



Unequal opportunities in primary education

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Audit report

“Unequal opportunities in primary education”

30 January 2026

Performance audit “Does every child have the opportunity to receive a high quality primary education, contributing to the growth of every pupil?”

The audit was conducted based on audit schedule No 2.4.1-65/2024 of the First Audit Department of the State Audit Office of Latvia of 1 July 2024.

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Dear Readers,



Almost everyone has their own idea of which school is the best and which is not a good school at all. Meanwhile, developers and implementers of education policy continue to insist that the concerns and efforts of socially active and

enterprising parents to have their child enrolled in a particular school are unfounded because they can take their child to the school closest to their place of residence safely.

Unfortunately, the audit conducted by the State Audit Office of Latvia confirms that this is not the case. The primary education standard is supposedly the same for all schools but both the learning process and the content and scope of teaching differ significantly in different schools. As usual, the least protected are children who do not have enterprising legal representatives or whose opportunities to choose a school are limited by the social situation of the family because then, good or bad, the school closest to their place of residence is and remains the only opportunity to study. In addition, open and clear information about changes is not publicly available, which is usually beneficial in order not to change anything.

In the audit, we also examined which target group received the most attention from the insufficient staff, that is, talented students or, vice versa, students with poor performance, and where the growth of students who did not have obvious difficulties but lacked high learning results at the same time remained. Our answer is that the primary education system in Latvia is generally “lukewarm”: those who can, they can do, those who cannot do themselves, then sorry!

Although the new financing model “Programme at School” promises changes in relation to support staff, the current situation in practice is not promising. Namely, the government pays for, for example, the work of a psychologist or speech

therapist with students for only a few minutes a week. Moreover, there is a shortage of such specialists in the labour market.

At the same time, there are inspiring exceptional cases in the education system in various parts of Latvia such as schools, principals, teachers and employees of municipal education boards who have a calling to do this work and who are changing the lives of some students for the better certainly fatefully. Therefore, the report includes links to social network resources for various issues of the quality of primary education, which everyone will have the opportunity to familiarize with opinions and stories of experience.

We would like to thank the Ministry of Education and Science and its subordinate institutions for their cooperation, as well as the municipal education boards included in the audit sample and the management teams of educational institutions for their patience, honest and open cooperation during the audit. Special thanks to the participants of the focus group organized during the audit, namely, Ms Dita Nīmante, Professor of the University of Latvia, Ms Māriņa Rozenfelde, Associate Professor of Riga Technical University, Ms Solvita Seržāne, Head of the Education Board of the Madona Regional Government, Ms Lilita Mačtama, Deputy Head of the Education Board of the Kuldīga Regional Government, Ms Gunta Lāce, Principal of the Limbaži State Grammar School, Mr Sergejs Beļkevičs, Principal of the Druva Secondary School, Mr Jānis Japiņš, Principal of the Riga Reinholds Šmēlings Secondary School and Deputy Principal Jeļena Jevdokimova, Ms Ella Karele, Deputy Head of the Latvian Parents’ Organization “*Mammām un Tētiem*”, and other industry experts for the support and exchange of views provided during the audit.

Respectfully
Ms Maija Āboliņa
Department Director

Summary

Main conclusions

The audit findings allow us to conclude that children in Latvia are not provided with equally high-quality education at the primary education level, and this affects both the individual future prospects of each child and the sustainability of society and the development of the country as a whole inevitably.

At the level of the state and local and regional governments, there is no prerequisites created to guarantee equal quality of primary education in the school closest to the place of residence. In their turn, the measures of educational institutions to promote the learning performance and growth of students are not sufficient and effective.

The auditors agree that there is a shortage of staff; however, the audit has identified a number of irregularities that still exist because the issues of a single approach, understanding and attitude have not been addressed for years.

The primary education standard is the same for everyone, but teaching and learning differ

The primary education offered by educational institutions in Latvia is very diverse. Moreover, the foundation for this is already laid in the legal framework.

