

Availability of education support services

Do children get the education support services they need at kindergarten and school?

Summary of audit results

What did we audit?

During the audit, the National Audit Office assessed whether

- information about the child's need for support is exchanged smoothly between the parties offering help, and the child receives support from one place;
- the Ministry of Education and Research has created conditions for educational establishments to have support specialists and teachers with the required training teach and support children at educational establishments;
- the Ministry of Education and Research has organised the funding of the provision of support services so that a child can be helped both in kindergarten and basic school;
- the Ministry of Education and Research assesses the efficiency of the organisation of support services.

The audit involves the provision of the support children need in municipal kindergartens and in basic school levels of general education schools. The audit does not address the support provided to children at schools for children with special educational needs. The functioning of child protection, social and healthcare services is not analysed in detail.

Why is this important for taxpayers?

In Estonia, in the 2019/2020 academic year, close to 200,000 children were acquiring preschool and basic education. At least one-fifth of them need support services when studying, and such services should be available in the educational establishment of their place of residence.

A child's development and progress in studies depend on the availability of support services. If a child gets the support he or she needs immediately as the need arises, conditions have been established to advance in kindergarten and at school. The prerequisites for receiving the support needed are well-trained teachers and support specialists who know how to support different children on their path towards education.

Assurance of support services, including funding, is a task for municipalities. In 2019, the expenditure of municipalities on the wages of support specialists totalled 22.2 million euros.

**What did we find and
conclude from the audit?**

Since 2018, targeted operating support has been allocated from the state budget to municipalities for the organisation of support services. In 2020, the amount of support totalled nearly 20 million euros.

According to the National Audit Office, 64% of children at kindergartens and 74% of children at basic schools mostly receive the support services they need. Others have to cope with much less help than they actually need, get it elsewhere or remain without help – at least 8,400 such children in total.

- **The lack of support specialists continues to hinder the receipt of support.** The positions have been established at educational institutions, but there is still a lack of specialists. The numbers of university level student places and graduates are not going to cover the demand for support specialists in the near future, either.

According to kindergartens and schools, if the current arrangement continues, more than 1,000 full-time support specialists will be needed (i.e. the total number reduced to full-time equivalents). The situation could be somewhat alleviated if municipalities set up support service centres to distribute the workload of support specialists more evenly between different educational institutions and thereby improve the availability of support services. To date, the centres have been established in eight municipalities.

Besides the lack of support specialists, some teachers are unable to cope with teaching children with different needs. This is due to both insufficient teacher training and lack of time to deal with children in need of support. Many teachers have undergone professional training years ago, when less attention was paid to teaching children in need of support in teacher training.

- **The assessment of the child's need for support and the provision of the service are not coordinated.** In order to receive the support needed, some children have to undergo several assessments and parents have to apply for services from various institutions. For example, the need for the support person service is decided by the municipality, but it can also be decided based on the assessment by the Rajaleidja centre. The need for rehabilitation services is assessed in the social welfare system. The need for other services (e.g. social transport) is assessed by the municipality. The need for educational support services is assessed by an educational institution or the Rajaleidja centre.

All parties agree that there should be fewer assessments and that a child should receive services in one place – usually at school or kindergarten. However, it has not yet been decided who will be responsible for a comprehensive and cross-sectoral assessment of a child's case. Currently, the coordinating role is played by the parent, who must be able to navigate between different areas.

- **Issues in information exchange prevent the child from receiving support on time.** 71% of the kindergartens and 60% of the schools surveyed in the audit stated that information about children's need for support does not reach them early enough to prepare for the arrival of a child in need of support. Also, all of the information needed often

fails to reach another kindergarten or school because kindergartens do not systematically prepare summaries of a child's development.

Schools find that the readiness for school card produced at the end of kindergarten is too general to serve as a basis for providing support services to a child at school. This means that when a child goes from one educational institution to another, it is often necessary to start monitoring the child and recording observations without any prior information, which postpones the beginning of the support period. Several issues of data protection and access to data in information exchange are yet to be resolved.

