means that the concretisation of what the legal requirements will involve in practice must take place at a regulatory level. In the individual evaluations, the Schools Inspectorate interprets the requirements of the law in concrete terms. These interpretations are based, inter alia, on the National Agency for Education's norms. In order to achieve equivalence in the supervisory evaluations performed by the different inspectors, it requires that the agency produce uniform interpretations of the law's requirements. However, a large majority of the inspectors do not consider the Agency for Education's norms and the Schools Inspectorate's operationalisation of the Act and Ordinance to be cumulatively sufficient to serve as a basis for the regular supervision.

Evaluations in the supervision are not always perceived as being equivalent

The National Audit Office's assessment has shown that the evaluations performed made in the supervision are not seen as equivalent. This is partly to do with the lack of concretisation of the law's requirements, but also to do with the fact that different inspection units within the Schools Inspectorate and different inspectors gather data in different ways. Principal organisers who have several schools also feel that the Schools Inspectorate evaluates the same type of data in different ways.



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Unclear what conclusions can be drawn from the supervision

It is clear from the National Audit Office's assessment that principals and principal organisers do not know with certainty how the supervision results are to be interpreted. Just over one quarter of principals and principal organisers consider it unclear whether the aspects of operations that are not criticised shall be deemed approved by the Schools Inspectorate, or if they in fact have not been evaluated. Furthermore, it is not specified in the supervisory decisions which aspects of the school's activities have been included in the supervision. To outsiders, such as pupils and guardians, it therefore becomes particularly difficult to draw conclusions about how well the school works on the basis of the supervisory decisions. That being said, the Schools Inspectorate has not been commissioned to, in the formulation of decisions, take into account that these decisions are actually used by parties other than those being evaluated.

The Schools Inspectorate can, to a greater degree, seek to ensure that deficiencies are addressed

In order for the supervision to have an impact, it requires a follow-up to ensure that the deficiencies have been addressed. The National Audit Office's assessment shows that such control measures are not implemented in many cases. During the period of the National Audit Office's assessment, a follow-up has often been performed in writing after three months, making it difficult to examine measures related to changes in how and with what quality operations are conducted. What the follow-up often achieves, however, is a verification that schools and principal organisers have started taking steps to rectifying the deficiencies and that documents has been corrected. In 2013, the Schools Inspectorate has started to develop the implementation of the follow-up.

The organisation of the inspection impedes qualitative evaluations of direct prerequisites for high quality

Of the two evaluation tools available to the Schools Inspectorate with an aim to contributing to favourable conditions for improved learning outcomes and increased equivalence, the agency has given priority to supervision over the quality audit. There are reasons for this, not least the Government steering indicating that supervision should be conducted regularly and continuously and that the possibility of combining the imposition of orders with a penalty has required significant resources. The two evaluation forms are different in nature and vary in their appropriateness depending on the purpose of the inspection. In the case of the supervision, the Schools Inspectorate has the possibility of using sanctions to enforce change or demand that operations cease in cases where principal organisers serious fall short in their obligations. On the other hand, the supervision's sanctioning abilities require that the evaluations result in a clear yes or no, and that the Schools Inspectorate clearly indicates how identified deficiencies can be



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addressed. This makes qualitative evaluations difficult in areas where the legislation is less concrete. Although it is possible to perform qualitative evaluations within the supervision, the National Audit Office considers there to be certain inherent contradictions between the supervisory model as such, and the possibility for the Schools Inspectorate to evaluate, and thus influence, the more direct prerequisites for the pupils' learning outcomes, primarily the teaching. The quality audit is better able to approach these qualitative aspects of school operations.

The Government's control needs to be strengthened

The Government's control has been characterised by confidence in the Schools Inspectorate, which has been relatively free to shape its own supervision and quality audit. This in itself is positive, but in this case, the National Audit Office finds that the control has been too limited. As shown in the National Audit Office's assessment, the quality audit is better able to cover those aspects of the schools' activities that provide pupils with direct prerequisites to achieve improved learning outcomes. Nevertheless, the Government's prior control regarding requirements of regularity in the quality audit has ceased. Furthermore, the Government has repeatedly asked the Schools Inspectorate to conduct an impact evaluation of their activities. When this has not been done, the steering has still not been tightened. Despite this, the Government has, without supporting data, asserted that the Schools Inspectorate's supervision and quality audits lead to improved learning outcomes.

The National Audit Office's recommendations

The Swedish NAO's recommendations to the Government:

- The Government should conduct an evaluation of the Schools Inspectorate's supervision and quality audit.
- Based on such an evaluation, the Government should consider whether the Schools Inspectorate's mandate should be clarified regarding the prioritisation between regular supervision and quality audit. The Government should also consider whether additional priorities should be established in order to promote the effective implementation of the Schools Inspectorate's mission.

The National Audit Office's recommendations to the Swedish Schools Inspectorate:

- The Schools Inspectorate should ensure that the supervision, to a greater degree, is oriented to facilitate qualitative evaluations of, for example, the teaching.
- The Schools Inspectorate should develop evaluation support for the inspectors by further clarifying the agency's interpretation of the statutory requirements. Through this, the reliability and equivalence of evaluations are strengthened and qualitative evaluations are facilitated.



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- The Schools Inspectorate should assess the accuracy of the risk and materiality analysis. The Schools Inspectorate's management states that the agency is planning such an evaluation in 2014.
- The Schools Inspectorate should make its establishment of practices more transparent and clarify its supervisory decisions. This is for the purpose of increasing the supervision's transparency and predictability for the target groups. In this way, the inspection's preventive function is strengthened.
- The Schools Inspectorate should continue the work that has been initiated to strengthen and develop the following-up of supervisory decisions. This is to ensure that principal organisers perform the measures needed to correct the highlighted deficiencies.

