



The task of promoting knowledge in compulsory schools for students with learning disabilities

– control, support and follow-up

Audit background and purpose

Compulsory schools for students with learning disabilities are for children who, because of a development impairment or an intellectual disability, are considered to be unable to achieve the knowledge requirements of regular compulsory schools. In the autumn of 2018, 11,140 students were attending compulsory schools for students with learning disabilities.

Under the Education Act, students in Swedish schools are to be given the guidance and stimulation that they need for their learning and personal development, regardless of type of school. Thus, based on their abilities, they are to be able to develop as far as possible in accordance with the goals of their education. In 2011, the entire Swedish school system was reformed in order to strengthen the focus on knowledge and to clarify results-based management in the school system. In connection with this, the knowledge perspective was also strengthened in the curriculum of schools for students with learning disabilities. Previous inquiries had discovered an over-emphasis on a care and treatment approach in these types of schools that was not conducive to the task of developing students' knowledge. Compulsory schools for students with learning disabilities have been followed up and evaluated to a limited extent since these reforms.

In view of this, the Swedish National Audit Office (NAO) has audited how the Government and the responsible school authorities have controlled, supported and followed up compulsory schools for students with learning disabilities since 2011. The aim has been to assess whether central government initiatives have given these schools good conditions for developing

students' knowledge to their best of their abilities in accordance with the educational goals. In the audit, the following audit questions are answered:

1. Are the initiatives of the Government and the National Agency for Education to develop the curriculum and timetables of schools for students with learning disabilities and to provide support in interpreting these appropriate?
2. Does the National Agency for Education provide teachers at schools for students with learning disabilities adequate support for assessing students' knowledge?
3. Is follow-up and evaluation of the task of promoting knowledge in compulsory schools for students with learning disabilities appropriate?

Audit findings

As far as possible, education at schools for students with learning disabilities is required to correspond to education in regular compulsory schools, while being adapted to the needs of schools for students with learning disabilities. This means that the Government and the National Agency for Education should fulfil these intentions when they control, support and follow up compulsory schools for students with learning disabilities. The overall conclusion of the Swedish NAO is that the needs of these schools are not sufficiently met in central government initiatives to control, support and follow up compulsory types of schools. This is seen particularly in the fact that the number of assessment-support measures for schools for students with learning disabilities is low and that there are shortcomings in the follow-up and evaluation of these schools at the national level. To a certain extent, it can also be seen in the way in which account is taken of compulsory schools for students with learning disabilities when changing timetables and making amendments in curriculums as well as providing support in interpreting the school system's policy documents. It is also reflected in interviews with teachers and principals at schools for students with learning disabilities. They have a clear view that their students and that compulsory schools for students with learning disabilities in themselves are not counted in the same way as regular compulsory schools. According to the Swedish National Audit Office, this view is also partially justified with regard to the central government initiatives that were included in the audit. The National Audit Office's observations are summarised below.

Lack of support in assessing students' knowledge

Assessment support is developed by the National Agency for Education as a support to teachers when assessing students' knowledge. The Swedish NAO believes it reasonable for teachers in schools for students with learning disabilities to have access to support in assessing students'

knowledge that is as extensive as that for teachers in other types of schools. However, teachers at schools for pupils with learning disabilities have access to assessment support that is much more limited than that of teachers in regular compulsory schools. While assessment support is available for all subjects, although not all years in all subjects, in regular compulsory schools, assessment support is available in three subjects for grades 1-6 in compulsory schools for students with learning disabilities.

Lack of information on goal fulfilment

The National Agency for Education is responsible, at national level, for following up and evaluating how the school system is developing vis-à-vis the national goals of education. These follow-ups and evaluations have provided a certain amount of information on compulsory schools for students with learning disabilities in specific areas, but on the whole, auditing of goal fulfilment for these schools is inadequate.

To a certain extent, the information collected and compiled by the Swedish Schools Inspectorate from its supervisory and quality audits, and Government public inquiries that have been undertaken in the field of education have provided the Government with information on some of the conditions of schools for students with learning disabilities for achieving the national goals.

In the National Audit Office's overall assessment, there are, however, shortcomings in central government follow-up and evaluation of schools for students with learning disabilities. There is a lack of information on the development of knowledge for pupils in these schools. There is also a lack of information on the capacity of compulsory schools for students with learning disabilities to develop these students' knowledge, on the differences between these schools and school authorities and the development of schools for students with learning disabilities over time. These shortcomings are also shown in Government reports to the Riksdag in the Budget Bill.

The timetables of compulsory schools for students with learning disabilities should be reviewed

The Swedish NAO considers that there is a risk that current timetables are not sufficiently adapted to the conditions of schools for students with learning disabilities, nor do they correspond to the timetables of regular compulsory schools to the extent possible. These timetables stipulate guaranteed teaching time for each subject and subject area. There are differences in the number of hours of guaranteed teaching time between timetables for subjects in schools for students with learning disabilities and regular compulsory school, particularly in English, domestic and consumer science, physical education and health, and crafts, which may need to be particularly evaluated. Students who study subject areas have a lower total

guaranteed teaching time than other students in the compulsory types of school. In the view of the Swedish NAO, the point of departure should be that all students be entitled to an equally extensive education.

Account is usually taken of compulsory schools for students with learning difficulties – but not always – when changing curriculums

Most of the changes in curriculums made since 2011 include both regular compulsory schools and schools for students with learning disabilities. In the opinion of the Swedish NAO, account of these schools was not clearly taken in one case. This applies to the clarification with regard to security and an environment conducive to study in the curriculums of the regular compulsory school and Sami schools which will begin to apply on 1 July 2019, but which was not included in the curriculum of schools for students with learning disabilities. It has not been clearly explained why schools for students with learning disabilities are not covered by this revision.

The Swedish NAO also believes that the National Agency for Education should more clearly prioritise schools for students with learning disabilities when developing support for interpreting curriculums and other policy documents. The Agency's commentary material is less extensive for these schools than for regular compulsory schools. It is also less extensive with regard to subject areas for these schools. Unlike that of the regular compulsory school, the commentary material for schools for students with learning disabilities has not been revised either based on the revisions of curriculums made in 2017. In interviews with teachers and principals at schools for students with learning disabilities it emerged that the general advice aimed at clarifying the interpretation of school policy documents is not always sufficiently adapted to the needs of schools for children with learning disabilities. Otherwise, this general advice is appreciated.

Recommendations

The Swedish NAO makes the following recommendations to the National Agency for Education:

- Ensure that teachers in compulsory schools for students with learning disabilities are given sufficient support to be able to assess students' knowledge
- Develop follow-up and evaluation of schools for students with learning disabilities. Follow-ups and evaluations should provide an answer as to whether pupils in these

schools are given good opportunities to achieve the goals of their education to the best of their ability.

- Ensure that account is clearly taken of the needs of schools for students with learning disabilities in the Agency's internal control.

The Swedish NAO makes the following recommendations to the Government:

- Develop reports to the Riksdag concerning whether schools for students with learning disabilities are achieving the goals decided upon by the Riksdag.
- Review the timetables for subjects and subject areas in schools for students with learning difficulties.