

Chapter 7

Estonia: School Leadership in Estonia 2001–2013

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Estonian School System

Estonia is a small country (about the same size as Denmark) with a population of 1.2 million inhabitants. About 70 % of them are Estonians, and the remaining 30 % is composed of representatives of many different nationalities (mostly Slavonic nationalities). This means that the majority of students go to Estonian comprehensive schools, while a number attend Russian schools or the small number of schools that cater to other languages and ethnic groups. Comprehensive schools are generally the responsibility of the municipalities, which oversee planning and management for kindergartens and schools. School finances primarily come from the state budget, and the municipalities divide these between different schools (if there is more than one school in the municipality). Those finances are calculated on the basis of a “soft head money system” providing certain compensation mechanisms for smaller schools. Municipalities also add some minor funds for the improvement and upkeep of the schools’ general physical environment.

The current Estonian school system was developed from the Soviet school system and has been reformed several times since 1992. This means that there are still many teachers (and school principals) working in schools that were educated under the Soviet system. That maintains a certain “Soviet shadow” on the teacher’s profession and on the everyday behaviour and decision-making in schools.

There are 558 comprehensive schools (Eesti Hariduse 2013) in Estonia today. The birth rate in Estonia dropped from more than 20,000 babies per year (late 1980s) to 12,000 (late 1990s) and has only risen slightly in the last 5 years (to about 15,000), and this has resulted in an urgent need to merge schools and restructure the entire education system to provide good options for the education of every child.

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Additionally, there is a tendency for young adults to move to the larger county centres or abroad, and that presents a considerable challenge for rural municipalities to find enough students to keep schools alive.

Children start their schooling at the age of 6 or 7, and they are obliged to attend school up to the end of grade 9 or 17 years of age ([Põhikooli ja Gümnaasiumi seadus](#)). More than 95 % of children come to school from kindergartens (Haridus- ja teadusministeerium ... 2013). Those coming from homes have to attend a pre-school or 0-class (once a month) in the last year before compulsory schooling. The Estonian education system follows a traditional format – 6 years for primary education, plus 3 years for lower secondary education (compulsory for every child) and an additional 3 years for upper secondary education (optional). At the primary level, there are usually class teachers and at the secondary level subject teachers. It was normal in the Soviet period that schools in major settlements went from grade 1 to 12 (all levels together in the same institution). The most recent changes to the School Act ([Põhikooli ja Gümnaasiumi seadus](#)) created legislative reasons to separate the upper secondary part of the comprehensive school and establish separate upper secondary schools (often owned by the state). Therefore, several state upper secondary schools were established in the last 2 years, and more will follow in the coming years. This changes the proportion of school ownership – the number of state schools is rising and the number of municipal schools is decreasing.

Economic and demographic processes are taking families to major centres in the country, and this creates a situation where rural municipal populations are decreasing and the number of children in obligatory schooling is also decreasing there. As many as 20–30 schools have been closed down or reorganised annually in recent years. This has created a new type of educational institution – kindergarten and primary school together (or even kindergarten and lower secondary school together) in the same institution.

Several challenges in the current education system can be highlighted. For example, compulsory schools used to go through regular external inspections, which involved gaining an awareness of decision-making at the school level and how the learning community functioned. These schools now use a system of self-evaluation, the principles of which have been defined and established since 2006. The teaching profession has had to deal with the fact that since teachers were used as an ideological tool under the former Soviet regime, widespread suspicion of teachers has remained even after the Soviet regime collapsed. Therefore, teachers as educational shareholders do not have a strong professional position in society, and the number and quality of candidates applying to train as teachers are not the best. Furthermore, in the context of recent school reforms and reorganisations, schools in rural areas find it difficult to hire qualified teachers, to meet requirements set for the learning environment and to manage with their limited budget. This means that the quality of compulsory education in different schools, which should be equal, actually is not. In addition, new legislation was enacted in January 2013 to devolve responsibility for the teachers' workload and remuneration to school level. Now, 20 % of the school salary budget is meant for performance bonuses (decided by the school leadership). That is a completely new approach to organising the work of teachers in