First of all, primary education can be acquired in various educational institutions (elementary schools, secondary schools, state grammar schools, etc.). Not only the name differs, but also the rules for admission of students and available financial resources.

In Latvia, half of local and regional governments have at least one state grammar school that implements some primary education curriculum. Yet the opportunities to study in a state grammar school are much more limited in other local and regional governments if the desire and the opportunity to study are only found in the educational institution closest to the place of residence.



Inequality is officially enshrined in the legal framework

Secondly, diversity is also created by the possibilities, desires and traditions of educational institutions themselves to implement curricula with higher planned results. Such curricula are also not implemented by educational institutions in all local and regional governments. In total, only 34 educational institutions in 14 local and regional governments implement primary education curricula with higher planned results in cultural understanding and self-expression arts, languages, mathematics or technologies. Moreover, the coverage of areas is not uniform: from 5 educational institutions that implement curricula with higher results in mathematics to 18

educational institutions that implement curricula with higher results in cultural understanding and self-expression arts.

Thirdly, diversity is also manifested in the optional classes offered by educational institutions, the offer of interest-related education and other differences. For example, several educational institutions implement curriculum “Leader in Me”, which is a paid service, and some educational institutions implement an international baccalaureate curriculum already at the primary education level.

The compulsory content of primary education and the corresponding number of teaching hours are set out in the Primary Education Standard. However, the number of teaching hours for school subjects also varies significantly across educational institutions.

The Primary Education Standard grants educational institutions the freedom to change the number of teaching hours for school subjects by up to 17% while state grammar schools are free to change up to 25%.

Equal opportunities are lost when an educational institution increases the number of teaching hours significantly for its students in one subject and decreases it in another. Inequality is even more pronounced when we compare this approach with another educational institution that does the opposite, that is, it reduces the number of teaching hours in the relevant subject rather than increasing it. It means that the planned number of teaching hours from grades 1 to 9 may differ among educational institutions. For example, the Primary Education Standard for grades 1–9 provides for a total of 1,501 teaching hours in mathematics. If an educational institution reduces the number of teaching hours by 25%, it is 1,125 teaching hours while the increase by 25% increases the number of teaching hours to 1,876 teaching hours. As a result, a difference of 751 teaching hours is formed between educational institutions. Similarly, in Latvian language, such a difference in the number of teaching hours can be up to 715 teaching hours among educational institutions.



Sometimes, there are no lessons at all in a school subject because it is completely “integrated” into other subjects.

Educational institutions often make changes to the number of teaching hours in subjects in which state tests must be taken in grade 9 like mathematics, Latvian and English by increasing the number of teaching hours by up to 40%. At the same time, the audit has detected cases where the number of teaching hours in mathematics and Latvian has also been reduced by up to 11%.

Similarly, the Primary Education Standard provides for educational institutions with unlimited rights to implement teaching subjects “integrated”. The audit has found cases where school subjects are even fully “integrated” into other school subjects. For instance, engineering is fully “integrated” into computing, although the number of teaching hours in computing has already been reduced by 40%.

The audit findings confirm that there is a trend that changes in the number of teaching hours are often made at the expense of school subjects such as music and sports. For example, one

educational institution argued in the audit that sports lessons were compensated by teachers going outside with their students every day during the long break. In this context, the auditors remind us of the negative trends in indicators characterising the health of children and adolescents. For instance, the proportion of first graders with a normal body mass index (BMI) is decreasing; complaints of headaches, back and stomach pains are increasing in elder age groups.

However, the number of teaching hours is also reduced significantly in such subjects as design and technology, up to 50%, social studies and history are reduced by up to 14% (as much as 67% in one educational institution) and computing is reduced by up to 40%. One should remind that the goal of primary education is not only to teach arithmetic, but to form a comprehensively developed and competent student, who participates in society in a socially responsible manner, among other things, and is a patriot of Latvia.

