

2025-2026

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fore word

Societal developments outside the school setting influence what happens within the school. Poverty, polarisation and declining well-being pose a number of challenges for Dutch education.

Schools today face a number of major challenges. New attainment targets and learning goals mean schools having to adapt their curricula and examination regimes, while both teacher shortages and falling student numbers demand changes in the way education is organised. Good education moreover depends on an understanding of what does and does not work, and under what conditions and in what circumstances. A clear definition is needed for the term 'evidence' when used within the context of the school; this requires a robust research infrastructure for educational practice and policy. All these topics are addressed in this Work Programme

Major changes are also taking place in the Netherlands on the political front. The recently formed government has brought new ambitions for education. In its earlier letter to the informateur, the official charged with forming the new coalition government, the Education Council has already stated its views on what is needed in the coming period. At the request of Parliament and the Minister of Education, Culture and Science, the Council will address a number of requests for advice, in addition to publishing advisory reports on its own initiative.

Finally, there have been a number of changes at the Education Council itself. Our former Chair, Edith Hooge, has departed and with effect from September 2024 Louise Elffers took up the torch. In the intervening period, Cor van Montfort fulfilled the role of acting Chair.

This Work Programme, which is updated annually, briefly describes the advisory reports and studies that the Education Council will be working on over the next two years. The Council has developed this Programme in part based on discussions with officials from the Dutch Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, the Dutch Parliament and representatives of pupil and student organisations as well as of associations representing parents, teachers, school heads and other education professionals, umbrella organisations, trade unions, sectoral boards and childcare organisations. The Council also took full account of the responses to the digital consultation exercise ('Denkt u mee?'). The Council would like to thank everyone for their contributions.

Louise Elffers
Chair

Cor van Montfort
Vice-Chair

Mirjam van Leeuwen
Secretary-Director



work programme

2025-2026

This Work Programme describes the advisory reports and studies on which the Education Council will be working over the next two years. Outside this Work Programme, the Education Council is always open to supplementary requests, including for legislative advice.

The Council is planning to produce the following publications in 2024:

- Advisory report on the teaching profession - at the request of Parliament;
- Advisory report on education for young people in youth detention centres - at the request of the Minister of Education, Culture and Science;
- Advisory report on teacher training programmes - at the request of the Minister of Education, Culture and Science.

Earlier this year the Education Council published the advisory report *Education as investment (Onderwijs als investering)*, which offers three considerations for the Dutch government and parliament to support decision-making on education within the framework of the national budget. Also published in 2024 was the report *Work-based learning under pressure (Een klemmend beroep)*, which focuses on practical training in the workplace as an essential component of vocational education. The Council also published two advisory letters on legislative proposals, namely 'Internationalisation in balance' (*Internationalisering in balans*) and 'Strategic personnel policy' (*Strategisch personeelsbeleid*). And in a letter to the *informateur*, the official charged with negotiating the formation of the new coalition government, the Council advised the new government to adopt a long-term approach and not to make cutbacks in education.

Current and planned advisory reports

The Council is currently working on several planned advisory reports and studies, or will begin doing so in the near future. These publications cover the following topics:

- Advisory report on poverty and education – at the request of Parliament;
- Advisory report on multilingualism – at the request of the Minister of Education, Culture and Science;
- Study on well-being and education – own initiative;
- Advisory report on school premises – at the request of the Minister of Education, Culture and Science;
- Status Report on Education in the Caribbean Netherlands – at the request of the Minister of Education, Culture and Science.

New advisory reports

In addition to the current and planned advisory reports and studies, this Work Programme also includes a number of new topics. Texts for the requested advisory reports have been supplied by the Dutch Parliament and by the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science. The Council is also planning to publish a new study on its own initiative. The new topics are as follows:

- Study of use evidence in teaching practice and education policy – at the request of Parliament;
- Advisory report on testing in a renewed curriculum – at the request of Parliament;
- Advisory report on addressing falling student numbers – at the request of the Minister of Education, Culture and Science;
- Study of the research infrastructure for education policy – at the request of the Minister of Education, Culture and Science;
- Study of polarisation in and around education – own initiative.



2.1 Advisory report on poverty and education

it is estimated that around 800,000 people in the Netherlands are living below the poverty line in 2024. One in every 20 children grows up in a household with an income below the 'modest but adequate' poverty threshold as defined by the Netherlands Institute for Social Research (SCP).