schools. Still another challenge is posed by changes occurring at Russian schools. Since successful Slavonic families tend to enrol their children into Estonian schools, this raises a range of pedagogical, political and economic issues for the Russian schools. Finally, closing down small rural upper secondary schools (or merging different schools at the upper secondary level) creates a list of problems related to further education for teenagers (and families) in local municipalities, including school transportation, availability of student accommodation, local social issues and so on.

Principal Role in the School

The Basic Schools and Upper Secondary Schools Act ([Põhikooli- ja Gümnaasiumi seadus](#)) declares that a school is managed by its principal. According to the number of students in the school vice-principals (deputies) could also be hired, whose duties and responsibilities are defined by the principal in coordination with the school owner. Typical fields of responsibility for different vice-principals include study affairs, school development and outdoor activities, information communication technology in schooling, school economics and special needs in large schools. Those positions together form the school leadership team led by the principal. Small rural schools do not usually have vice-principals, and all of those duties are the principal's responsibility.

Open principal positions are usually filled through publicly announced vacancies. The formal requirements for successful candidates include master's level education and leadership competencies (Direktori, õppealajuhataja ... 2013). Those competencies are specified in the national school principal qualification model (Projekt "Õppeasutuse juhi ..." 2013) as follows:

- Higher education in pedagogy, at least 3 years experience in pedagogical work and having passed 240 h of school management training
- Other higher education, at least 5 years experience in pedagogical work, possessing the occupational grade of at least a teacher and having passed 240 h of school management training
- Higher education, at least 3 years management experience in an equivalent institution and having passed at least 240 h of pedagogical training and 160 h of school management training

The required 240 h of school management training can be replaced with a master's degree in school management from a university.

The procedure for filling vacant school principal positions is established by the school owner. The principal's contractual conditions of employment are decided, and the contract document signed by the school owner. The successful candidate will usually be appointed to the office by the school owner for an unlimited period. Employment contracts for principals are no longer time limited (previously, the contract was signed for 5 years). This change was as a result of a demand on the part

of school principals to become more independent from municipal politicians. The employment contract with the principal is concluded, suspended, amended or terminated by the school owner. The new act gave principals more decision-making power in fields they earlier had to seek agreement or a proposal from the school board or the teachers' board. The national school principal qualification model was developed recently (Projekt "Õppeasutuse juhi ..." 2013), and according to that, a system of in-service training was started for principals.

The responsibilities and roles of the school leadership team are defined by the Basic Schools and Upper Secondary Schools Act, school by-laws, job descriptions and the employment contract. The principal is responsible for the teaching and learning process and other activities in school, the general state and development of the school and the legitimate and expedient use of financial resources. The principal represents the school and acts in the name of the school and has the right to enter into transactions within the limits of its budget to the extent necessary to perform the functions of the principal provided by law. He hires and fires teachers and other staff and negotiates employment contracts within the framework of the school budget.

The principal signs directives (e.g. school curriculum, school by-laws) within the jurisdiction and competencies provided by the law. There is a school board as an advisory body for the principal, but it is also the board the principal must report to. The principal is the chairman of the board of teachers at the school, which has some decision-making power (e.g. students' administering system, the work plan for teachers) and is an advisory body in several school (mostly educational) issues (including the school curriculum).

School principals focus primarily on financial and staff issues and then on better results by the school in state examinations and outstanding performance by students in different competitions and exhibitions. Less attention is paid to the involvement and satisfaction of students and teachers: "... school principals don't emphasize their management leadership styles; they have amongst the lowest average use of instructional leadership and administrative style in school leadership" (Loogma et al. 2009).

