

# Compulsory school attendance and efficiency of enforcement

*How to help thousands of children who do not want to attend school?*

Report of the National Audit Office to the Riigikogu, Tallinn, 27 August 2007

## Summary of audit results

The National Audit Office audited the activities of the Ministry of Education and Research in ensuring compulsory school attendance in order to assess what has been done to improve compulsory school attendance and whether the measures taken in schools to ensure compulsory school attendance are effective.

In forming its opinion, the National Audit Office proceeded from the following criteria:

- the state has an overview of non-attendance and of any changes in compulsory school attendance;
- schools, local governments, parents and pupils know their rights and obligations as regards compulsory school attendance;
- the measures taken to ensure compulsory school attendance are effective.

In this audit, non-attendance means that:

- a child under the minimum school leaving age has not been entered into any pupil lists of schools;
- a pupil fails to attend school regularly (has been truant for more than 20 percent of lessons in a semester);
- a pupil who has no basic education stops his/her studies;
- a pupil is not able to acquire the curriculum (the pupil's semester or annual marks include Fs).

Both Estonia and the European Union have declared that the provision of at least the basic education for the population is their strategic objective. Acquisition of education is important from the point of view of both an individual and the state. The statistics show that people without basic education have more difficulty finding work, employees without basic education earn less than average wages and a low level of education is an important risk factor for crime as well. In addition, people without basic education may incur additional expenses for the state as they may require social benefits and engage in criminal activities more. Therefore, it is important that the number of pupils who acquire basic education is as big as possible. The state spends billions of kroons on the provision of basic education.

Compared to the audit results of 2002 of the National Audit Office, the Ministry of Education and Research has launched several activities but the situation as regards compulsory school attendance has not improved. The most important findings of the audit are as follows:

- **The definition of non-attendance and obligations of various parties as regards compulsory school attendance have still not been specified.**
- **The Ministry of Education and Research has no clear overview of compulsory school attendance.** The state does not have continuous data to monitor non-attendance and thus, no overview of problem pupils and pupils who do not attend school. In addition, there is not enough reliable data on the implementation of various measures.
- **Accounting for pupils under minimum school leaving age has serious shortcomings.** Therefore we cannot be sure that all children to whom the compulsory school attendance requirement applies attend school. The analysis of the National Audit Office showed that 3800 children who have to attend school according to the data of the population registry are not on any pupil lists of schools and the reason for their non-attendance is unknown. In the case of 1438 of these children, the state had paid child allowance as of the time of the audit. The remaining couple of thousand children probably do not live in Estonia because no child allowance is paid for them and their place of residence has not been specified in the population register in most cases.

- Truancy has not decreased. **About 2 percent of pupils, i.e. 3100 pupils, miss more than 20 percent of classes for no reason, i.e. these children are on a pupil list of a school but actually do not comply with the compulsory school attendance requirement.** On average, each student missed school for three weeks in an academic year and one of these three weeks is truancy.
- **Many students have problems with getting ahead with their studies and the number of pupils who discontinue their studies is still big.** The problem is the most serious with the pupils at the third stage of study, i.e. 7th to 9th grade pupils, one fifth of whom have Fs among their semester marks and more than 7 percent of pupils have Fs among their annual marks.
- **More and more measures are taken to improve compulsory school attendance.** About 2.5 times more money was assigned for implementing these various measures in 2007 as compared to 2003. For example, the number of boarding school facilities has increased six times as compared to the 2002/2003 academic year. According to the Estonian Education Information System (EHIS), the number of pupils who use the services of a speech therapist and who attend remedial classes has increased considerably as well. This is partially due to the fact that schools have started to enter more data on the measures into the EHIS.
- The schools were of the opinion that the **most efficient measure** to improve compulsory school attendance is opportunity classes. The boarding school facilities and classes for pupils with behavioural problems are also rated as very good. Special classes were considered to be a good measure even by problem children, but children rated counselling (with a psychologist or a psychiatrist) the highest although the schools did not rate it as high. Juvenile committees were rated the **least effective measure** by both schools and pupils.
- **Although various measures have been implemented, the indicators for compulsory school attendance (discontinuation, truancy) have not improved.** Therefore, the activities of the state in ensuring compulsory school attendance cannot be considered effective. The state spends more than 120 million kroons a year on measures whose effectiveness is not systematically assessed. The National Audit Office is of the opinion that the targets set in the general education development plan as regards students who discontinue their studies or have Fs among their annual marks in the third stage of studies in basic school, i.e. 7th to 9th grades, will not be achieved by 2013.

**Response from the Minister of Education and Research:** The Minister does not have significant objections to the results and recommendations of the audit. In his response letter to the National Audit Office the Minister promised to improve record-keeping on children who have to comply with the compulsory school attendance requirement as well as gathering of data on indicators and implementation of measures as regards compulsory school attendance in order to ensure that all children attend school and participate in studies as required. The Ministry is preparing amendments to the Basic School and Upper Secondary School Act. These clarify the responsibilities of schools and local governments in the provision of support services. A task force for clarifying the responsibilities of local governments in finding the so-called missing children will be formed in cooperation with the Ministry of the Interior. In addition, the Minister promised to discuss the topics of implementing support measures and parental responsibility with the Ministries of Social Affairs and Justice.

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