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Problematic School Absenteeism

Improving Systems and Tools

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Project goals

The Erasmus+ project *Problematic School Absenteeism – Improving Systems and Tools* aims to improve existing systems and to propose initiatives targeted at students with problematic school absence.

The Nordic project examines shared challenges in primary and secondary education systems and works to develop a common model to improve practices related to problematic school absence. Societal changes, research results and experiences working with problematic school absence show the need to develop existing routines and practices in schools and in the municipalities.

Project phases

The project is divided into two main phases over 36 months. The first phase will result in a description of current guidelines and practices in partner countries, while the second phase aims to propose shared guidelines, initiatives and routines to prevent, detect, manage, treat, monitor and follow up on school attendance problems (SAP) across the Nordic countries, including from stakeholder perspectives.

Partners

The coordinating organisation of this Erasmus+ KA2 – Strategic Partnership is Statped (Norway) and the participating organisations are Valteri Centre for Learning and Consulting (Finland), Magelungen Academy (Sweden) and the municipality of Aarhus and Aarhus University (Denmark).

Contact information:

Maria Sandhaug, Project Manager, Statped, Norway: Maria.Sandhaug@statped.no

Iines Palmu, Valteri Centre for Learning and Consulting, Finland: Iines.Palmu@valteri.fi

Peter Friberg, Magelungen Academy, Sweden: Peter.Friberg@magelungen.com

Mikael Thastum, Aarhus University, Denmark: mikael@psy.au.dk

Report 1

This is the first intellectual output of the ERASMUS KA2 project 'Problematic school absenteeism', carried out in collaboration by four Nordic countries: Sweden, Finland, Denmark and Norway. In this paper, we provide an overview of existing definitions and theories about school absenteeism. We also attempt to determine whether there are definitions and frames of understanding that are overlooked in the literature/research. One of the outcomes that we want to achieve is to arrive at common denominators and frames of understanding.

Acknowledgements

An alphabetical list of authors

Iines Palmu, PhD Student, Consulting Teacher, Valteri Centre for Learning and Consulting, Finland

Jenny Berg, Teacher, Assistant Principal, Magelungen Academy, Sweden

Johanna Leino, PhD student, Consulting Teacher, Valteri Centre for Learning and Consulting, Finland

Johanna Sergejeff, Consulting Teacher, Development Manager in the Ministry of Culture and Education, Finland

Johan Strömbeck, Phd student, Research manager, Magelungen Academy, Sweden

Lotte Fensbo, Unit leader ESP, Aarhus Municipality, Denmark

Maria Sandhaug, PhD, Postdoctoral, Senior Adviser, Statped, Norway

Marit Solvoll, Senior Adviser, Statped, Norway

Mikael Thastum, Professor, Aarhus University, Denmark

Peter Friberg, Psychologist, Chief and Head of Education, Magelungen Academy, Sweden

Robert Palmér, CBT Therapist, Gjerdrum Municipality, Norway

Sarah Jakobsen, PhD student, Aarhus University, Denmark

1. Introduction to problematic school absenteeism – a brief literature review and status report

School absenteeism has probably existed for as long as there has been a modern school system. Although the problem of school absenteeism was identified and described as early as the 1930s, it only received considerable attention recently in the Nordic countries (Ek & Eriksson, 2013; Gren-Landell, 2021; Gren-Landell, Ekerfeldt Allvin, Bradley, Andersson, & Andersson, 2015; Havik, Bru, & Ertesvåg, 2014; Havik, Bru, & Ertesvåg, 2015a; Havik, Bru, & Ertesvåg, 2015b; Ingul, Klöckner, Silverman, & Nordahl, 2012; Ingul & Nordahl, 2013; Karlberg et al., 2020; Määttä, Pelkonen, Lehtisare, & Määttä, 2020; Swedish National Board of Education, 2008). The school is an important arena for development, both socially and academically, hence school absenteeism can hamper the acquisition of crucial competencies, such as reading skills and socio-emotional competence. Students who struggle for one reason or another to participate in daily school activities are at risk of marginalisation and being left behind. If their needs are not met, they are likely to not complete school, which can lead to both short-term and long-term negative consequences, including mental health problems and unemployment, as formal education is essential for employment (Attwood & Croll, 2006; Egger, Costello, & Angold, 2003).

In the Nordic countries, children have the right to attend school (from 6–16 years). In Sweden, school-age children are legally required to attend school. In Finland, Denmark and Norway, children are required to complete compulsory education, but physical attendance is not required.

Most students are occasionally absent from school during their schooling. A cold or stomach flu, for example, can force them to stay home for a day or two or they are granted leave to go on holiday or visit a relative. Others are worse off still, with life-threatening diseases like cancer. These are examples of excused absence, the reason for which is mostly self-corrective, while unexcused absence is more problematic. Students may prefer to hang out with friends outside of school, perhaps because the school environment excludes them. They may be too anxious to leave home or need to help with household chores. Students may have difficulties that the school is not adequately addressing. But when does school absenteeism become problematic? Some students can manage even with moderate absence

and eventually catch up because the absence is self-corrective. For others, a little absence can become problematic. School absenteeism can also be a symptom of a larger problem, such an unsafe neighbourhood with crime and drug problems, family dysfunction or possibly undetected learning disabilities. When students do not attend school, their situation is always somehow complicated. Help may be needed on several levels, such as in the schools, with the families and with the students.

Can the Nordic educational systems be modified to help and improve the inclusion of students with problematic school absenteeism? National regulations and guidelines based on scientific research can effectively prevent and impede emerging problematic school absenteeism. Providing support requires understanding the nature and function of the behaviour. So, what are the factors that contribute to problematic school absenteeism? In the next section, we answer these questions and explore how SAP are defined and conceptualised in the scientific literature.

1.1. What is problematic school absenteeism?

To date, there is no unambiguous definition for problematic school absenteeism, although various attempts have been to define and conceptualise the broad, heterogeneous array of attendance problems (Heyne, Gren-Landell, Melvin, & Gentle-Genitty, 2019). According to Kearney (2008), problematic school absenteeism is a dimensional construct involving various behaviours along a continuum that ranges from milder (e.g., pleas for non-attendance and tardiness) to severe (repeated absences or complete absenteeism) cases.

It is of high scientific and practical value to determine 1) whether absenteeism is problematic and 2) the type or nature of absenteeism involved (Heyne et al., 2019). However, the criteria for defining when absenteeism is problematic vary greatly – not only between countries, but also between schools (e.g., definitions of emerging, acute or chronic absenteeism are not shared). Likewise, conceptualisation is obscured by a wide range of terms, often used interchangeably and inconsistently (See Table 1).

Understandably, the prevalence rates of problematic school absence vary between countries and applied criteria, but international studies indicate that this concerns around 3–5% of all students (Heyne et al., 2019; Kearney & Bensaheb, 2006). According to Havik et al. (2015a),

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self-reports among 6th to 10th graders indicate that 7.5% were absent 13% or more of the time during the last three months for some reason. Nonetheless, these percentages depend on the defined 'time limit' for problematic school absenteeism in the different reports.