The professional development of school principals is supported by annual conferences/master classes where well-known and recognised leaders from different schools and fields of study share their experience. National School Principals Association takes care of some professional development activities for principals.

Current Trends in School Leadership

The Ministry of Education and Research paid attention to school leadership in the ESF programme "Raising the Qualifications of General Education Teachers 2008–2014", where one of the target groups was school principals. The Estonian government planned to develop and implement a model for evaluating school principals by 2013. The government has prepared a bill to increase the competency and

decision-making power of school principals, reduce the role of state regulations and involve more boards of teachers and school boards in school leadership as educational shareholders. More responsibility in different educational legislative acts (recently updated) has been given to school owners to select school principals and to let them lead the educational processes in schools. The school principal is considered nationally as a key player in achieving an education system that provides high-quality education that is accessible for every youngster.

Methods and Research Selection Criteria

The current chapter is designed on the basis of high-quality studies on educational leadership carried out in Estonia since 2000. There are both quantitative and qualitative studies in the sample. The most important criterion for including the results of the study is the importance of the study for the national education system, while the academic rank of the researcher or a team carrying out the study has also been considered as an important factor in the selection. All defended doctoral theses in the field have been included and some international developmental projects. The country has been involved in several international comparative research projects where school leadership is a part of the study (e.g. TALIS, PISA), and the results of those studies are also referred to.

Several researchers have published peer-reviewed articles in international journals and full papers for international conference proceedings on school leadership. There are a small number of studies and analyses of school leadership that have been commissioned by the Ministry of Education and Research from different research firms (e.g. Praxis) or scientific teams. Several items have been published nationally with high-quality analyses of school leadership.

The major source for the chapter is a study reported in 2011 (financed by European Social Foundation) on school leadership. The study itself was targeted at all of Estonia, and the results are representative of the country as a whole.

Study Results on School Leadership in Estonia 2000–2013

There were no high-quality studies on school leadership in Estonia before 2000. Therefore, the first studies mostly mapped the field and identified the issues to be studied. Salumaa (2007), in his doctoral thesis, studied school teachers (604 respondents), vice-principals (68 respondents) and principals (72 respondents) in respect to representations of school culture. The study based on a questionnaire developed from the organisational typology offered by Harrison (1972), Handy (1993, 1995) and Handy and Aitken (1990). His main findings were as follows:

- The prevalent organisational culture in the whole group is person oriented, followed by task-oriented and power-oriented.
- According to the perception of teachers, the person-oriented culture is the dominant organisational culture at school. In their opinion, role-oriented culture is the least dominant.
- According to the perception of vice-principals, the person-oriented culture is the dominant organisational culture at school. In their opinion, power-oriented culture is the least dominant.
- According to the perception of school principals, task-oriented culture is the dominant organisational culture at school. In their opinion, power-oriented culture is the least dominant.

He concluded by saying that the person-oriented organisational culture is dominant and task-oriented one is the second-most dominant in Estonian schools, and this means that schools are only halfway towards building up a learning organisation (Salumaa 2007).

Aidla (2009), in her doctoral study, focused on the impact of individual and organisational factors on academic performance in Estonian comprehensive schools based on national examination results. In addition to the students and teachers, 57 secondary school principals (data collected 2003–2005) also responded the questionnaire. That questionnaire consisted of 24 statements about school academic performance, school leadership, the school environment, student educational progress and teacher competence on a 10-point scale. Factor analyses and correlations were used.

She identified that the organisational culture of the school and the attitudes of the school administration (leadership team) are related to school academic performance, but this relationship depends on the size and location of schools. Additionally, the results indicate that the attitudes of the school administration and the personality of school members may indirectly contribute to academic performance in schools mediated through the organisational culture, but these relationships also depend on the size and location of schools. The attitudes of school administrations and the specifics of organisational culture may open up new perspectives for improving academic performance in schools (Aidla 2009).