It should be emphasized that there is no basis for the argument that such flexibility is used in response to an adaptation to the learning needs of learners in all cases since changes in the number of teaching hours are permanent and are re-approved in the curricula of educational institutions from year to year. Therefore, in the auditors' opinion, they characterize the learning process implemented in the educational institution as a whole largely.

It is important that neither learners nor their legal representatives are aware of changes in the number of teaching hours of school subjects and the "integration" of subjects into other subjects when choosing an educational institution. The changes are not indicated on the websites of educational institutions, local and regional governments, or state institutions. Thus, learners and their legal representatives cannot make a reasoned decision about the choice of an educational institution, and it can create special difficulties in the event of a change of educational institution.

The auditors draw attention to the fact that neither the Ministry of Education and Science, nor the State Service of Education Quality, nor the founders of educational institutions monitor changes in the number of teaching hours in subjects actually, and how these changes affect the acquisition of teaching content has not been assessed comprehensively.

In addition, the audit has established that the actual number of teaching hours also differs from the planned number of teaching hours significantly. For instance, cases were found when the actual number of teaching hours was 46% less in mathematics, 27% less in Latvian and 24% less in English than the educational institution's planned number of teaching hours in three years.

It can also be partly explained by the absence of teachers including their involvement in the organization of centralised exams, holidays and so-called "alternative days" (Knowledge Day, Sports Day, Progress Report Day, excursions, class events, etc.).

The auditors draw attention to the fact that the number of teaching hours specified in the Primary Education Standard in relation to the mandatory teaching content does not address this issue at all. Even if an educational institution implements the teaching content in accordance with the



The number of lessons actually happened is less than planned.

number of teaching hours specified in the Primary Education Standard, a significantly smaller number of teaching hours may reduce the opportunities for learners to master the teaching content qualitatively.

Paradoxically, educational institutions are not always informed about the possibility of changing the number of teaching hours specified in the Primary Education Standard. It probably explains the fact that half of educational institutions organise their work in accordance with the number of teaching hours specified in the Primary Education Standard.

The State Audit Office of Latvia considers that both the legal framework and its application in practice create unequal opportunities for learners to acquire the primary education content guaranteed by the state and compete for admission to a chosen educational institution at the next level of education. Moreover, insufficient transparency of information may create a false impression that the learner and his/her legal representatives can rely on the educational institution closest to their place of residence. In their turn, the most vulnerable are children who do not have responsible legal representatives or whose opportunities are limited by the social situation of their family because the educational institution closest to their place of residence is their only opportunity to obtain primary education in such a case.

The above shows that it is absolutely wrong to compare and evaluate the quality of the activities of educational institutions based on the performance of learners in state tests for grade 9, as the results are affected by both the changes made in the number of school subjects and teaching hours, the number of teaching hours actually taken place, and other no less important factors such as the provision of support staff in the educational institution.

[Assessing student performance is a missed opportunity to identify the necessary support for student growth in a timely manner](#)

Early identification of learners' learning and support needs is critical to planning and providing the necessary support. Therefore, any form of learning assessment or tool that helps educational institutions and educators identify and determine learners' needs is essential to achieving the growth of each learner.

[Diagnostic and formative assessment is fragmented](#)

One of the types of assessment is the state-level diagnostic or monitoring works for grades 3 and 6. Unfortunately, the Ministry of Education and Science has not ensured the development and implementation of these works for three school years. As a result, neither state institutions, local or regional governments, nor educational institutions have access to comparable information about the academic performance of students in these grade groups.

The need for this type of testing is confirmed by the fact that the number of local and regional governments that elaborated and implemented regional or city diagnostic works has increased over the three school years.



[The result of state inaction turns into municipal expenses and administrative burden](#)

Although the State Audit Office of Latvia welcomes the initiative of local and regional governments, it was not efficient because almost half of local and regional governments used their resources to develop diagnostic tests separately, although it was planned that they would be developed and implemented uniformly at the national level. It would also provide a single and comparable picture of the learning performance of students.