Table 1. What we mean when we talk about absenteeism (supplemented and adapted from Heyne et al., 2019; Pelkonen, 2021)

Absenteeism	Category
School absenteeism, school non-attendance, school attendance problems	School refusal
Non-problematic vs. problematic absenteeism	Truancy (skipping or cutting lessons and/or school)
Excused/authorised vs. unexcused/unauthorised absenteeism	School withdrawal
Emerging, acute, and chronic absenteeism	School exclusion (temporal school suspension, permanent school expulsion, school does not provide sufficient support/systems, e.g. for students with special needs)
Child-motivated/condoned vs. parent-motivated/condoned absenteeism	School phobia
School refusal behaviour	School avoidance

1.1.1. Differentiation between non-problematic and problematic absenteeism

Kearney (2003; 2008) has proposed that non-problematic absenteeism can be defined as absence that is "agreed on by parents and school officials as legitimate in nature and involving detriment to the child" (Kearney, 2003, p. 59). This absence can be caused by illness, religious holidays, natural disasters, etc. and the absence can always be compensated for (i.e., the youth is not attending school but is engaged in alternative forms of education). Kearney defined problematic absenteeism as a two-week period of 1) more than 25% absence or b) difficulty attending school (skipping classes, anxiety about school) that significantly interferes with a student's or family's daily routines. Later, Kearney (2008) revised the criteria: the student 1) has missed at least 25% of total school time for at least two weeks, 2) experiences severe difficulty attending classes for at least two weeks with significant interference with the student's or family's daily routine and/or 3) is absent for at least 10 days of schooling during any 15-week period while school is in session (i.e., a minimum of 15% days absent). The third criterion was added to encourage interventions with students whose sporadic absenteeism is still problematic.

However, Kearney's 25% criterion seems to be based on an expert opinion rather than evidence pointing to 25% as being a meaningful cut-off point for problematic absenteeism.

In addition, the nonspecific criterion (i.e., interference with the student's or family's routines) may be too complicated to apply in research and practice (Heyne et al., 2019).

More recently, a cut-off point of 10% has been suggested as a more pragmatic and easily implementable definition that requires some type of reaction. Consequently, in Denmark, Australia, the UK, and US, missing 10% or more of school has been described as worrying or problematic and the prevalence rates of youths with absenteeism above this threshold range from 11% to 25% (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership, 2020; Danish Ministry of Children and Education, 2021; Department of Education, 2019).

An example of a different approach to defining when to react in cases of absenteeism is the algorithm for 'attention-demanding' absenteeism developed by the municipality of Aarhus, Denmark (Aarhus Municipality, 2013). Signs of attention-demanding absenteeism comprise four attention parameters that enable the school to become aware of possibly problematic absence at an early stage. These four parameters are:

A. Four or more absence periods during the last month
B. 10% unexcused absence during the last month
C. Eleven or more periods of absence during the last school year
D. More than 10% absence during the last school year

The two monthly parameters A and B enable the school to identify emerging absence at an early stage. A and C can draw attention to absence patterns, such as regular absence on Mondays or Fridays, B specifically concerns unexcused absence and D concerns the quantity of the absence during a longer period, regardless of the absence category.

Student with one or more of the parameters need attention and whether or not there are reasons to react based on the absence must be evaluated.

1.1.2. Differentiation between types: four subtypes of problematic absenteeism

Recently, it has been suggested that the hypernym 'School Attendance Problems' (SAP) can be used as an umbrella term and that problematic absenteeism can be differentiated by its four subtypes: school refusal (SR), truancy (TR), school withdrawal (SW) and school exclusion (SE) (Heyne, 2019; Heyne et al., 2019). These general categories focus on the reasons behind the attendance problems and aim to capture the heterogeneity of the etiology and presentation of SAP. For example, risk factors predisposing to different kinds of SAP are

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likely to vary and targeting interventions are more effective when the reasons behind absenteeism are clear. Among students, the reasons for SAP may involve more than one category, as truancy may be motivated by an informal exclusion by the school or follow initial school refusal.

The main features of school refusal (SR) are that the student is reluctant or refuses to attend and experiences temporal or chronic emotional distress about going to school. He or she does not attempt to hide the absence from guardians or parents, does not display severe antisocial behaviour and the parents have made reasonable efforts to secure the student's attendance (Heyne et al., 2019). These students often have negative experiences at school and may have comorbid learning difficulties. Ingul, Havik, and Heyne (2019) and Heyne et al. (2019) include Berg and colleagues' criteria for school refusal (SR), defined as follows:

a) Reluctance or refusal to attend school, often leading to prolonged absence.
b) The student is usually at home when not at school and usually the parents are aware of this.
c) The student experiences emotional distress about going to school (somatic complaints, anxiety, etc.).
d) Absence of severe antisocial behaviour, but the student may show resistive behaviour when parents try to get him or her to school.
e) Parents have tried to secure the youth's attendance at school (Berg, 1997, 2002; Berg, Nichols, & Pritchard, 1969; Bools, Foster, Brown, & Berg, 1990).

According to these criteria, SR is often differentiated from truancy based on criteria b), c), and d), and from school withdrawal based on criterion e) (Heyne et al., 2019).

Truancy (TR) occurs when the student is absent from school or may be at school but is absent from the obligatory location. This absence occurs without the permission of school personnel and the student typically tries to hide the absenteeism from parents and teachers.

School withdrawal (SW) occurs when absenteeism is entwined with problems within family dynamics. The parents know that the student is absent, but either want to keep the student at home or do not make sufficient effort to get him or her to school. In addition, the student might be absent, for example, to keep an eye on a parent with mental health problems or

substance abuse or to take care of younger siblings. In these cases, the student may be worried about what might happen at home during the school day.

School exclusion (SE) occurs when students stay or study at home at the school's initiative. This kind of situation may develop, for example, when the student shows openly aggressive behaviour and is considered unpredictable or uncontrollable – and the school cannot sufficiently meet the student's specific needs. The school personnel may initiate a shortened school day or week if they consider that safe school days for all participants cannot be guaranteed otherwise. Additionally, temporary school suspension or permanent school expulsion may occur. SE may also be non-formal exclusion when the school does not provide sufficient or the necessary support to a student with special needs.

These subtypes are not mutually exclusive. In fact, several overlapping characteristics have been found between SR and TR (Steinhausen, Müller, & Metzke, 2008) and a smaller proportion of youth (5–9%) meet the criteria for both types (Egger et al., 2003; Heyne et al., 2019). In addition, there may be overlaps between SR and SW, complicating a clear-cut distinction between them. For example, a child's anxiety about going to school may be related to a dependency relationship with the mother (Christogiorgos & Giannakopoulos, 2014) and the parents may cope with their child's anxiety by being overprotective (Thastum et al., 2019).

1.1.3. A functional model

Kearney and colleagues (Kearney & Silverman, 1996) have proposed another approach to differentiation of SAP types. They suggested a functional model that organises SAP by the primary factor motivating the absence. The model includes four motivational functions of school absenteeism: (1) Avoidance of negative affectivity associated with school-based stimuli (e.g., specific persons or places at school), (2) escape of aversive social and/or evaluative situations in school (e.g., tests, peer interactions), (3) attainment of attention from significant others outside school (e.g., parents) and (4) the pursuit of tangible rewards outside of school (e.g., playing computer games, hanging with friends). Functions 1 and 2 represent negative reinforcements, whereas functions 3 and 4 represent positive reinforcements. However, absenteeism is not uncommonly a mixture of more than one function. For example, a child can initially stay home because of something unpleasant at

school, but then enjoy the conveniences of staying home. In this case, the child misses out on school due to both negative and positive reinforcements.

