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**English - Or. English**

**DIRECTORATE FOR EDUCATION  
EDUCATION COMMITTEE**

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**Meeting of the Education Committee at Ministerial Level**

**THEME 1: RAISING PERFORMANCE LEVELS FOR ALL**

**SUB-THEME: ESTABLISHING STANDARDS AND MONITORING EDUCATIONAL QUALITY**

**Lead Speaker - Finland**

**18-19 March 2004, Dublin Castle, Ireland**

Contact:

Ms Tuula Haatainen, Minister of Education and Science, Finland

Tel.: +358 9 160 77410; e-mail: tuula.haatainen@minedu.fi

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**English - Or. English**

**Dear colleagues,  
Dear education experts,**

I am delighted that the quality of our education systems has been taken as the theme of this meeting. I would like to take a brief look at some key issues in establishing standards and monitoring educational quality. I consider it important to discuss these challenges at the international level.

***Educational aims in defining quality criteria***

Education is mainly steered by means of legislation, resource allocation, curricula and evaluations. The quality criteria applied in education have an important role in supporting the development of the education system as a whole, as well as the quality of individual schools and pupils' learning. In Finland, basic education is a pilot sector in the development of quality standards.

As in many other OECD countries, the situation in Finland is relatively good in terms of both equal opportunity and learning outcome in general education. As concerns major cities, however, comparisons between schools reveal a connection between pupils' social backgrounds and learning outcomes. In this respect, Finland is no exception because no country has found a definite answer to the problem of social, cultural and educational legacy. This seems to be associated with pupils' well-being and especially with various symptoms of mental and physical ill-being both in low and high socio-economic areas. In areas of low socio-economic status, learning outcome seems to be below average, symptoms of ill-being more frequent and health habits less wholesome than average. In schools with high learning outcomes, it is more common for pupils to experience their school work as a heavy burden and suffer from different kinds of youth stress symptoms than for pupils in areas of low socio-economic standing.

These findings suggest that we need to develop school curricula.

**My question is:**

***How should we develop curricula in order to narrow this gap in learning outcome?***

***Improving the impact of core curricula***

For the national core curriculum to have more effect on quality and standards, it is important to determine what level of generality and detail it should have and how its objectives and criteria could steer education in different kinds of areas effectively but without going into too much detail.

In Finland, we have recently revised the general education core curricula. There will be no increase in the number of classroom hours. Instead, we have focussed teaching at core areas: mother tongue, mathematics, science and civics. In order to equip children and young people to take better care of their health, we made health education a subject in its own right in basic education. Another change from our former thinking was to provide more specific guidelines and include a description of good learning outcome in the core curriculum. This is important because we want to encourage more uniform criteria in grading in different schools and thereby strengthen pupils' legal protection especially in transition to further education and training. Our analyses have shown that grades in school reports do not represent the level of pupils' knowledge in the best possible way, nor are they reliable yardsticks in comparisons between schools. Individual learning is often compared with that of pupils in the same school and not with the criteria of good learning determined in the core curricula. As a result, the grades given for learning of the same level may differ. The difference between the scale used by two schools may be as much as two grades.

In addition to the description of good learning, we are preparing national recommendations for a good school and good teaching. This is only a tool, not a norm. We look upon it as a form of information-based management, which we hope will support schools in development.

**My question is:**

*Are the descriptions of good learning and quality recommendations enough to steer the development of teaching and learning in schools or do we need something better, for example, economic support to schools in lower socio-economic areas?*

***Monitoring Educational Quality***

Monitoring and assessing the impact of education are challenging areas of quality assurance. Here I would like to raise two fundamental questions: How is the achievement of educational objectives monitored and how is performance data used? For effective utilisation of monitoring data, it is vital to determine how the data turns into, or is turned into, development.

In my opinion, the core issue here is what the monitoring data should be like in order to provide a good tool for educational development. This in turn begs the question: What kind of evaluation can education providers or schools utilise?

Providing more versatile monitoring data is a major challenge. As I see it, the use of learning outcomes alone as a performance criterion is neither just nor appropriate in terms of development, because outcome is greatly influenced by the circumstances in which schools work. This is why it is important to give better insight into the connection between the background factors and results and thereby get closer to the true impact of education. A key aim in evaluation is to develop action models, to find pedagogic practices and administrative solutions which have led to good result, and to develop procedures and disseminate them to others. One way to apply this kind of information is a practice known as positive discrimination. It means that education providers allocate more resources to schools in challenging areas. Schools have welcomed this practice because additional resources enable them to provide more effective remedial and small-group teaching and pupil welfare services.

The monitoring data in education must simultaneously serve the development of schools and education, promote pupils' learning outcome and enhance their parents' access to information about the quality of education. To my mind, one worrying trend is that evaluation findings are also published as ranking tables.

If the data obtained in the monitoring of educational quality is used to make ranking list, we should consider carefully whether these tables really serve the development of teaching and education. Instead of increasing information, the practice of categorising schools into good and poor based on average learning outcomes only proliferates assumptions and vague notions.

I think it important to publish the salient findings of evaluations. Salient findings describe the national, regional and local situation in education and existing development needs. This assures access to relevant, up-to-date and reliable information about the activities of authorities. The purpose is to practise open and good information management.

**My question is:**

*How can we guarantee that learning outcome assessments are not used to brand schools but to promote development, while securing openness.*

***Towards a new administrative evaluation paradigm***

As I see it, one of the challenges in the near future is to develop the monitoring of educational quality and evaluation towards a holistic approach, in which outcomes and factors relating to pupils' well-being are not examined as separate entities, as we have done so far. As regards Finland, one explanation is that these aspects belong, at least partially, to different administrative sectors. I am an advocate of a method which combines learning outcome data with information about pupils' well-being and the social background of schools. This tripartite thinking is based on the idea that parents' social standing, pupils' well-being and learning outcomes are interconnected. I also consider it important that the learning-to-learn method is further developed in cooperation with research institutes.

The conclusion to be drawn from all this is that these approaches are a natural part of the new administrative culture of evaluation. Evaluation findings have broadened our view of the state of affairs in schools and among children and pointed out areas in need of development. An important target to be set for the years to come is to develop an international learning-to-learn indicator based on scientific research and piloting.

**My question is:**

*How can we develop evaluation and our administrative culture to accommodate factors relating to pupils' well-being and social background in evaluation and assessment?*