

Education opportunities of children with special needs

Audit report No. OSIII-2-6/06/93 of 10 November 2006

Summary

The National Audit Office investigated the educational opportunities of children with special needs in order to assess whether the created opportunities take the special needs of the children into account and allow them to manage in life later. The audit analysed the admission of children with special needs to the school, the educational conditions in the school and their fate after obtaining the basic education. Students with physical, speech, sensory or mental disability or a health disorder (severe acute somatic diseases and mental disorders) and/or learning difficulties were considered children with special needs. The educational opportunities of other children with special needs (e.g. talented, behavioural difficulties, etc.) were not investigated. The audited institutions included the Ministry of the Education and Research and the Ministry of Social Affairs.

According to the Ministry of Education and Research, in the academic year 2005/2006 the number of students with special needs was 25,711, i.e. nearly 15% of all students pursuing general education. The number of students with special needs in ordinary schools is rising, while the number of children studying in schools for children with special needs has been stable. In the academic year 2005/2006 there were 43 special needs schools (incl. 4 sanatorium schools) in Estonia. 24 of them were state schools, 15 municipal schools and 4 private schools. Classes of children with special needs had been created in 69 ordinary schools and there were children with special needs who studied in ordinary classes of ordinary schools. In 2006 EEK 215 million was allocated from the state budget for covering the running costs of the special needs schools of the state. In 2006 EEK 53.3 million was allocated from the state budget for teaching children with special needs in municipal and private schools in addition to the amount allocated for teaching all children.

Main observations

There is no agreement on which children to consider as children with special needs and the exact number of these children is unknown. Therefore there is uncertainty in the organisation of the education of the children with special needs, which impedes the organisation of educational activities and causes unequal treatment of the children with special needs. Since it is not known whom to consider as children with special needs, reliable and exhaustive information about all children with special needs has not been gathered to the Estonian Information System for Education (EHIS).

A large portion of children with special needs is not dealt with at the right time. Children's special needs usually become evident before school or in the first stage of school. According to experts, it is possible to eliminate, treat or alleviate the special needs of children, provided that they are attended to at the right time. However, in reality in a third of the cases the special needs are noticed and a suitable curriculum or a suitable school is determined for the child as late as in the second or third stage of school. Upon implementation of the support systems necessary for children with special needs, the problems of cooperation between different parties and the unclarity of the parties' obligations became evident. The required support systems are implemented too late for many children.

The educational conditions need improvement. The audited indicated that the teaching aids for the children with special needs are insufficient, there is a lack of required specialists and the study environment in most schools needs adjustment. The educational conditions designed specifically for the children with special needs were usually better in the special needs schools, but even the latter could not ensure all the required conditions. The activity of the special needs schools in providing the students with treatment and rehabilitation services is limited.

A fifth of the people having the capacity for work, who have obtained basic education at a special needs school or class, do not study or work. A third of the graduates of a special needs school or class have not continued their studies and a third of those who have continued their studies have broken off the studies. 42% of the persons with special needs who have not continued their studies or who have broken off their further studies after acquisition of the basic education and who could potentially work have not gone to work. Studying in a special needs school and a special class of an ordinary school has produced similar results in terms of the fate of the students after the basic school. As for disabled children it became evident that in more serious cases (children with a moderate or severe mental disability) the special needs schools have achieved better results and children with standard intellect have achieved the best results in an ordinary class of an ordinary school.

All in all the audit confirmed that in comparison with the special needs schools the ordinary schools have not been able to offer similar conditions for attending to more difficult and specific special needs. Students with a disability who have obtained basic education on the basis of the national curriculum for basic and upper secondary schools have achieved the best results in an ordinary class of an ordinary school as a result of which the studies of the students who have standard intellect in ordinary schools should be supported. From the point of view of state resources it would be easier and more effective to teach children with more specific and difficult special needs in special schools. Local authorities as the managers of the school can support the teaching of children with special needs in the local school and the parents and children should have the freedom to choose a suitable school. In the context of the given assessments the National Audit Office would like to emphasise that upon assessment of the organisation of education for children with special needs the factors arising from the specifics and depth of the disability are very important. However, due to the insufficiency of the data they have not been taken into account. Therefore the analysis reflects the effectiveness of the educational organisation of the children with special needs.

Main recommendations

To the Minister of Education and Research in cooperation with the Minister of Social Affairs

- To develop clear definitions of the special needs and the classifier for determining the substance and scope of various special needs, involving experts and practitioners. This would allow for gathering comparative data, make financing transparent and treat students equally.
- To determine the obligations of the parties for noticing the children with special needs and implementation of the support systems as soon as possible.
- To develop solutions for organisation of the provision and financing of the treatment and rehabilitation services in the special needs schools. The goal is to solve a situation where the special needs schools provide these services, but there are no requirements regarding the provision of the services and the financing has not been organised. For many children the provision of the treatment and rehabilitation services in the school is the only opportunity for gaining access to assistance, otherwise the prescribed services would not be received. To consider drafting a special regulation for organising the system, stipulating the financing of all the services out of the state budget through one ministry.

To the Minister of Education and Research

- To work out solutions for compilation and dissemination of teaching resources (textbooks and other teaching aids) adjusted for the children with special needs and necessary for acquisition of the subjects complying with all the national curricula. To that end the National Audit Office recommends that the following be considered:
 - Granting the National Examination and Qualification Centre and/or specialised schools the functions of a methodology centre, which would allow for gathering and developing information on teaching and auxiliary materials regarding special needs, make it available to all schools and to arrange publication of textbooks;
 - Drafting amendments to the Basic Schools and Upper Secondary Schools Act according to which the support allocated from the state budget could be used for acquisition of other teaching aids besides textbooks.
- To update the minimum staff of schools established by Regulation No. 48 of 15 September 1999. To consider determination of the composition of the staff based on special needs and, where possible, replacement of a staff specialist with outsourcing the service or provision of the service by the local authority. This would allow for ensuring the education meeting the actual needs and the activities supporting provision of education.

The Minister of Education and Research and the Minister of Social Affairs agreed with the proposals and recommendations of the National Audit Office in their letters of reply. The Minister of Education and Research and the Minister of Social Affairs consider it important that the ministries cooperate upon performance of various recommendations and to that end it is planned to form work groups between the ministries and agencies.

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