The functional model is becoming increasingly prominent, perhaps because it may provide valuable leads for targeting the underlying reason(s) during intervention, especially in cognitive behavioural approaches. However, a major limitation of the model is that types of absenteeism that are not motivated by the child (i.e., SW and SE) are not included. Therefore, using the model uncritically involves a risk of missing important contributing factors in the home or school environment, such as parental strategies or a lack of resources, which may otherwise provide leads to intervention (Heyne et al., 2019; Thastum, 2019).

1.2. Risk factors and early signs

SAP should be understood from a multifactorial perspective based on the notion that various factors contribute to the problems over time. The causes of a student's absenteeism from school are often unique to the individual and determined by multiple, overlapping variables in the student's life and surroundings (Kearney, 2008).

Research into SAP has identified a wide range of factors that may place students at risk of problematic absenteeism. In this paper, such factors are referred to as risk factors, although it should be noted that they may serve as predisposing, precipitating, and/or maintaining factors. Risk factors are commonly grouped into factors pertaining to the individual, the family, the school and the broader community (Maynard et al., 2018).

1.2.1. Individual factors

One of the individual risk factors most strongly associated with SAP are psychological problems. Compared to students with stable school attendance, students with SAP display a higher rate of internalizing (e.g., anxiety, depression) and externalizing (e.g., behavioural problems) problems (Egger et al., 2003; Gubbels, van der Put & Assink, 2019; Lomholt et al., 2020). Developmental disorders such as autism spectrum disorders are also considered a major risk factor for SAP (Kurita, 1991; Munkhaugen, Gjersvik, Pripp, Sporheim, & Diseth, 2017). Other individual risk factors include physical problems (e.g., chronic illness), substance abuse and (undetected) learning disabilities (Gubbels et al., 2019, Lomholt et al., 2020; Thornton, Darmody, & McCoy, 2013).

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1.2.2. Family factors

Family factors such as family structure, family functioning and parenting style can affect the development of SAP. Family-related risk factors include for instance low socioeconomic status, parental mental or physical health problems, low parental involvement in the student's schooling and an overprotective parenting style (Gubbels et al., 2019; Ingul et al., 2019).

1.2.3. School factors

In schools, poor classroom management has been argued to play a significant role in the development of SAP (Havik et al., 2015b). Poor classroom management is characterised by a lack of classroom order and poor structuring of instruction and/or of social interactions between students. Thus, by failing to prevent unpleasant experiences such as bullying, social isolation and unpredictability at school, as well as to promote participation, the school contributes to absenteeism, both directly and indirectly. Another school factor is school transitions. School transitions may mean changes between schools (e.g., associated with a move), but also starting a new school year or returning after a holiday period (Ingul et al., 2019). Even in single-structure educational systems, the transition between primary and lower secondary education may involve a shift in physical and social environment, as well as changes in pedagogical practices (e.g., going from one primary teacher to subject-specific teaching) (Symond & Galton, 2014). Coinciding with the transition between childhood and adolescence, this is considered a period of vulnerability and risk of developing SAP (Ingul et al., 2019).

1.2.4. Community factors

The association between community factors and SAP is rather difficult to establish. Nevertheless, studies point to the increasing importance of education, putting pressure on children and adolescents to achieve academically (Maynard et al., 2015). In relation to this, mental disorders and a lack of mental well-being among children and adolescents have been rising steadily over past decades, a trend also seen in the Nordic countries (e.g., Danish Patients, 2021; Public Health Agency of Sweden, 2021). Emotional problems may be linked to a more achievement-oriented culture (e.g., increased national testing in schools), in some cases reinforced by the distribution of social media that may lead to negative social comparisons (Keles, McCrae, & Grealish,2019) and the perception of an increasingly

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threatening world (e.g., school shootings, terrorism) (Healthychildren.org, 2021). Community risk factors also include neighbourhood characteristics such as poverty and structural barriers such as a lack of transport infrastructure or living in remote locations (Melvin et al., 2019).

1.2.5. Early signs

Early signs of SAP may be misbehaviour in the morning to avoid school or tardiness, perhaps due to arguments at home. It may also be the youth returning home during the day (e.g., lunch breaks), missing specific activities or classes while remaining in school (e.g., sitting in the library instead) or absence on specific days (e.g., Mondays or days when oral presentations are held) (Ingul et al., 2019).

To determine whether the school absenteeism should be considered problematic and to know when and what we are measuring, criteria are needed. To some extent, we consider all school absence problematic and in our daily work, we meet with a group of students with complicated problems who need considerable support (prevention and intervention) and with multiple factors to consider. When a student has extended absence, it is probably difficult for the student regardless of the cause and hard for the student to change the situation. Consequently, student needs multi-professional support.

1.3. International Network for School Attendance (INSA)

The international Network for School Attendance (INSA) was established in 2018. Its mission is to promote school attendance and to respond to school attendance problems. Sweden, Finland, Denmark and Norway are all represented by academics and clinicians in the national subnetworks (insa.network/sweden, insa.network/finland, insa.network/denmark, insa.network/norway).

INSA objectives include ensuring that all stakeholders have access to current developments in the field, sharing data from research and best practices, connecting and mentoring junior researchers and practitioners, convening annually at different locations across the world and documenting deliberations in the field (past, present, future). The website provides

information about past, current and upcoming activities and achievements, as well as helpful links and other resources.

1.4. Definition and prevalence in the Nordic countries

The Nordic countries do not distinguish between excused and unexcused absence. The local and governmental levels, municipalities, educational and the support systems operate with different definitions of SAP and different prevalence rates of school absenteeism (Table 2).

Table 2. Prevalence rates of absenteeism in the Nordic countries

Prevalence	Sweden	Finland	Denmark	Norway
How are prevalence rates registered?	Surveys to municipalities and schools (2008, 2010, 2016)	No national registry data	National registry data	No national registry data
National Prevalence rates? Yes /No	Yes	No (School Health Promotion Study collects students' self-reports on Grades 5 and 8)	Yes	No
Prevalence by category?	1) Prolonged unexcused absenteeism (PUA) 2) Unexcused repeated partial absence (URPA)	1) Excused 2) Unexcused	1) Absence due to illness, disability, etc. 2) Unexcused absence 3) Extraordinary exemption	1) Excused 2) Unexcused
How is prevalence calculated?	Percentage of students in each category	Hours	Days or half days	Hours/10–20%
Prevalence (%)	PUA: 0.07% in grades 1–6, 0.39% in grades 7–9 URPA: 0.70% in grades 1–6, 4.30% in grades 7–9. (2016)	N/A*	Overall absence: 5.2% in regular schools and 9.4% in special schools Students with more than 10% absence: 11.7% (2019)	N/A*

*N/A = Not applicable

1.5. Objectives

School absenteeism is a universal problem that challenges schools and communities today. The Nordic perspective is important, as the Nordic countries have similar school systems and a similar demography in the primary school population. For example, most schools are non-private schools ran by municipalities, core curriculums are provided by the state and education is free of charge. The countries have established a Nordic Educational Model, comprising a compulsory school system and 'A School for All' (Blossing, Imsen & Moors, 2014). Classrooms in the Nordic countries emphasise equal opportunities for all students, including student variance and diversity. The project *Problematic School Absence – Improving Systems and Tools* aims to describe and improve guidelines targeting SAP on the school, municipal, national and transnational levels. The main goal is to target the challenges faced by schools today with innovative and knowledge-based actions. Practical guidelines for municipalities and schools support both school administrative systems, as well as school staff, in identifying and treating students with potential or severe SAP.