Children and adolescents growing up in poverty find it harder to access high-quality, rich education, derive less benefit from education and are more inclined to leave school prematurely because of education-related costs, such as voluntary parental co-payments, the cost of buying a laptop, diary or gym kit, travel costs, costs for supplementary activities offered by the school such as school trips or debating courses, and out-of-school activities such as extra lessons, exam training or homework classes. The fact that some children and young people have to go to school without breakfast, experience financial and other stress at home and receive less support from their home setting has a detrimental impact on their learning and development.

Children's development ought to be the starting point for policy and its implementation. The United Nations International Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), signed in 1989, provides the foundation for this. The primary focus of policy aimed at households in poverty ought therefore to be on the perspective of the child and its best interest. Poverty poses challenges, including for education, on how to deal with this. The response to these challenges can vary depending on the local situation and school.

Commissioned by the Dutch Parliament, this study addresses the question: What is needed to ensure that pupils and students growing up in poverty are able to participate to the full in education?

2.2 Advisory report on multilingualism

Language is a topic that is currently receiving a great deal of attention. And rightly so: having a good command of language is a crucial prerequisite for participating in education and in society. When talking about 'language', in primary and secondary education we are generally referring to the Dutch language, whilst being conscious of the fact that this is not the first language for every pupil. Language is also a hot topic of conversation in higher education, however, for example in the debate on the right balance between use of Dutch and English as the language of instruction.

One in four Dutch children speaks a second language at home in addition to Dutch, and thus grows up multilingually. In addition, a growing number of educational services – from early childhood education right through to university education – offer instruction in other languages besides Dutch, especially English. Multilingualism is an added value for individuals and society, but also presents a challenge for the education system, for example in combating inequality of opportunity in primary and secondary education based on home language, and in higher education due to the dominant position of English.

Pupils who do not speak Dutch at home face a dual challenge at school, having to learn Dutch whilst at the same time learning and acquiring skills in that language. What does this mean for their schooling and development?

Some segments of education have a good deal of experience with multilingualism which is more embedded in the teaching, for example in education for newcomers to the Netherlands. What lessons can be drawn from this? What are the opportunities and challenges posed by multilingualism in education?

2.3 Study on well-being and education

There have been growing signs in recent years that all is not well with the mental health of children and adolescents in the Netherlands. The number of secondary school students with emotional problems is rising sharply, and many primary school pupils also struggle with emotional problems and reduced well-being. On the cusp of moving into further education, young people feel under pressure to choose the 'right' programme and to set themselves apart from their peers.

Students are concerned about their future, for example in terms of finding work, an affordable home and equal opportunities. Teachers are worried about the influence of social media and about the vulnerability of pupils. School, education and study are important

contributors to young people's resilience and helping them learn to deal with stress and pressure. But they are also themselves potential sources of stress and pressure. Not just pressure to perform, but also social pressure experienced by pupils and students with their peers. Another source of pressure is the growing individualisation, including in education. What role do tests and examinations play here? And how much scope is there for educational intervention, given the growing trend within education to approach problems from a medical or therapeutic standpoint?

This study, carried out on the Council's own initiative, explores the question: What needs to change in the educational structure and culture to contribute in an educationally sound and healthy way to children and young people's schooling and development?

2.4 Advisory report on school premises

Good school buildings are an important precondition for good education, for both pupils and teachers. However, many buildings are old. There is much debate about who is responsible for funding primary and secondary school buildings: local authorities or schools?

There are wide local differences in how the issue of school buildings is approached. Responsibilities for building new premises and maintaining existing facilities are split, which leads to disputes and differences.

Many school buildings are old, and around a quarter of Dutch primary and secondary school premises do not meet the minimum ventilation standards. Achieving a consistently good internal climate, for example in terms of temperature and lighting levels, is also impossible for many schools. This has adverse repercussions on the school achievements of pupils.

The (poor) accessibility of buildings and lack of space are also problematic, for example for pupils with disabilities or extra support needs. The quality of school buildings is therefore an important factor in the ambition of achieving more inclusive education.

Another development which places demands on the quality of school buildings is the integration of education with other provisions in multifunctional buildings. Does this benefit the quality of education? To what extent are schools able to make their own choices in this regard if there are also aspects to consider which are relevant from the standpoint of general social policy?

