

Limits on small schools

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Primary schools and secondary schools are feeling the effects of falling pupil numbers, especially in sparsely populated areas. The rate of this fall is only set to increase in the coming years. Classes and schools are becoming smaller; this is not only expensive, but can also put pressure on the quality of teaching. Schools close or merge, and this can come at the expense of variety in the educational offering. In this advisory report, the Education Council makes recommendations to ensure that schools are strong and the system remains pluriform even in areas with falling populations.

The Education Council believes that the quality of education must be assured, even in sparsely populated areas. All children have the right to a good education. An increase in the number of small schools as a result of falling pupil numbers puts pressure on the quality and the cost of education. This is unsustainable in the longer term. Small schools often underperform and find it more difficult to fulfil their role as a social meeting place for children. The Education Council therefore recommends that the number of small schools should be limited. Even with fewer schools, it is still possible to guarantee freedom of choice for parents and pupils in the Netherlands. Parents and pupils should at least be able to choose within a reasonable distance between a public school and a school under private patronage.

The changes in the law needed to limit the number of small schools will take some time. The fall in pupil numbers, however, means that action is needed sooner. The Education Council therefore also proposes a number of measures for both primary and secondary schools aimed at encouraging better cooperation between them and achieving a structural, high-quality educational offering.

Recommendation 1: review shutdown thresholds and funding

A review of the shutdown thresholds and the funding model is needed in order to sustainably ensure the quality of education and to limit the increase in the number of small schools. The Education Council recommends that the threshold number of pupils for primary schools should be increased to 100 pupils; this should apply to all primary schools from 2019. The Education Council currently sees no reason to increase the threshold for secondary schools. Furthermore, the Education Council proposes that the additional funding component for small primary schools should be replaced by a funding component for schools in sparsely populated areas. The budgetary saving that this generates can be reinvested to improve the quality of primary education.

Recommendation 2: support experimental initiatives by schools

Given that the changes in the law will take some time, the Education Council calls for optimum use of the legally available scope for experimentation so that schools can get to grips in the short term with the effects of falling pupil numbers on condition that the experiments contribute to a strengthening of educational quality in the long term and, where possible, guarantee pluriformity. This applies to both primary and secondary education.

Recommendation 3: ensure that schools work together to ensure a good offering

In primary education, a process is needed quickly to allow schools to work together locally and regionally in order to put together a high-quality and varied educational offering. The Education Council recommends that this process be encouraged through a Regional Adaptation Plan (RAP) that makes it appealing for schools to work together. Statutory arrangements that hamper cooperation should be simplified.