In this first report, the main objectives are to address Nordic approaches to prevent, detect, manage, treat, monitor and follow up on school absenteeism by:

1. Defining and interpreting SAP internationally and nationally
2. Describing the educational school and support systems in the Nordic countries
3. Providing overviews of prevalence and registration rates in the Nordic countries
4. Exemplifying Nordic initiatives and actions to prevent and treat SAP
5. Discussing and comparing Nordic strengths and limitations concerning SAP

Consequently, the Nordic Erasmus project examines shared challenges in the primary and secondary education systems and works to develop a common model to improve SAP-related practices.

2. An introduction to the Nordic education systems

Education is compulsory and free for all children and adolescents in the Nordic countries (with few exceptions, e.g., asylum-seeking children). Compulsory education is ten years and children start school at the age of six. The countries all have a national curriculum for

compulsory education. The education systems in Sweden, Denmark, Finland and Norway are described in more detail in the following chapters.

2.2. The Swedish education system

Education in Sweden consists of pre-school (Swedish: *förskola*), pre-school class (Swedish: *förskoleklass*), compulsory school (Swedish: *grundskola*), compulsory education for students with learning disabilities (Swedish: *grundsärskola*), upper secondary school (Swedish: *gymnasium*), upper secondary school for students with learning disabilities (Swedish: *gymnasiesärskola*), special school primarily for students with impaired hearing (Swedish: *specialskola*), Sami school (Swedish: *sameskola*), adult education (Swedish*: vuxenutbildning*), higher vocational education (Swedish: *yrkeshögskolor*), folk high school (Swedish: *folkhögskola*) and university (Swedish: *universitet*).

Education in Sweden is compulsory and free of charge for all children and adolescents ages 6–16. Since 2018, compulsory school in Sweden is ten years and the first year starts from the age of six (i.e., pre-school class). Students in compulsory schools, compulsory education for students with learning disabilities and in special schools for students with impaired hearing have the right to finish the final grade. The right to finish compulsory school and compulsory education for students with learning disabilities is determined by the home municipality and, for special schools for students with impaired hearing, by the National Agency for Special Needs Education and Schools (SPSM).
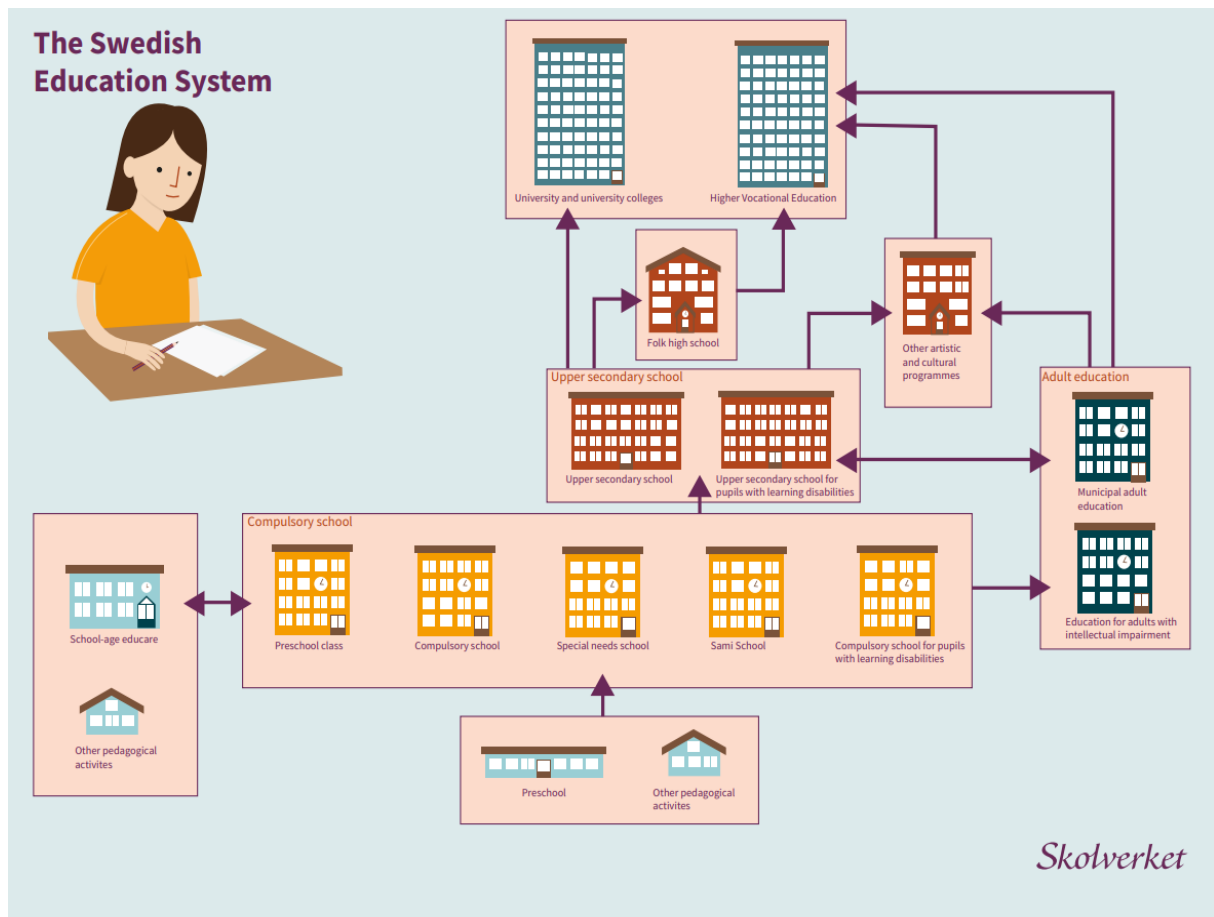
Figure 1. Education system in Sweden. Published with permission from the Swedish National Agency for Education, 2020

The compulsory school education is based on the official curriculum for compulsory school, preschool class and leisure time centre (for schoolchildren) 2011 (LGR 11). There are separate curricula for Sami students, students with sign language as their first language and students with learning disabilities.

Compulsory school in Sweden is built on the principle that schools should be equivalent and uniform regardless of the type of school. Equivalent education and uniform content are guiding principles. In the curriculum for compulsory school, goals stipulate what each student is expected to learn in each subject in grades 3, 6 and 9. The curriculum does not specify which specific methods should be used to achieve the goals. This is decided on the local level by the municipality or, in case of independent schools, the principal organiser. If a school is run by a municipality, the principal organiser is the municipality.

The subject curricula presuppose that specific content, organisation and methods to be used in teaching are determined on the local level in the individual school. Asylum-seeking

students are entitled to the compulsory school education. Students with a mother tongue other than Swedish have the right to be taught in their native language as a subject in compulsory school.

If a child is a native speaker of one of the official minority languages in Sweden, they have a stronger right (stipulated by the Education Act) to be taught in their mother tongue in school. When it comes to native speakers of minority languages, there are no requirements that the language be the one that the child uses in daily interactions with others or that the child has extensive knowledge of the language.

During the 2018/2019 academic school year, there were 121,991 students in pre-school classes and a total of 1,068,274 students enrolled in the Swedish comprehensive school system. On average, there are 12.1 students per teacher in compulsory school.

2.2.1. Support for learning

The Swedish Educational Act of 2011 states that all schools must give students the guidance and stimulus they need to succeed in school. This is to ensure that all students, based on their specific abilities, can achieve their full potential (SFS 2010:800).