In this report, the Council addresses the following question from the Minister of Education, Culture and Science: What is needed to ensure the quality of educational buildings in the future?

2.5 Status Report on Education in the Caribbean Netherlands

Schools, school boards, education establishments and education-related bodies in the Caribbean Netherlands (Bonaire, Sint Eustatius and Saba) have been part of the Dutch education system since 1 January 2011. This has led to new policy, research and evaluations, with examples including amendments to education legislation, administrative agreements for improving education, official reviews of educational quality, research on opportunities and risks for Caribbean students following their education in the Netherlands and several studies around poverty in the Caribbean Netherlands.

At the request of the Minister of Education, Culture and Science, the Education Council is working on the publication of a Status Report on Education in the Caribbean Netherlands. The Report will provide an inventory of existing studies, evaluations and policy, in addition to exploring a number of specific themes. The Education Council will be working closely with education partners in the Caribbean Netherlands throughout the entire project.

2.6 Study on the use of evidence in education practice and policy

Evidence-based and evidence-informed approaches are becoming increasingly commonplace, in both education practice and policy. Education professionals use knowledge gleaned from research to understand what works and under what circumstances. Schools can also be required to work with proven effective methods as a condition for obtaining government grants.

While it is useful to know what 'works', education is not an exact science, and there is no panacea which works everywhere and in every situation. It is important to know which evidence has been gathered under what conditions, in what context, using which methods, with which target group and from the basis of which scientific (sub)discipline.

Interventions which produce no result or even negative results are moreover less often published, whereas this knowledge can be important input in educational practice. Research is often difficult for education professionals to access, and they sometimes find it difficult to translate research results into the everyday reality of their own work.

Moreover, there is a risk that evidence can be given the status of 'absolute truth' in education development and policy, if insufficient attention is paid to the context of scientific methods and interventions. Evidence-based and evidence-informed approaches are about utilising scientific knowledge in combination with practical knowledge, professional expertise and the fact that every decision is embedded in the context of the classroom. Finally, seeing evidence as absolute can undermine the autonomy of schools and teachers and impede innovation.

This study, commissioned by Parliament, discusses the opportunities and risks of using evidence in education practice and policy, based on the question: Where can the links between research, policy and practice be strengthened?

2.7 Advisory report on testing in a renewed curriculum

At the request of the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, the National Institute for Curriculum Development (SLO) is working up proposals for reform of the learning goals for primary and early secondary education, as well as the attainment targets for secondary education. Together with the reference framework for language and mathematics, these form the legal basis for primary and secondary education in the Netherlands, and therefore set the direction for school curricula. These reforms have consequences for the testing regime.

As a corollary to the process of reform, examination programmes are being developed for secondary education. It has been announced that the attainment test taken at the end of primary school, as well as the subsequent tests and examinations, will also be updated to bring them into line with the new attainment targets. These developments raise a number of specific issues.



In the first place, there is a need to identify how the different educational attainments can be tested. This largely determines how educational targets can be formulated in terms of learning or teaching goals. Second, allowance needs to be made for technological developments which make different forms of testing possible or even necessary, for example automated testing or generative language models. Third, it is important to investigate how different functions of testing can be unified, whilst making allowance for unintended effects. Testing and preparation for tests can for example be motivating and helpful in focusing attention on key educational objectives, but can also cause stress (for example if testing is carried out too often or if too much is at stake); it can accelerate the curriculum (if testing is one-sided); or it can put pressure on equality of opportunity (for example in the case of privately funded test training or unreliable or 'unfair' tests).

Parliament has asked the Education Council to advise, based on a broad consideration of the roles, possibilities and limitations of testing, on the following question: What constitutes an adequate testing system in a renewed curriculum?

2.8 Advisory report on dealing with falling student numbers

According to the reference framework compiled annually by the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, the number of students in senior secondary vocational education (mbo), higher professional education (hbo) and university education in the Netherlands is set to fall in the coming period. Fewer students will mean less funding, and this could put pressure on education establishments, making it difficult for them to continue offering some programmes, especially the less popular courses. These developments have helped drive a wave of mergers in senior secondary vocational education in recent years in a bid to maintain the quality and breadth of education provision.