National-level tests are necessary for grades 3 and 6. It is also confirmed by the audit findings that the educational institutions included in the audit sample had a different understanding of the importance of diagnostic tests and their implementation in practice. Namely, there are educational institutions where diagnostic tests are regular, and there are educational institutions where they are not implemented at all.

The so-called formative assessment, or the assessment of students' performance without grades, is essential in everyday life. Since a student learns in the learning process and does not already know everything, this assessment aims to provide both teachers and students with information that s/he has already mastered and that s/he still needs to master in a timely manner.

However, the audit findings allow us to conclude that educational institutions do not always use formative assessment effectively. It is carried out in all subjects rarely and not always before each summative test, which is assessed with a grade. Cases have also been identified when it is carried out formally only the day before a summative test, which cannot be sufficient impartially for the student to have time to improve his or her knowledge and skills.

Factors influencing academic performance and assessment of student growth are ignored

The growth of a learner is a goal that is stated in both the Guidelines for 2021–2027 and the Primary Education Standard. In addition, the learning performance of the learner can be influenced by habits, values, and how carefully and consciously the learner plans his/her studies or what memorization strategy s/he uses. These factors and skills cannot be assessed, for example, by conducting diagnostic or formative assessment of the mastery of a learning topic.

The audit findings show that educational institutions do not have a common understanding and approach to assessing the factors and skills that influence the growth and learning performance of the learner, and there are no practical tools available for this purpose (tests, questionnaires, etc.) compared to neighbouring countries.

Support staff resources are still insufficient

From 1 September 2025, the financing model “Programme at School” is being implemented gradually, which also provides for the procedure for calculating funding for the wages of support staff.

However, the audit findings show that the workload of support staff is not determined in accordance with the actual support needs of learners (learning difficulties, behavioural problems, many absences from classes, etc.) in the financing model “Programme at School”.

The insufficient number of support staff is also evidenced by the time, measured in minutes, that the paid support staff will be able to devote to one learner with learning difficulties in the financing model “Programme at School”. The audit has calculated that, for instance, a psychologist will have 14 to 18 minutes per week while a speech therapist will have 11 minutes per week.

In the opinion of the State Audit Office, the financing model “Programme at School” does not provide confidence that the calculated and allocated state budget target grant is sufficient to provide learners with support in an appropriate amount.

Developing the potential of every learner is a vision rather than reality

The education system must safeguard the development of each student’s individual performance and competencies by providing appropriate support mechanisms for different groups of students both talented, those aiming for excellence, students with average performance, and students with poor performance.

One should emphasise that talent is not always evidenced by the grades that a student obtains in certain school subjects. In addition, each individual has both strengths and weaknesses. Each student can correspond to all of the above groups simultaneously from different perspectives, and they are not mutually exclusive.

The audit has identified efforts by educational institutions to provide students with support to improve their academic performance and growth but they are insufficient.

Educational institutions do not have a clear and single understanding of what constitutes a student’s talent or a talented student.

In their turn, measures taken by educational institutions to discover and develop students’ talent are fragmented and their scope is not uniform, as they are characterized by “life” from one EU Structural Fund project to the next, and the availability of support depends on whether the educational institution participates in these projects at all.

Besides, the measures implemented by educational institutions are mostly aimed only at preparing students for participation in olympiads and competitions.

The results of international studies on negative trends in relation to learners with high learning outcomes are often heard in the public domain. For example, the proportion of such learners is lower in Latvia than the average in OECD countries, as well as lower than in neighbouring countries. The auditors consider that working with learners with average and good learning



State funding for student support is not based on student needs



Support for talents and learners with poor academic performance is fragmented, insufficient and also ineffective

outcomes has great potential to influence the overall education indicators positively in society by increasing the proportion of learners with high learning outcomes. Therefore, it is worrying that educational institutions do not have a single approach to how to work with the growth of such learners purposefully. For instance, starting with how to identify areas generally in which learners would like and could achieve higher learning outcomes with additional support.