Laws regulating Swedish upper secondary school stipulate that each student must have a mentor, whose mission is to support the student's school performance. If the student requires adaptations, the mentor must make sure that those teaching the student receive the relevant information for implementing these. A student's mentor is usually a teacher, but this is not a requirement, and it is the principal who decides which staff member is to mentor which student.

In primary school, the law does not require a mentor for each student, but it is common for this role to exist and that the class teacher is also the mentor. The mentor or class teacher in the school years in which students are not graded must prepare the written individual development plans required by law.

The written individual development plan is a tool to help teachers follow up on a student's knowledge development and gauge their need for support. After fifth grade, when students are graded each semester, the individual development plan is no longer mandatory.

If a student does not fulfil the educational goals, special support may be warranted. The first step is to assess the organisation around the student. A teacher, often together with student welfare staff, assesses the student's performance on the school, group and individual level and tries to determine whether the need for special support is in one subject or if the student needs support in all subjects. The plan for future support is based on the assessment.

2.2.2. Adaptations and special support

If it becomes clear (based on the assessment) that a student needs special support, the first step is to make adaptations. The goal of these adaptations is to make teaching more accessible to the student. There are no formal requirements or demands concerning formal decisions by the principal of a school for adaptations for students.

The adaptions are carried out in the regular classroom setting. If the school is still not able to give the student enough support towards goal completion and there is a need for more permanent and extensive efforts, this means that the student requires special support.

Before the decision is made to offer a student special needs support, an investigation by the school must be conducted. The principal of the school is responsible for making sure that an investigation is initiated promptly and that a decision regarding special support is also made promptly after the investigation (SFS 2010:800).

If the assessment points to a need for special support, an action plan (Swedish: *åtgärdsprogram*) must be prepared. In the action plan, it must be made clear how the need for special support is going to be met. The plan must also state when the actions will be evaluated and followed up on. It must also contain information on who is responsible for monitoring and evaluating the plan. The student and student's legal guardian must be given the opportunity to participate in the development of an action plan. The action plan is decided on by the principal (SFS 2010:800).
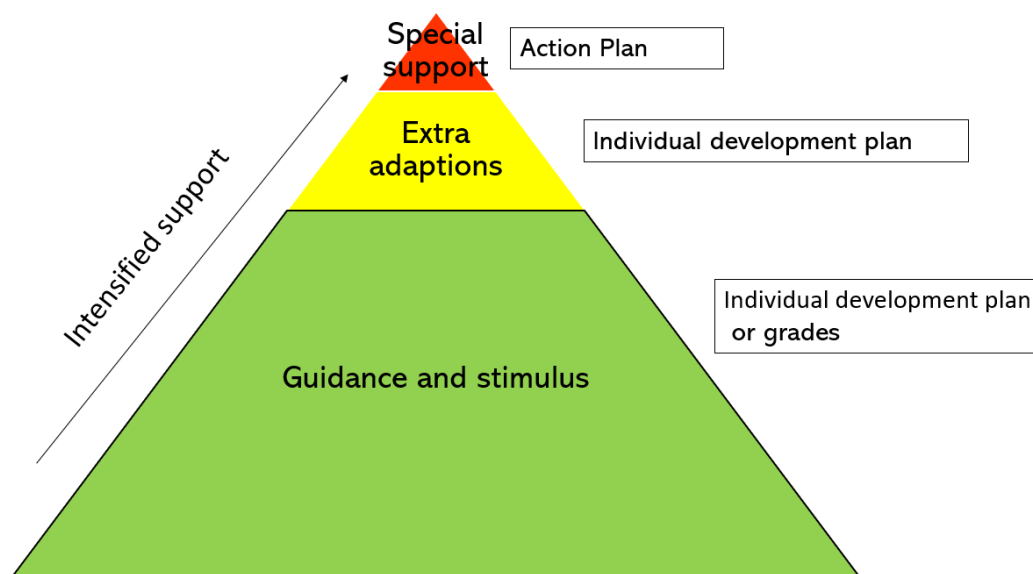
Figure 2. A tier model of the support system (SFS 2010:800, Chapter 1, 4§, Chapter 3, 3§, Chapter 3, 9§)

2.2.3. Independent schools in Sweden

Sweden is the only OECD country to have a fully developed and established voucher system. Private schools financed by vouchers are called 'independent schools'. Each school in Sweden must have a principal organiser (Swedish: *huvudman*) responsible for the education provided to the students. The principal organiser is accountable to government agencies.

In a report by the Swedish National Agency for Education (2014), it was found that there are 600 different principal organisers that run independent schools in Sweden. Some run one school, while others run hundreds of schools.

2.3. The Finnish education system

The education system in Finland consists of early childhood education and care, pre-primary education, basic education, general upper secondary education, vocational education and higher education. Since the start of this year, January 2021, Finland has extended free compulsory education to the age of 18 starting 1/8/2021 (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2021). This consists of one-year of pre-primary education for six-year-olds, nine years of basic education for children ages seven to sixteen and secondary education (high school/vocational school). Unfortunately, Figure 3 showing the education system in Finland

has not yet been updated according to the extended compulsory education – approved by Parliament – to take effect later this year (2021) with the first age group (born in 2005). At the same time, Parliament voted to make secondary education entirely free of charge, which means, for example, that students will not have to provide their own textbooks in the future and student guidance and student welfare services will be improved (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2021).