How can good access to education be guaranteed for students in senior secondary vocational, higher professional and university education? What is needed to ensure this if student numbers are falling? How can the provision of sufficient, good-quality education be maintained everywhere, including in regions where student numbers are falling sharply? How can students be offered sufficient freedom of choice? What are the practical options open to education establishments and the government?

At the request of the Ministry of Education, the Education Council will address the following question: What is needed to maintain adequate access to senior secondary vocational, higher professional and university education everywhere in the country in a time of falling student numbers, and to ensure the education provided is of good quality and offers sufficient freedom of choice?

2.9 Study on the research infrastructure for education policy

Good (practical) research is an essential basis for education policy and for providing insights into education practice. There are a number of research disciplines and subdisciplines which contribute to up-to-date and fundamental expertise regarding education. This is not a static field: developments in policy and practice are accompanied by changing research questions and scientific insights; new focus areas arise and existing ones recede in importance, for example research on education law, education history and fundamental educational science.

The fitness for the future of numerous disciplines has been under pressure for some time. This can have a number of adverse consequences, such as loss of specialist knowledge, or can lead to a more superficial understanding of complex issues. A shrinking basis of different disciplines within education research can also reduce the diversity of perspectives and impede the interdisciplinary collaboration that is needed for a well-founded education policy.

If gaps arise in education research, it is harder for the government to fulfil its core task of providing properly founded policy measures and legislation. Another risk is that research in some areas offers too narrow a basis to be able to serve as a 'countervailing power'. Experts and researchers can offer policymakers and legislators the evidence-based insights needed to make well-founded decisions and to improve existing education policy and legislation.

There is currently no wide-ranging overview of the status of the research infrastructure as an essential source of input for education policy and legislation. Which actors are involved in education research and what role(s) do they play? What gaps are there, or could arise

in the short term? What steps are being taken to ensure the viability of these research disciplines and what funding provides the basis for this? Is the (management of) the research infrastructure optimally configured?

At the request of the Minister of Education, Culture and Science, in this study the Education Council addresses the question: What is needed to ensure a properly functioning research structure for education policy?

2.10 Study on polarisation in and around education

Research by the Netherlands Institute for Social Research (SCP) shows that a large majority of the Dutch public is concerned about polarisation. This also has an impact on education. A healthy democratic society is characterised by diversity of opinions, insights and values; there are always differing opinions in a debate. Polarisation entails a sharpening of differing views to such an extent that people adopt entrenched, opposing positions and cease to engage in discussion or be prepared to do so.

Polarisation manifests itself in education at several levels. In the classroom, the laboratory or the lecture theatre, polarisation revolves around sensitive personal, political and societal themes. In societal and scientific debates, polarisation arises around the question of what constitutes good education. Polarising tendencies can also occur in education policy, for example where the government prescribes how education should be configured within schools, with the result that plurality and the professional freedom of education professionals and leaders are excessively curtailed.

Education can be adversely impacted by these different forms of polarisation; schools and universities are exactly the places where it should be possible to discuss controversial themes in a calm atmosphere, protected from the hectic societal dynamic. And polarisation in the debate on what constitutes good education rapidly puts pressure on freedom of education.

In this study, carried out on the Education Council's own initiative, the Council addresses the following questions: Is it really the case that there is a worrying increase in polarisation in and around education? What consequences does this have for educational quality, freedom of education and the quality of the democratic society? What is needed to be able to provide good education in a less polarising way? Who needs to take the responsibility or initiative for this? And what is the specific task and responsibility of the government in this process?

2.11 Legislative advice

The Education Council has a statutory task to advise the government on legislative proposals. Proposals which imply essential changes in terms of governance, control, supervision and funding, which impinge on Article 23 of the Dutch Constitution (concerning the provision of education), or which have major implications for educational practice, are all topics on which the Council advises. The precise legislative proposals on which the Council advises are determined in consultation between the Council and the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science.

In its legislative advisories, the Council examines the impact of a legislative proposal on educational practice and assesses its conformity with Article 23 of the Constitution. The Council also looks at aspects such as the practicability and consistency of the proposed legislation.

The Council provides its advice on legislation after consulting the Internet and before the Dutch Council of State has issued its advice. The turnaround time for these advisory projects is short, with the Council generally publishing an advisory letter within six weeks.

