**Advisory report regarding measures to overcome consequences of the coronavirus pandemic for education**

*16 April 2020*

The Minister for Primary and Secondary Education and Media has solicited advice from the Education Council on how the pandemic’s consequences for education can be overcome. This first advisory report addresses short-term consequences of the lockdown for primary and secondary education.

The education system experiences unprecedented times. The Education Council stresses the need to focus attention on acute issues and to acknowledge that all else is of later concern. The Council also states the importance of having realistic expectations of schools; especially since schools already suffered from severe workloads and staff shortages before the pandemic and now face further challenges as staff gets ill or is under increased stress. Primary attention during the school lockdown should be directed towards shelter and care for children and youths in unstable or unsafe home environments. In addition, it is important to support schools in order to enable them to do what is called for and to prepare for an ‘intelligent’ re-opening; by providing scope for schools, offering clarity on measures and facilitating them. Schools can probably compensate learning deficits within regular school times and contexts once pupils are allowed back in school. The Council also recommends to initiate research to monitor the effects of measures and interventions.

Specific recommendations are:

* **Shelter and support for children and youths in unstable or unsafe home environments**

The Council emphasizes the significance of proper attention to children and youths in vulnerable positions, especially those living in unstable or unsafe home environments. Municipalities and schools should stay in contact with those pupils; if necessary providing day-care shelter in schools or elsewhere. The government should make it absolutely clear that those pupils are covered by the same exception as children of parents in crucial professions (e.g. nurses) and address municipalities and school boards that fail to care for them. Schools could be supported to provide for these children by deploying professionals that are inactive due to the lockdown (e.g. educational staff of museums). Should the lockdown exceed the duration of a few weeks, special activities will have to be organized for these pupils, embedded in extended school days or summer programmes. The Council envisions rich programmes that include sports and cultural activities.

* **Preparing for the time pupils return to school: ‘intelligent’ re-opening**

Re-opening schools will not be a matter of simply continuing lessons where one left off. It calls for deliberate preparations and well thought out transitions from distance learning to teaching in school or blended forms of learning. Lessons can be learned from countries that have re-opened already, as well as from existing experiences with distance and blended learning (e.g. in mobile schools for children of fairground entertainers or inland skippers).

The Council stresses that measures should not focus completely on learning outcomes, but also on the pupils’ social and emotional development. Attention should be payed to the social and emotional impact the lockdown has on them. And schools should investigate whether pupils have developed learning deficits throughout the school lockdown.

The Council observes that it is very likely that many children will not have covered or processed all subject matters in the way they should have. However, huge variation between pupils is to be expected – some may even have done better and deem distance learning a positive experience –; e.g. due to differences in learning styles, due to social and financial factors or parents’ capabilities to offer their children support with school work, or due to differences between pupils who are capable of working on their own and pupils in greater need of frequent and clear direction. The consequences of the lockdown are also likely to vary between types of education, depending on the extent to which teaching and activities can be adapted to distance learning. In some types of education or courses that is harder than in others (e.g. early childhood education or VET).

The longer the duration of the lockdown turns out to be, the greater differences between pupils will be. If the lockdown (i.e. the period in which pupils learn at home, directed by their school/teachers from a distance) does not exceed the duration of a few weeks, deficits will be limited, in general. Schools and pupils will probably be able to catch up deficits quickly, within the next academic year(s). Schools can be trusted to manage this situation, although some support would be welcome and the government should monitor what schools do in order to learn about what measures can be effective. If the lockdown lasts for several months, additional measures are in order. One measure to consider in this scenario would be to move the summer break forward or to lift the obligation on schools to fully close during the summer break.

Special attention would be needed to pupils making the transition to secondary or higher education. Due to the lockdown, the test at the end of primary school that offers objective information for admission to schools in secondary education, has not been administered. The same goes for central examinations at the end of secondary school. The schools or universities where pupils continue their education, should reckon with the possibility that this has caused selection errors.

* **Sharing information, experiences, and good practices**

The Council recommends to establish a national information and support node. That should be a central place to collect and disseminate information on education during and in the wake of this pandemic. To this information point a help desk should be attached to offer schools customized support (in combination with special subsidies). The Council also recommends to initiate research to monitor consequences and the effectiveness of measures.

