



RIKSREVISIONEN

Summary:

Equal grades, equal ability?

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Follow-up on the Government's efforts to achieve equivalent grading in compulsory schools

Summary

The Swedish National Audit Office has audited the Government's initiatives to achieve equivalent grading in compulsory schools.

Background to the audit

Motive: Grades fulfil several important functions. First and foremost, they have to measure pupils' ability, but they also serve as an instrument of selection for the next level of education, and they are also used as an indicator in follow-up of and reconciliation against the national ability objectives by authorities and by the Riksdag and the Government. It is therefore important that grades are set in an equivalent way.

For a number of years, school agencies, the Swedish National Agency for Education and the Swedish Schools Inspectorate have confirmed in various assessments and investigations that grades and the setting of grades are failing to maintain equivalence. The Swedish National Audit Office has also previously audited the Government's initiatives to achieve equivalent grading. The Government and the school agencies have since implemented a wide range of measures, but deficiencies in grading persist.

Purpose: The audit focused on investigating whether the Government and the school agencies, through their management of educational activities, the production of supporting materials and information initiatives about these materials, have provided authorities, head teachers and teachers with the conditions required to achieve equivalent grading. The audit also investigated whether the school agencies have obtained, through follow-up, evaluation and supervision of grading, sufficient supporting data to direct governance and support towards more equivalent grading. Governing documents and support materials include not only the Swedish National Agency for Education's provisions, comments on the administrative provisions and general advice, but also tests,

diagnostic material and other assessment aids produced by the Swedish National Agency for Education in order to support equivalent grading.

Implementation: The findings and conclusions of the audit are based on interviews, studies of documents and literature, and questionnaires issued to teachers and head teachers in compulsory schools. The Swedish National Audit Office has not conducted its own investigation into the extent to which grading is equivalent. The Swedish National Audit Office's assessment that grading has deficiencies in terms of equivalence is based instead on the reports and investigations carried out by the Swedish National Agency for Education and the Swedish Schools Inspectorate.

The results of the audit

Grading is still not carried out in an equivalent way. The problem of a lack of equivalence in grading has been known for a long time, and wide-ranging initiatives have been undertaken to rectify the problem, so far without obvious success. Among other things, the administrative provisions that govern how grades are awarded have been changed in order to improve the conditions for equivalent grading. The Swedish National Audit Office's audit indicates that the methods used so far by the Swedish National Agency for Education to encourage more equivalent grading by means of various kinds of support have not achieved sufficient acceptance among teachers who award grades. Nor has there been any broad-based evaluation of the reasons why grading is still not equivalent.

The Swedish National Audit Office's overall conclusion is that the new regulatory framework constitutes an important component for a more clearly defined way to achieve equivalent grades. The additional initiatives that school agencies need to target at teachers who award grades should be based on an analysis of the reasons for the current deficiencies. It is particularly important to investigate why Government aid is not getting through and being used in schools.

Shared responsibility between Government and authorities complicates control. The Swedish Schools Act means that all pupils have a right to an equal education. Equivalent grading is an element of this public obligation. The responsibility for implementing this public obligation is shared between the Government, school agencies and municipal or individual authorities. The picture that emerges in the audit is that one contributory factor to the fact that grading does not yet take place in an equivalent way is that the Government and the school agencies are not exercising their mandate in full to govern grading and to follow up to ensure that this activity is being carried out in the way intended. This may have its origins in a degree of uncertainty about how responsibility is divided between the Government, school agencies and local school authorities. The audit indicates that there is a degree of uncertainty at school agencies about the extent to which they should exercise their mandate in the question of management and aid in relation to local school authorities. This is not efficient and risks resulting in the objectives of equivalent grading not being achieved. The Swedish National Audit Office believes that the Government should make it clear to the school agencies how far they should exercise their own mandate to govern and support the local level in order to achieve equivalent grading.