There are about 2,200 compulsory schools in Finland and fewer than 5% of them are private (Statistic Finland, 2019). Most students attend a neighbourhood school located near their homes. General upper secondary/high school leads to a standardised national matriculation examination and vocational education to a vocational qualification (see Figure 3). It is possible to combine these two for a dual qualification, i.e., to earn a vocational degree and take the matriculation examination (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2018). For more information on the division of labour between government entities in the education system Finland, see https://www.oph.fi/en/about-us/tasks.
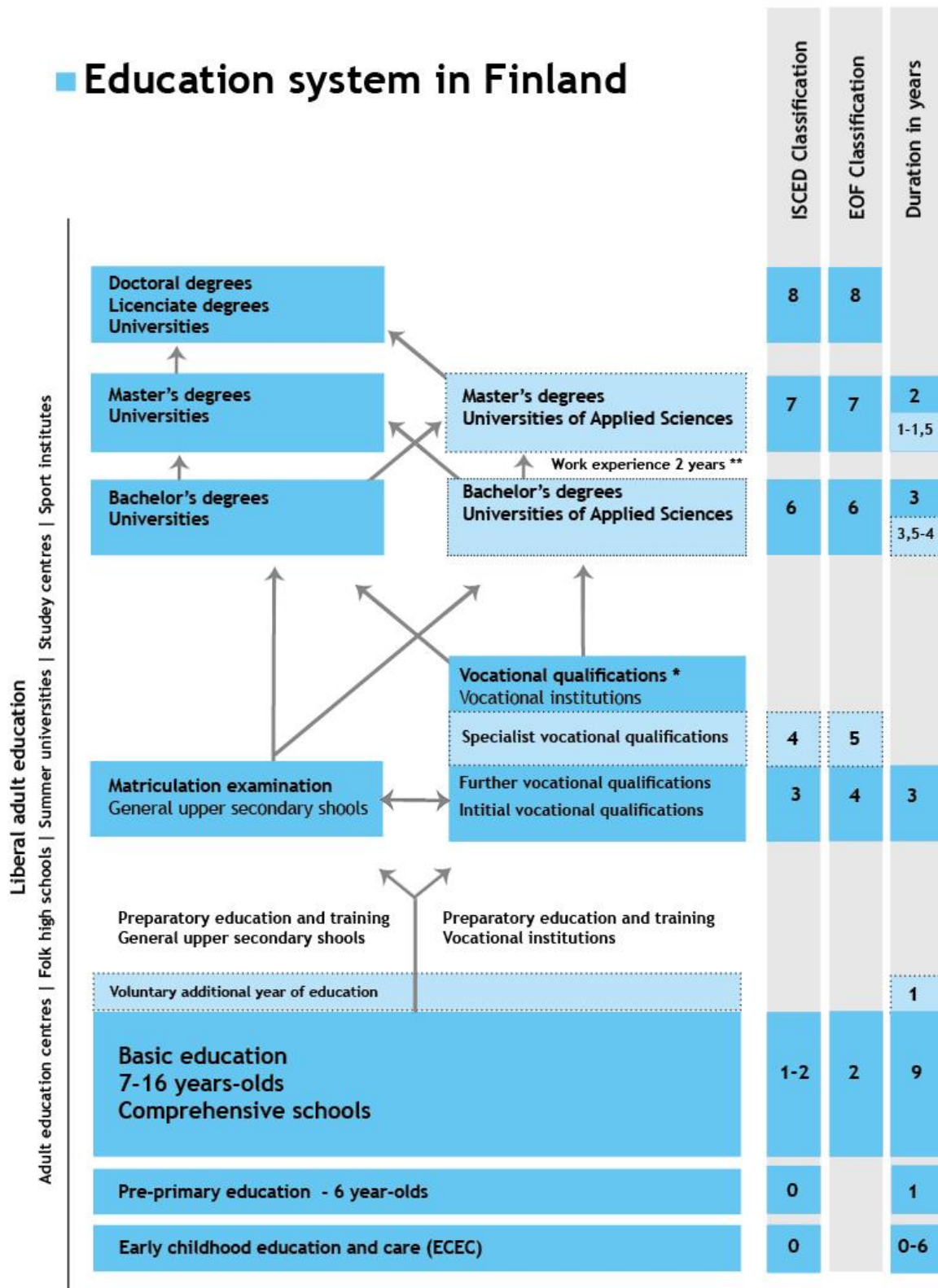
Figure 3. Overview of Finnish education system (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2020c)

2.3.1. National core curriculum for basic education

The national core curriculum for basic education was reformed in 2016 (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2018; 2014). The core curriculum provides a common direction and basis for renewing school education and instruction. The common compulsory subjects are stated in the Basic Education Act, while the national core curriculum defines the objectives and core contents of each subject. In addition, the core curriculum defines the objectives for the learning environment, as well as principles for student welfare, guidance, support, differentiation and assessment. It forms a unified educational continuum through the compulsory education.

Municipalities and education providers prepare local curricula and annual plans based on the national core curriculum. The central aims of the new curriculum are to develop the school culture and promote instruction with an integrative approach (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2018; 2016). Additionally, the core curriculum describes seven transversal competence areas, including thinking and learning-to-learn, as well as working life competence and entrepreneurship. These transversal competences can be viewed as 21st century skills.

2.3.2. Support for learning and school attendance

The National Core Curricula for pre-primary and basic education includes a systematic approach to organising student support. The focus is on prevention and early intervention. There are *three levels of support* in pre-primary and basic education: general, intensified and special support (European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, 2020a). In the autumn of 2019, 20.1% of students in compulsory education received intensified (11.6%) or special support (8.5%) (Statistics Finland, 2020).

In Finland, both intensified and special support are primarily provided within mainstream education. In 2010, new special education amendments were made to the Finnish Basic Education Act (642/2010), which were officially adopted in 2011. The three-tiered support system can be considered the Finnish approach to directing education towards a more inclusive system, as it emphasises the responsibility of all teachers to provide support within the regular educational setting, representing a new feature in policy documents. All students of compulsory school age have the right to general support, which means high-quality education, as well as guidance, differentiation, other special teaching arrangements and

support (e.g., flexible or smaller study group, individualised study and support materials, shorter school days, individual support plans and online studies and guidance). Intensified support is more continuous, stronger and more personalised than general support. The aim is to prevent existing problems from becoming more serious or expansive. If intensified support is not enough, the student receives special support. This includes individually tailored syllabi in different subjects and adaptation of the distribution of lesson hours. Special support strives to provide broadly based and systematic help to students, so that they can complete compulsory education and be eligible for upper secondary education. The objectives and teaching arrangements to support students are described in the student's *individual educational plan* (IEP) (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2020a; 2020b).
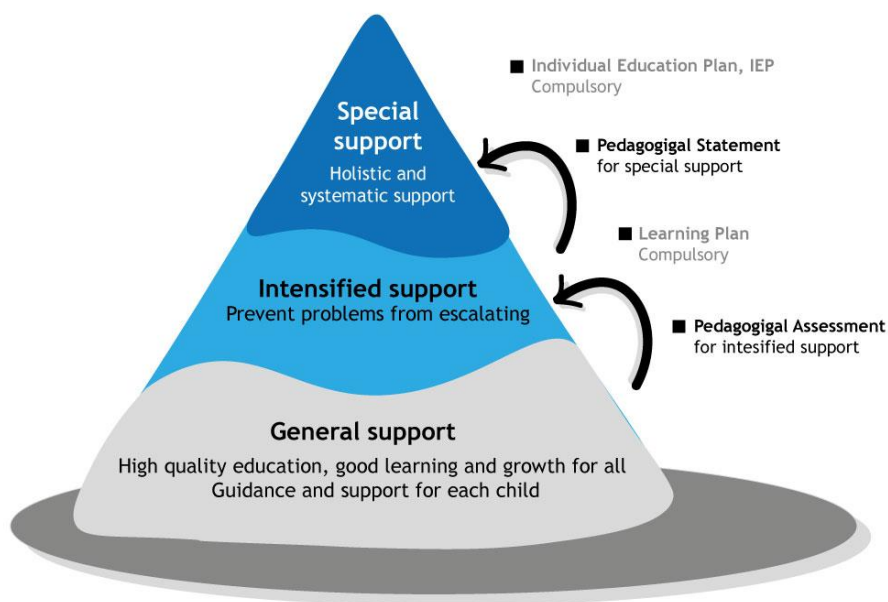
Figure 4. The three-tiered support system in Finland (figure created by Valteri Centre for Learning and Consulting)

2.3.3. Student welfare

The students have a statutory right to individual student welfare. Student welfare primarily consists of preventive activities and communal student welfare work that supports the entire school community. Communal student welfare work aims to promote the learning, well-being, health, social responsibility, interaction and participation of all students, as well

as the wholesomeness, safety and accessibility of the learning environment. A school culture that strengthens the sense of community reconnects young people with school, despite challenges on a personal level related to mental health or otherwise.

Individual student welfare focuses on the student and the services are based on the student's right to receive sufficient support in resolving difficulties. This means access to school health services, a school social worker and psychology services, as well as other multi-professional services implemented by a team of experts. Such a multi-professional team of experts is established if the need arises to clarify an individual student's need for support and to organise services (Hietanen-Peltola, Laitinen, Autio & Palmqvist, 2018). If a student does not attend school regularly, systematic collaboration between numerous parties is often required, as cross-sectoral cooperation is essential to student welfare. The key points include early involvement and systematic, high-quality communal student welfare, which aims to develop a positive school culture that prevents and addresses absenteeism (Sergejeff, Pilbacka-Rönkä & Mantila, 2019).