# Good prospects for young generations *9 June 2020*

# The Council’s second advisory report against the backdrop of the coronavirus pandemic deals with long-term consequences and approaches, i.e. the start of the new academic year and beyond. It covers all segments of the education system and sketches a way to conduct educational policies in these extraordinary times. It also offers an agenda for policies and investments in education. The pandemic has necessitated unprecedented measures, also within the education system. Schools, universities, and their staff have faced this situation with a lot of resilience and creativity. However, both the education community and the government still encounter many challenges to overcome the consequences of the crisis. The Ministry has asked the Education Council to help think of possible ways to deal with these challenges.

# Next stage calls for strategic approach to educational policies

# Most likely, the education community has entered a long era of uncertainty in which developments are highly dynamic and unpredictable. As the pandemic enters a new stage, a more strategic and coherent way of conducting government policies is called for. The government’s responsibility for a well-functioning education as a whole should serve as a starting point. Professionals within the education community need room to develop solutions that are appropriate for their schools or study programmes, as well as for their pupils or students. On the other hand, the government is charged with watching over public values and supporting schools and universities. High levels of suspense necessitate open and learning modes of policy-making. It is essential that the government keeps a close eye on what is happening within the educational field and which approaches and interventions turn out to be effective. Therefore, the government should initiate research and knowledge dissemination. The Council stresses the significance of scenario-based approaches in which policy makers reckon with multiple possible courses both within education and in the societal environment of schools. Policy makers should also consider various interests and perspectives – ensuring that the educational perspective is given due regard as well at all times – and acknowledge that this crisis causes new forms of scarcity within education.

# A policy and investment agenda for education

# The Education Council formulates three principles for educational policies in the months and years to come:

# Investing in education pays off.

# Targeted investments are needed to uphold qualitative education in the long run. Education is crucial to guide the Netherlands out of this crisis. In addition, education offers young generations good prospects for the future as to chances at the labour market and participating in society at large.

# Cherishing zeal and fostering learning will enhance education.

# Throughout the pandemic, educational professionals have shown how much zeal is present within the education community. New experiences and creative solutions are manifold and progress has been made in developing skills. It is important to build on those experiences and solutions to improve education. Simultaneously, the crisis brought to the fore several vulnerabilities within the education system. Lessons can be learned from that as well.

# Schools and universities also serve a social purpose.

# Schools and universities are meeting places, venues to learn together and to learn how to live together, communities fostered by collective experiences. Personal contact and interaction are crucial to educational processes and to working on a wide range of educational and pedagogical purposes. Policy makers should reckon with that when balancing interests and deciding on measures.

# Furthermore, the Council identifies five strategic matters that already were burning issues prior to the pandemic. These issues directly strike at the core functions of education, and are probably augmented by the pandemic. They should guide educational policies to overcome consequences of the coronavirus crisis.

# Invest in teachers and school leaders

# Several segments of the education system struggle with staff shortages. Due to disease and increased work load, more people might drop out. It is of the highest importance to ensure that education remains an attractive field to work in.

# Invest in equal opportunities

# Unequal opportunities in education pose a manifest and enduring problem. Despite efforts by schools and universities, the coronavirus pandemic threatens to augment inequality of opportunities. Investments are needed to counter this.

# Invest in reading skills

# Literacy is of the highest importance. It is the key to comprehension in many other subjects, proficiency in digital skills and participation in society. It also renders people less vulnerable on the labour market.

# Invest in labour market induction and lifelong learning

# The pandemic’s impact on the economy limits students’ chances to find apprenticeships as well as fitting jobs after graduation and, hence, prospects of a successful start of their professional life. In addition, lifelong learning gains significance even more. There should be manifold opportunities to engage in further developing one’s knowledge and skills.

# Guarantee functions of tests and exams with respect to transitions within the education system

# Tests and exams offer crucial standards for decisions on further steps in one’s education. Pandemic measures undermine the functions tests and exams have with respect to transitions within the education system. To allow for successful continuation of pupils and students, more robust ways of organising tests and exams are paramount.