The audit has found that support is dedicated to learners with learning difficulties mainly. However, this is not effective because an improvement in the learning performance of the learners included in the audit sample is observed only in rare cases.

In their turn, difficulties in the learning process for the majority of students who did not pass any of the state tests for grade 9 in the 2023/2024 school year could already be noticed in the state test results in grades 3 and 6. Even worse, if the state test results in lower grades confirm that the student's abilities are not to blame for the low results in grade 9, because, for example, the student's performance in mathematics was 90% in grade 3, but only 7% in grade 9.

In the auditors' opinion, the above indicates that overall support for individual growth is insufficient and is not targeted at any group of students. However, there are some exceptions that are based on the initiative of individual teachers and educational institutions.

The students' absence from classes is one of the reasons that affects the effective acquisition of the curriculum negatively, which was also confirmed by the educational institutions included in the audit sample. Since the acquisition of primary education is mandatory, the legal representatives of the students are obliged to ensure that the student attends the educational institution and participates in the learning process regularly. Still, the audit findings show that students also miss classes for unjustified reasons.

The average number of absences per student per school year in the sampled educational institutions is 80 lessons. However, it exceeds even 100 lessons in some educational institutions. According to the auditors, it might be the cause of a decline in academic performance and might contribute to early termination of studies and indicates the need to find a single solution in the country to reduce the number of school absences.

The accreditation process must be improved

Every learner has the right to high-quality primary education. It means that the student and his/her legal representatives have the right to expect that the state takes responsibility and guarantees that when starting education in the educational institution closest to the place of residence, the learning process implemented there will provide the opportunity to obtain primary education on an equal footing with peers studying in other educational institutions. To prevent the situation where the shortcomings in the quality of education are only evidenced by the results of state tests



Students with average and good academic performance is Latvia's untapped potential

in grade 9 when the student can change little and has lost future opportunities significantly, permanent, true and impartial accreditation of educational institutions is crucial.

The auditors consider that the accreditation implemented by the State Service of Education Quality of Latvia does not provide a single and impartial approach to assessing the quality of the activities of an educational institution in all cases.

One should note that the implemented accreditation approach is not suitable for educational institutions that implement only primary education distance learning curricula. Distance learning is essentially a very different form of education, in which a learner acquires the content of subjects independently and individually. To organize such a learning process, the educational institution must develop and provide specially structured learning materials as well as various technical and electronic means of communication.

The above requires a different approach to assessing the quality of the activities of an educational institution. However, the same criteria and performance indicators are applied to the accreditation of distance learning educational institutions currently as are applied to educational institutions where students acquire primary education in person. Consequently, it does not provide confidence in the provided assessment of the quality of the activities of the educational institution.

In addition, the audit has established that an educational institution is granted accreditation for six years even with significant shortcomings in ensuring the educational process. From the school years 2021/2022 to 2024/2025, the State Service of Education Quality refused accreditation to four general education institutions. At the same time, several educational institutions were only one point away from disqualification due to the assessment of a specific criterion. For example, one educational institution received 5 points out of 15 points in criterion “Equality and Inclusion”, which ensured accreditation. If the educational institution had received only 4 points in the criterion, accreditation would not have been granted.

In one of these educational institutions, the State Service of Education Quality found significant irregularities such as high risks of physical and emotional violence, insufficient support staff and the inability to continue including learners who required support measures to prevent learning difficulties. It was concluded that the educational process was not suitable for the majority of learners.

In the opinion of the auditors, the high proportion of students in need of support, the high rates of physical and emotional violence and the deterioration of the situation in the educational institution could not remain unnoticed by the municipal education board for a long time. In the educational institution with 558 students, segregation had been created for a long time, unrestrictedly accepting students with various disabilities and special needs. At the same time, neither support staff nor an inclusive learning environment was provided by jeopardising the physical safety of both students and teachers.