The Government should coordinate its governance, follow-up and control. For the Government's governance and control to work as efficiently as possible, it is important that the Swedish National Agency for Education and the Swedish Schools Inspectorate have procedures for sharing information with one another. Together, the two school agencies' activities on follow-up and control provide a good picture of where there are deficiencies in grading. According to the Swedish National Audit Office, the results of the initiatives undertaken by the school agencies could be used more efficiently to encourage moves towards equivalent grading. The Swedish National Audit Office believes that the sharing of information between school agencies can be developed in such a way that joint experiences can be made use of and form the basis of governance, follow-up and control of grading by schools. The Swedish National Audit Office considers it particularly important that there be procedures, between the authorities, to highlight schools that report notable deviations between grades in national exams and the final grades for Year 9 and that should therefore be the subject of additional supervision.

Are the Government's management tools sufficiently effective? The audit has ascertained that despite increased initiatives, the Swedish National Agency for Education's support materials are not perceived as being sufficiently comprehensive and detailed, and nor do they reach teachers who award grades to a sufficient extent. It is the view of the Swedish National Audit Office that it is not efficient to produce and distribute materials that do not reach users or are not used. It is important that the Swedish National Agency for Education further develop its support materials and its information distribution channels. The agency should also perform regular follow-up to monitor how the material is perceived and used among teachers and head teachers.

National exams serve many objectives and purposes. Both the Swedish National Agency for Education and the Swedish Schools Inspectorate have stated that this is a problem. It is the view of the Swedish National Audit Office that national subject exams should play a central role in order to achieve equivalent assessment and grading. The Swedish National Audit Office therefore considers that the Government should accentuate the role of the exams to provide guidance for grading by reviewing the objectives and purpose of the national subject exams.

Inadequate conditions at the local level. Both head teachers and teachers who responded to the Swedish National Audit Office's questionnaires refer to inadequate conditions at the local level as one explanation why grading is not equivalent. They refer to a shortage of time to familiarise themselves with and apply the support material from the Swedish National Agency for Education. There is also insufficient time for professional discussions within and between schools to calibrate grading between teachers. As problems with the lack of equivalence in grading have been known for a long time, it is remarkable that such a large number of teachers and head teachers refer to inadequate conditions at the local level as one reason why the problem persists. The Swedish Schools Act has now been modified to define more clearly the general responsibilities of authorities and head teachers. It is important that the Swedish National Agency for Education analyse what the clearer role of school agencies means, and on the basis of this analysis target their governance so that the responsibility of school agencies to create the conditions for equivalent grading takes effect.

The Swedish National Audit Office's recommendations

The problem of inadequate equivalence in grading has been around for a long time. The Government and its school agencies have implemented wide-ranging measures that aimed to rectify these deficiencies. Despite this, both the Swedish National Agency for Education and the Swedish Schools Inspectorate confirm that the problem persists.

The Swedish National Audit Office recommends that the Government

- clearly define for the school agencies the extent to which they should exercise their various mandates to govern, support and follow up on the work of compulsory schools on equivalent grading
- refine the role of the national exams to set guidelines for grading by reviewing the purposes and the objectives of the exams.

The Swedish National Audit Office recommends that the Swedish National Agency for Education

- exercise its mandate to ensure that governance and support material reach end users, and follow up regularly on how teachers and head teachers perceive and use the support material.

The Swedish National Audit Office recommends that the Swedish National Agency for Education and the Swedish Schools Inspectorate

- increase their coordination in order to make more efficient use of the joint results of the authorities' follow-up and control activities.

Facts

Responsibility for schools is shared between the Government, school agencies and local school authorities. Responsibility for equivalent grading is divided between a large number of bodies. The Riksdag and the Government define national objectives and guidelines. The Swedish National Agency for Education makes decisions on grade criteria and produces support material in order to facilitate equivalent grading. The Swedish Schools Inspectorate supervises the work of the schools.

Within this framework, there are municipal and individual authorities that are responsible for providing educational services. The local school authority is responsible for providing schools with sufficient resources. Head teachers are responsible for ensuring that teachers have the right competence and the necessary skills to award grades in an equivalent way. It is, however, the teacher who has the direct responsibility for ensuring that grading of pupils takes place in the correct way.