- **Attitudes in the society, including among parents, hinder the provision of support to children.** This is the opinion of half of the surveyed kindergartens and schools. It depends on the parent's consent whether the information about a child's need for support reaches the parties providing assistance and whether the child receives support services. If cooperation with the educational institution is not smooth, the parents may not want to share information about the need for support for their child in order to avoid labelling and segregating the child or having the child transferred to another educational institution. However, without the necessary information, a child's need for support cannot be assessed or support provided. Educational institutions have a major role to play in shaping attitudes.
- **State budget support has been increased to provide support to schoolchildren. The provision of support services to kindergartens has been put on the back burner.** In 2018, clearer requirements were introduced to support students in need of support in basic school, and the government also increased state budget support to organise the teaching of these students and provide them with support services. However, several planned amendments to the law concerning kindergartens have been delayed.

As a result, municipalities have often created better opportunities to support schoolchildren than kindergarteners and support services are not provided in kindergartens or schools comprehensively. The National Audit Office emphasises that the obligation of municipalities to ensure support services to kindergartens has not decreased compared to the past. The lack of relevant support in the kindergarten that meets the needs of a child may lead to a greater need for support and higher costs at school.

What did we recommend as a result of the audit?

The main recommendations by the National Audit Office:

- introduce to municipalities the successful operation models of education support service centres. Encourage and support municipalities in establishing support service centres in order to provide support services in schools and kindergartens comprehensively and distribute the work load of support specialists according to needs throughout the municipality;

As the organisation of support services in kindergartens and basic schools is the responsibility of municipalities, the National Audit

Office will send them a memorandum containing the results and recommendations of the audit;

- decide who will be responsible for the comprehensive coordination of the case of a child in need of support and his or her family. In doing so, take into account the rights and needs of the parties when ensuring access to the child's data;
- accelerate the preparation and submission of the draft Preschool Education Act to the Riigikogu. Clearly state in the planned act which support specialist services must be ensured in kindergarten. Improve monitoring of the availability of support services;
- systematically gather information on the in-service training needs of teachers. Then, provide better opportunities for teachers to acquire, in higher education and in-service training, the skills needed to work with children in need of support. In doing so, encourage the setting up of teaching assistant positions in educational institutions to support teachers and the children who need support;
- make sure that the lack of information does not lead to delays in the provision of support services. For this, the awareness of the parties must be increased, the introduction of good practices to municipalities continued and, through supervision, the systematical monitoring and (digital) documenting of childcare development ensured in educational institutions.

Also, opportunities must be created to increase the awareness of and support to parents (incl. to guide attitudes) so that they have all the necessary information to decide on the need for support for their child.

Responses of the audited:

The Minister of Education and Research agrees, on the whole, with the findings and recommendations of the audit report. The National Audit Office's notion is shared in that support has a greater impact at an early age, which is why it is appropriate to pay attention to the availability of support services in kindergartens. The Minister of Education and Research emphasised that until the teaching of children in need of support is treated as separate and inherently different from teaching other children, inclusive education cannot actually be implemented. The Minister also emphasised that the problems referred to in the report and the proposed solutions are a good input for municipalities to better organise their work.

According to the General Director of the Education and Youth Authority, the issue of access to educational support services is very important. Both the identified bottlenecks and the development proposals are broadly agreed to.

The Minister of Social Affairs agreed that cross-sectoral cooperation between the state and local governments and private parties is important in ensuring the rights and well-being of a child. An integrated service model is being developed in cooperation with the parties. The project will test a solution in which assessments in different areas are carried out

together and services are provided in the child's main place of stay. Proposals to change the support system will be submitted to the government this year. Among other things, in the amendments to the support system for children with special needs, the Minister of Social Affairs has addressed the need to facilitate the movement of information and pointed out bottlenecks in data exchange. The Minister of Social Affairs also agrees that there is a need to establish clearer requirements in preschool education to support the children in need of support.