Irs (2012) carried out her doctoral study on teacher performance appraisal and remuneration aspects of performance management in Estonian comprehensive schools. In addition to teachers (2165), she questioned 298 school principals on the theme using a 5-point Likert scale (data collected 2008–2009). She conducted case studies in three comprehensive schools to obtain proper interpretations for statistical data.

Her study provided evidence that in order to employ new management practices more smoothly, aspects of school management should be taken into consideration. For example, the study indicated that well-organised strategic management, resource management and organisational culture are important in performance appraisal and performance-related pay design, as these help develop awareness, positive opinions and intention to adopt. She stated that teacher performance management should be

aimed at a balanced development of the school, and therefore, teacher performance appraisal and performance-related pay should combine criteria related to the learning process, the learning environment and school management. Teacher performance-related pay improves teacher performance both as individuals and in teams and guarantees teacher development in accordance with school objectives (Irs 2012).

Kukemelk and Lillemaa (2010) studied Estonian school principals within the framework of the NordPlus Horizontal project “Development of school management in the Baltic region”. They studied school principals in three key areas (according to the EFQM quality management model): the strategic management of school, resources (human, physical facilities and financial) management of school, and teaching and educational processes in school.

An electronic survey was carried out using a 5-point Likert scale questionnaire designed in the E-formular environment. The data were collected in November 2009, and 121 school principals responded. The aim of the study was to map the school leadership field in those three domains and according to the results to improve existing in-service training courses for school leaders.

The study indicated that schools had defined key results in their development plans in two thirds of the cases. Most schools (more than 80 %) define strategic directions and priorities, but only two thirds of those make efforts to achieve these strategic goals. Principals considered studies of school satisfaction amongst students and parents very often (86 %) and studies of the school climate for teachers even more (92 %) when designing their school action plan. School budgeting, according to the developmental plan, indicated certain contradictions in the school finance and material resources planning stage compared to everyday decision-making processes. Principals were more concerned about the school environment, teachers’ opinions, etc. than student development.

Türk et al. (2011) carried out a major study on school leadership focusing on all nine domains of the EFQM Model of Excellence in comprehensive and vocational schools. Some of their results have been reported on conference presentations (Haldma and Ploom 2011; Kukemelk 2011, 2012, 2013, Kukemelk et al. 2010; Ploom and Haldma 2012a) or in published articles (Kukemelk et al. 2011; Ploom and Haldma 2012b, 2013). That study involved all important school stakeholders – principals, teachers, students, parents, school board members and school owners. The study developed an electronic questionnaire on a 5-point Likert scale specified for all six target groups (in some cases, printed versions for parents were used) in the eFormular survey environment. The data was collected through 2009–2010, and all together 327 school principals, 2294 teachers, 5685 students (aged 16 and 18 years), 1922 parents and 569 school board members or school owner representatives responded. In addition, more than 50 case studies were carried out to better understand the statistical results. The collected empirical data were correlated with statistical data provided by the national education information system (EHIS), but also factor analyses, regressions and ANOVA were used.

The main results of the study were:

- Strategic planning as a leadership tool is acknowledged by different school stakeholders and is in use, but in everyday school life, the development of the

school is considered an internal field of the school administration, and other school stakeholders are only informed about designed documents and policy papers.

- School self-evaluation processes (compulsory since 2006) have started better in bigger schools, but the remarkable additional workload from that process could cause fatigue and disappointment in teachers.
- According to the school principals, they are the main leaders in the school; however, other stakeholders do not often follow them.
- Information about the school is attachable for different stakeholders, but they have to ask for it (parent involvement rate, especially in vocational schools, is low).
- Students and parents are generally happy with the quality of education in the schools, but they are not so happy with the methods used.
- All fields of school activities are given a much higher assessment by the principals and then teachers, but remarkably lower by parents and especially by students.
- Almost half of the students (45 %) like to go to school.
- Estonian schools focus mainly on academic results and much less on the personal development of their students.
- Major schools can hire qualified teachers more successfully than smaller (mostly rural) ones, and that could be one of the reasons students repeat a year more often in smaller schools, and students in major schools achieve higher scores in national exams.
- Principals and teachers accept teacher performance assessment as a school leadership tool, but it is not often in use.
- Teacher performance-oriented pay indicators are often related to student academic achievement, and this is only used in every third school.
- School stakeholders are not involved enough in resource management by principals, and therefore, there is a lack of motivation to optimise the use of resources.