2.4. The Danish education system

The Danish education system consists of day-care services, pre-school, primary and lower secondary education, upper secondary education, vocational education, higher education and adult education (see Figure 5 1 for an overview) (Ministry of Children and Education, 2020a).
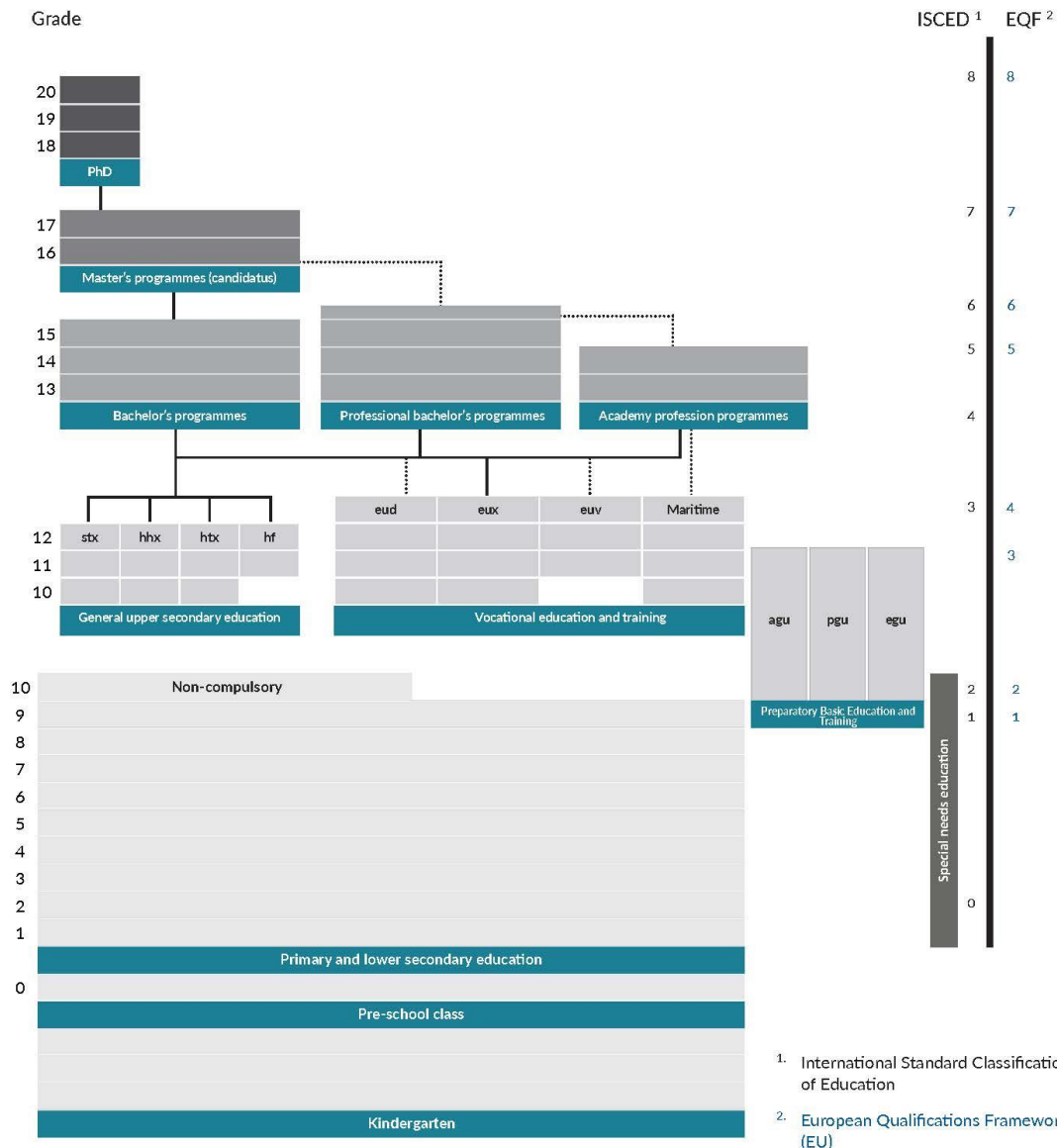
Figure 5. Overview of the Danish Education System (Ministry of Children and Education, 2020a)

2.4.1. Compulsory education

In Denmark, education is compulsory between the ages of six and 16, which covers 10 years of basic education (Danish: *Grundskole*). Basic education is free and constitutes a comprehensive system that integrates pre-school, primary education and lower secondary education. In other words, basic education consists of one compulsory pre-school year (grade 0), nine years of compulsory primary and lower secondary education (grade 1–9) and one extra optional year (grade 10) (Ministry of Children and Education, 2017).

The Danish public school is called the *folkeskole.* It is regulated by the Folkeskole Act (Retsinformation.dk, 2020a), the basic education act in Denmark, and the related ministerial orders. The Folkeskole Act lays down the overall framework and objectives for school activities (Ministry of Children and Education, 2018), which are administrated locally on the municipal and school level. In this paper, the Education Act refers to the Folkeskole Act.

In 2014, a comprehensive reform transformed Danish public schooling. The agreement stated that "the academic standard needs a lift and all children must be challenged to achieve their highest academic potential, regardless of their social background and with a high level of well-being" (The Ministry of Children and Education, 2014a, p. 3). To achieve these declared goals, the reform introduced longer school days, going from 21 to 30 weekly hours on average, as well as intensified teaching in Danish, English and mathematics. In addition, part of instruction became organised as 'supportive instruction' (e.g., physical activity and homework assistance) that supports the students' general development and learning readiness. Finally, it has become mandatory for schools to work systematically on student welfare (The Ministry of Children and Education, 2014a).

Compulsory education can also be received in a private or self-governing institution or at home if the education measures up to the public-school standards (Ministry of Children and Education, 2018). In Denmark, there is also a tradition for continuation schools, which are private residential schools covering 8–10th grade (UG.dk, 2020).

In the 2018-2019 school year, the percentage of students in public schools was 78.8%, compared to 17.8% in private schools and 1.4% in continuation schools, while 2% were enrolled in other schools such as special schools (Danish National Agency for It and Learning, 2020a).

2.4.2. Support for learning

According to the Education Act, the municipal board is responsible for providing appropriate personnel, facilities and materials in schools (Retsinformation.dk, 2020a).

Although not required by law, so-called resource persons are commonly employed in schools. Resource persons are professionals who advise, assist and supervise the school's teachers within special fields of competence. Resource persons may be reading specialists, social educators or counsellors with specialised knowledge of student well-being and social development (Danish Evaluation Institute, 2009). In addition, all schools are required to have a pedagogical learning centre (Danish: *pædagogisk læringscenter*) that aims to support the collaboration between the school's resource persons and, in general, to promote learning activities at the school by conveying and implementing new pedagogical knowledge (Retsinformation.dk, 2020a, section 2, §19).

The Education Act emphasises a common and general education school. At the same time, each student has the unconditional right to receive instruction organised in accordance with his or her needs and capabilities. Section 20, subsection 2, contains an obligation for municipalities to provide the necessary special education or assistance to children whose development requires special consideration or support (Retsinformation.dk, 2020a). Special education includes differential teaching, counselling, technical aid and personal assistance. Consequently, there are also often other professionals than teachers working individually with students. Children with more severe levels of disability who cannot be catered to in a mainstream school may require placement in a special school or special class associated with a mainstream school (Ministry of Children and Education, 2020b).

