

Estonian language training in a Russian-language basic school

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Summary of audit results

In the case of Estonian language training, Estonian can be studied either as a mother tongue or as a second, i.e. foreign, language. Estonian can also be taught in a foreign language, and the aim of learning is to master the Estonian language.

In the case of Estonian-language education, all subject lessons take place in Estonian according to the national curriculum of basic school. The aim of training is to acquire basic education.

The current organisation of **Estonian language training** has not ensured that graduates of Russian-language basic school acquire the necessary proficiency in Estonian for further successful studies in Estonia. The national curriculum stipulates that graduates of basic schools with Russian as the language of instruction obtain the B1 level in Estonian, but approximately one-third of the graduates have not reached this level over a long period of time. The Estonian language proficiency of teachers and heads of school often do not meet the required level.

In schools with Russian language of instruction, a gradual transition to fully **Estonian-language education** will begin in the academic year 2024/2025, with the deadline being 2030. This is a task that requires significant effort, and the Ministry of Education and Research must support local governments and schools more systematically than before, because solving problems related to the transition cannot be left only to heads of schools and local governments.

For your information

As of autumn 2021, according to the Ministry of Education and Research, about 1,300 teachers of general education schools did not meet the language requirements and needed additional Estonian language training.

Source: [Explanatory memorandum to the Action Plan for the Transition to Estonian-Language Education 2022–2030](#)

With the transition to Estonian-language education, the number of teachers who need Estonian language training will increase even more, because by 2030 at the latest, language proficiency corresponding to the C1 level will be required from all teachers, including those whose language proficiency corresponded to the required level B2 before the reform. The B2 language level applies only to those teachers who do not teach Estonian or in Estonian.

Source: [Requirements for proficiency in and use of the Estonian language for officials, employees and sole proprietors](#)

Main audit observations

The Ministry of Education and Research has not purposefully directed the achievement of the national goals of Estonian-language education in Russian-language basic schools, nor has it regularly supervised the organisation of Estonian language training. The ministry has been aware of the problems for years, but the response has not matched the magnitude of the problem.

For many years, the Estonian language proficiency of graduates of Russian-language basic school has been below expectations. Between 2005 and 2020, only 63% of graduates reached the B1 level, although the national target for 2020 was 90%. Students who have reached the required level by the end of basic school are more successful in acquiring further education: they reach higher education significantly more often and faster than students without B1 level.

Teachers and heads of school who do not meet the language requirements have been able to continue in their positions for a long time. Heads of school as employers have had great difficulties in finding Estonian language teachers and teachers teaching in Estonian. Support from local governments as school administrators to find missing teachers has been mostly occasional.

Local governments do not obligate school staff to improve their proficiency in the Estonian language. In most cases, there are no measures that would, on the one hand, motivate (e.g. through additional funding, training, cooperation projects) and, on the other hand, pressure (e.g. through closer control) school staff to decisively improve their proficiency in the Estonian language and bring it up to meet the requirements.

For your information

Students in a language immersion class have a 4.4 times higher chance of reaching the B1 level in Estonian by the end of basic school compared to students in a regular class.

The potential of effective language training methods – integrated subject and language training, including early language immersion – is not taken advantage of enough. The Estonian language proficiency of students is better if the school has more Estonian-language lessons or if the students have participated in a language immersion programme. However, only a fifth of the graduates had studied in language immersion classes. Following the transition to Estonian-language education, it is planned to abandon the language immersion programme in its current form.

The transition to Estonian-language education is a necessary reform. For the reform to be successful, it is necessary to plan systemic activities that take the actual situation into account. For example, one of the central challenges of the reform is to ensure the availability of teachers who meet the qualification requirements, i.e. raise the language proficiency of teachers currently teaching in Russian from the B2 level to C1 level, so that they could continue teaching their subjects in Estonian.

In order for the reform to succeed, it is necessary, inter alia, to prepare to assist schools in a weaker starting position. It is probably necessary to plan separate support measures for those local governments and schools that need more support for a timely transition (including, for example, the option of the ministry intervening in school administration).

In conclusion, implementing the transition to Estonian-language education requires much more resources, central support and active leadership than before.

The most important recommendations

Recommendations of the National Audit Office to the Minister of Education and Research in cooperation with the heads of local governments:

- Clearly determine the tasks of local governments and heads of schools, first, in supporting Estonian language training and, second, in supporting the recruitment of teachers, for example agree in the action plan for the transition to Estonian-language education which support measures are offered by local governments and which by the ministry;
- Agree on a common approach to eliminate obstacles in language training of teachers or recommended best practice on how to better reconcile working and learning Estonian, how to find substitutes for school staff during language training, etc.

Recommendation of the National Audit Office to the Minister of Education and Research:

- In cooperation with experts, create other ways to participate in the management of schools facing problems and to support them or to take over the management of schools in addition to the current measures (handover of running schools and cancellation of education licence); and establish clear criteria for which problems, to what extent and with which methods the ministry should intervene in the management of schools.

Response of the Minister of Education and Research: The Minister supported the opinion of the National Audit Office that the transition to Estonian-language education is a multifaceted reform with many challenges. Therefore, the ministry has taken the direction of central and permanent management of the reform, including making structural changes in the ministry. The Minister agreed that the success of the reform depends on how the goals are set, on stable management and cooperation, which needs to be ensured for a longer period of time.

Response of the Mayor of Tallinn: The Mayor largely agreed with the problems and suggestions outlined in the audit report and considered it important to emphasise that solving the problems related to the transition to Estonian-language education should not be left only to local governments and schools. In order to transition to Estonian-language education, the specific tasks and responsibilities of the state, school administrators and schools must be agreed upon and means for fulfilling the responsibilities must be provided.