The Council intends to publish legislative advice on at least the following topics in the coming period:

- Supervision of informal education;
- Introducing clearer quality standards;
- Standards for administrators.



3

tasks and working methods

Good education for everyone: that is the goal which the Dutch Education Council is committed to helping achieve

For more than a hundred years the Council has been providing successive governments and parliaments with independent advice, both on request and on its own initiative, on education policy and legislation.

The Council examines education practice and the functioning of the Dutch education system, both retrospectively and from a long-term perspective. It identifies and highlights issues, identifies pinchpoints and undesirable effects inherent in legislation and policy proposals and outlines perspectives or solution pathways. It does this in the form of evidence-based studies, advisory reports or legislative advice. The Council also draws up a periodic Status Report on Education in the Netherlands, in which it presents an overarching picture of Dutch education. The Council also advises local authorities on aspects related to educational premises.

The Council's advisory reports and studies deal with all aspects of the education system, from pre-school provision right through to postgraduate education and lifelong learning and development. It addresses questions such as: How can education contribute to the development of the individual and society? Who needs to take action? What is the role of national and local government? Which responsibilities lie with school boards and which with school leaders and teachers? When do organisations and professionals around the school need to act? What is the role of pupils, students and parents?

The Council is an autonomous body, which keeps its ear to the ground and its eyes open to trends and opinions in Dutch society and education. Its reports are fed by the knowledge and experience of those working in the field, and also draw on education policy and legislation. They also incorporate insights from working visits and from professionals and specialists, as well as drawing on scientific knowledge and insights from a wide range of disciplines, such as educational science, economics, sociology and education law. The Council also draws on intersectoral and international comparisons. The Youth Education Council (JongerenOnderwijsraad) warrants special mention; it is made up of pupils and students across a range of ages and school types, supporting the Education Council with experiences and ideas about Dutch education and a range of linked topics on which the Council gives advice.

In preparing its advisory reports, the Council also draws on the knowledge and expertise of other advisory and policy bodies, and conversely contributes expertise on request to support advice given by other bodies. Joint advisory reports are sometimes published. As one of the founding members of EUNEC, the European Network of Education Councils, the Council also shares knowledge and expertise with other advisory bodies in Europe and beyond.

The members of the Education Council are nominated by an independent appointment recommendations committee and appointed in a personal capacity for a term of four years. They are recruited on account of their scientific expertise, practical education experience and/or societal contribution, combined with their vision on education. Their broad expertise means they always bring to bear different perspectives – for example educational, economic, legal or international – on the topics under consideration.

Principles

The Education Council says what needs to be said and is a critical interlocutor for government and the education system. In its choice of topics, its substantive analyses and its recommendations, the Council bases its approach on five public values: quality; accessibility; efficiency; plurality and freedom of choice; and social cohesion, inclusion and democracy. Each of these values deserves to be promoted and each interacts with the others. An emphasis on one can be detrimental to others, and there may be mutual conflicts between them. This means that constant judgements have to be made.

As regards *quality*, for example, the Council may look both at the quality of education in a broad sense and the conditions that make quality education possible. Accessibility is about the unhindered availability of education to every pupil and student. It also impinges on issues such as equality of opportunity. Efficiency is concerned with the cost-effectiveness of the education system in relation to its societal outcomes. It is also about setting educational goals, linking them to financial policy and monitoring whether those goals are achieved.

Plurality in education has its roots in Article 23 of the Dutch Constitution. The Council highlights the importance of plurality in the system, including comprehensive public education provision and the associated freedom for parents and pupils to opt for the school of their choice. The Council's approach strikes a balance between the needs, interests and wishes of pupils, students and parents on the one hand and public and societal interests on the other.

Finally, the Council looks at education in relation to *social cohesion, inclusion and democracy*, both in schools and in society. The school is a social community and a place in which to learn to live together in a democracy. From this perspective, the Council believes it is important that pupils from different backgrounds and with different abilities are able to meet each other at school and that schools devote sufficient attention to democratic citizenship.



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ISBN 978-94-6121-090-6
Intern documentnr. BS.2400038

Design

thonik

Photography

Edwin Walvisch
© Onderwijsraad, Den Haag

Published by the Dutch Education Council (Onderwijsraad),
The Hague, Netherlands, September 2024

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