Data from a previous study were combined with the Estonian PISA 2009 results to identify connections between school leadership and principal and student performance (Kitsing et al. 2013). Data from those schools (from Türk et al. 2011 study) participating in PISA 2009 were picked up and analyses conducted using the school PISA results. The intersection of the two surveys consisted of 102 schools. In the survey conducted by the authors, school performance was evaluated using an ordinary least squares regression model as the “school effect” or value added based on school-level PISA data on student performance and student social background indices. Based on the estimated “school effect”, the sample schools were divided into three groups: schools with high, moderate and low effect on student performance. An ANOVA was used in order to test whether there is any difference between teachers’ opinions and the implementation of evaluation in determining performance-related pay in high- and low-performing schools.

The results of the analysis indicated that teachers in low-performing schools expect to receive pay for each individual work process. Teachers in high-performing

schools value high student results more or, in other words, aspects related to the school's overall performance.

The International TALIS study (23 OECD countries participated) gathered data in 2008 (Loogma et al. 2009) and included quite a reasonable questionnaire for participating school principals (37 different statements to assess different school leadership issues). As a mapping study, it involved 200 schools from Estonia, but the principal response rate is missing from the report. School leadership was analysed according to school and teacher performance appraisal, school autonomy, school climate and school and principal profile.

The principals stated that they are responsible for hiring and firing teachers, deciding the salary for teachers (at least nationally fixed minimum teacher's salary is required) and salary increases, school budgeting (included budget for personnel in-service training) and IT spending. The portrait of the Estonian school principal is well balanced: almost half females and half males and according to age, half are younger than 50 and the other half older than 50. Most principals have master level education (1.5 % even a doctoral degree), and 23 % have bachelor level education.

The study indicated that principals pay much attention and time completing different reports and other administrative tasks. Educational processes in the school are mostly led by the deputy principal of study affairs. Principals spend their working time mostly in school administration (43 %), school curriculum and teaching-related duties (21 %), representing the school (15 %) and other tasks (31 %).

Conclusions from Studies and Further Challenges

Estonia has paid much attention to school principals and their leadership in schools in recently updated or developed regulations and national policy papers. Different improvements to the legislative acts have increased the decision-making power at the principal level and overall school autonomy. Schools can adopt their own curriculum with their own priorities, and generally, there is no regular external inspection in the system. Therefore, the role of the principal is very important in the system. Studies carried out in the country focus mostly on mapping school leadership administration and touch upon school efficiency, but studies related to personal issues for school principals (e.g. levels of stress due to the high expectations and responsibility, reasons for burnout, personal characteristics supporting successful school leadership, etc.) are missing.

Estonian society expects school principals to be super administrators with a vision for an excellent school and always effective as fund raisers and capable of leading the educational processes in school. The studies indicate that in most cases school principals are administrators managing under fixed frameworks and paying most of attention to school economic and managerial issues. The main purpose of the school – to educate children – is often left to the deputies. That contradiction between the societal expectations and the real situation demands a revision of the school leadership system.

Another important issue relates to the involvement of different stakeholders in school leadership. Through training courses and published good practices, authorised bodies claim that distributed leadership and stakeholder involvement are the best practice. Teacher and parental involvement in decision-making processes is promoted and expected from schools. Studies indicate that there is still a long way to go before we can say that the different stakeholders have an important role in the Estonian school system.

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