Inevitably, a perception of such an educational institution has developed gradually in the local community, as a result of which the socially active legal representatives of students are looking for an alternative for their children. In their turn, the children who do not have ambitious legal

representatives or whose opportunities are limited by the social situation of the family are the most vulnerable again. Their only option is to obtain primary education in the educational institution closest to their place of residence, which is not suitable for the majority of students even according to the accreditation report.

The auditors assess that both the local or regional government and the State Service of Education Quality of Latvia denied students equal opportunities for quality education essentially by allowing such situations and granting accreditation, which consequently affects their future educational opportunities negatively.

Educational development planning is fragmented and expensive

In Latvia, the development of education at its various levels (national, municipal and educational institutions) is planned without any mutual linkage. Moreover, it is oriented mostly towards achieving different results, and it hinders the achievement of the goals set for the quality of education in the country in general.

The educational development planning documents of both local and regional governments and educational institutions lack clear and measurable performance indicators, thus it is impossible to assess either progress or effectiveness in achieving goals and priorities.

Since 1 September 2024 following a proposal by the Saeima Education, Science and Culture Committee that was not properly discussed, the law imposes an additional obligation on local and regional governments to develop an education ecosystem development strategy, which has high requirements. At the same time, local and regional governments have not been provided with the promised methodological support for understanding and fulfilling the new requirements, as well as the operation of the digital risk identification tool, which was planned to be used for this purpose as well.

As the Ministry of Education and Science has not ensured the operation of the risk identification tool and the necessary support, most local and regional governments have outsourced the development of education ecosystem development strategies by spending almost half a million euros. The audit has also found that the majority of these orders were received by one economic operator, namely, “Dynamic University” Ltd.

In the auditors’ assessment, development plans of educational institutions are not an effective development planning document and could be abandoned to reduce the administrative burden. Practice shows that activities can also be planned effectively with short-term planning and assessment documents at the level of educational institutions due to their limited development planning competence.



Resources that could have
been saved constitute almost
half a million euros

Education quality monitoring tools are still not usable

A clear and open education quality assessment system is needed for all parties involved such as learners, their legal representatives, management and teachers of educational institutions, as well as state and municipal institutions, be able to assess the quality of education in Latvia impartially.

The Ministry of Education and Science implemented the EU Structural Funds project “Establishment and Implementation of an Education Quality Monitoring System”, including by creating two digital tools for education quality risk management and school network effectiveness monitoring.

The audit has found that they cannot be used because there is no quality data available and their operating algorithm does not take all the relevant information into account (for example, that it is a distance learning educational institution or that it implements special education curricula).

The auditors do not doubt that such tools can provide support to both the State Service of Education Quality of Latvia, municipal education boards, and educational institutions in implementing their functions and tasks. However, once again, the project financed by the EU Structural Funds has ended, but there is no outcome.

Key recommendations

Based on the audit findings, 10 recommendations have been made to the Ministry of Education and Science of Latvia, as the leading state institution in the education sector.

The State Audit Office of Latvia expects that by implementing the recommendations:

- ✓ Changes in school subjects and lessons shall be justified and monitored, and information about them shall be publicly available;
- ✓ The workload and remuneration of support staff shall be based on the actual support needs of learners;
- ✓ Regular national tests shall be implemented for grades 3 and 6 and educational institutions shall be provided with tools to identify learners’ learning and support needs in a timely manner;
- ✓ Support shall be provided for the growth of every learner and the number of learners who are absent from lessons shall be reduced;
- ✓ Accreditation of educational institutions shall be improved by introducing a differentiated approach and reducing accreditation costs;
- ✓ Bureaucracy in education development planning at the level of local and regional governments and educational institutions shall be reduced and a digital risk management tool shall be implemented in practice.



10 recommendations made to the Ministry of Education and Science after the audit