In all municipalities, the Educational Psychological Services (EPS) (Danish: *Pædagogisk Psykologisk Rådgivning; PPR*) is a statutory body that works to ensure the provision of appropriate education for all children and adolescents under the age of 18. The EPS is a multi-professional counselling function consisting of psychologists, language therapists, etc. The EPS works partly on the systemic level, assisting the organisational development of educational institutions and the development of expertise in staff, and partly on the individual level, assessing and declaring each child's educational needs (Ministry of Children and Education, 2020b). However, there are considerable differences between municipalities with regard to the organisation and tasks of EPS. EPS is mostly organised as an independent

and centralised municipal unit with a primary association with the regular education area but in some municipalities, EPS is decentralised (i.e., with primary placement at the educational institutions), shares its finances with other municipal units or is primary associated with the special education area (Deloitte, 2020).

2.5. The Norwegian education system

The education policy is expressed in white paper 21 (2016–2017) 'Desire to learn – early effort and quality in school'. The basic principle is a universal education for all. This means that the quality of the general education is as high as possible and the intention is to provide a good learning environment without bullying that is adapted for all children. The Norwegian school system is unitary, with a strong focus on inclusion. The principle of early effort applies if it is discovered that all other measures to adapt the education to the special needs of an individual child have failed. In this case, extra measures are implemented in the regular education.

2.5.1. The educational pathway

Universal education for children was introduced in Norway 250 years ago. From 1889, children received seven years of compulsory education. In 1969, compulsory education was increased to nine years and, in 1997, to 10 years (Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research, 2007).

Compulsory education in Norway is 10 years:

- Primary level
    - Lower primary level: grades 1–4 (ages 6 to 10)
    - Upper primary level: grades 5–7 (ages 10 to 12)
- Lower secondary level: grades 8–10 (ages 13–16)

Everyone who has completed the compulsory education has the right to upper secondary education or training. A total of 98% of all 16-year-olds enrol in upper secondary school the same year that they complete the compulsory education (Norwegian Education Mirror, 2019).

The Norwegian education system

Figure 6. The Norwegian education system (Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research, 2007)

Kindergarten is voluntary but is considered an important part of the educational pathway. At the end of 2018, 91.7% of children ages 1–5 years were enrolled in kindergarten. The percentage of children increases with age and 97.6% of five-year-olds attend kindergarten (Norwegian Education Mirror, 2019).

In 2019-2020, 636,250 students were enrolled in public and private primary and lower secondary schools in Norway. The number of students enrolled in private primary and lower secondary schools increases from year to year. In 2019–2020, 4% of students were enrolled in private primary and lower secondary schools, the rest in public schools and there were a total of 2,799 primary and lower secondary schools (Norwegian Education Mirror, 2019). Few children attend private schools in Norway, but about 50% of kindergartens are private (Norwegian Education Mirror, 2019). In Norway, only a few students were home-schooled in 2019–2020 in line with the Educational Act § 2-13, but not all home-schooling is registered (Beck, C. W. and Vestre, S. E. (2009).

All public education in Norway is free of charge, but kindergartens have parental fees. The goal is for kindergartens to be accessible to all children regardless of the parents' income.

2.5.2. The curriculum

The National Curriculum for Knowledge Promotion in Primary and Secondary Education and Training was introduced in 2006. The curriculum was renewed and revised following the adoption of white paper 28 in 2016 (Stortingsmelding 28, 2015–2016). From august 2020, renewed and revised subject curricula have been in place. With few exceptions, schools offer the same subjects as before, but the content has changed to give students more in-depth learning and better understanding that includes life skills and citizenship. The latter may contribute to preventing school absenteeism.

The curriculum applies to all levels of primary and secondary education and comprises:

- The core curriculum
- The quality framework
- Distribution of teaching hours per subject in primary and secondary education
- Subject curricula

The subject curricula include competence aims after grades 4, 7 and 10 and after each level of upper secondary education and training.

There are separate subject curricula for Sami students. These curricula are equivalent to and parallel to the subject curricula for education and training in the Sami districts.

There are separate subject curricula in Norwegian, sign language, English and drama and rhythmics for hearing impaired students or students who use sign language.

2.5.3. Support for learning and school attendance

"Primary and lower secondary school students have the right to attend the school closest to where they live or the school designated for the catchment area where they live" (Education Act, section 8-1). Section 8-2 goes on to state that "[i]n their education, students must be divided into classes or basic groups that meet their need for social belonging. For some of the instruction, students may be divided into other groups as necessary. Students must not normally be organised according to their level of ability, gender or ethnic affiliation".

The compulsory education system is based on the principle of equitable education for all. Under the Education Act, all "[e]ducation must be adapted to the abilities and aptitudes of the individual student, apprentice, candidate for certificate of practice and training candidate." (section 1-3). The principle of adapted education applies to all students, including those who need additional academic challenges.

"Students who either do not or are unable to benefit satisfactorily from ordinary teaching have the right to special education (Education Act, section 5-1). Subject to an expert assessment, the school should decide whether an individual student is entitled to special needs education or not (Education Act, section 5-3). A central goal for the kindergartens and schools in Norway is that every child belongs to an inclusive learning community. Special education or assistance should be an integral part of the general education system, given to children who need it where they are.

The kindergarten or school has the primary responsibility for the children's education and care. This means that they need to know the needs and capacities of every child and monitor their learning and development closely. If a child does not learn and develop as expected, the kindergarten or school is required by virtue of the Education Act section 5-3 to initiate an expert assessment. The EPS is the expert body that carries out these assessments. There are

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a large number of municipalities in Norway and all have a designated EPS, although some municipalities share an EPS.

The EPS carries out the legally required expert assessments, but it is the municipalities' responsibility to ensure that they do so. The municipalities make the individual decision about special assistance and/or special education (cf. Education Act, section 5-1). The decision must account for the content, organisation and extent of the assistance/education, as well as for who is going to provide it. As there are no requirement qualifications for the title 'special needs teacher', the assistance/education is very often provided by untrained assistants or staff without special education qualifications (Nordal-rapporten, 2018). A change to the legislation is currently under discussion to ensure that the staff providing special assistance/education have the relevant qualifications. In 2019–20, 7.7% of students received special education, of which 68% were boys (Fakta om grunnskolen skoleåret 2019–20, 2020).

The EPS also assists kindergartens/schools together with the school social health service in organisational development and acquiring the necessary competence to better adapt the education to children with special needs.

3. Government and administration

Sweden, Denmark, Finland and Norway are all divided into regions or counties, each of which is made up of several municipalities. In all four countries, the municipalities are responsible for providing compulsory education, in addition to other services.

The municipalities are not organised and funded the same way in all of the countries, but they all receive funding from the state and through taxes. The municipalities in Sweden, Finland, Denmark and Norway have considerable autonomy and decide how to organise the education in their area and how much of the budget is to be allocated to education. This results in differences among municipalities within each country and between the countries. The municipalities still have to organise and provide the education in compliance with national policies and regulations. The government and administration of compulsory education in the four countries is explained in more detail in the following chapters.

3.2. Sweden

3.2.1. Local education authorities – municipalities and regions

There are four levels of government in Sweden: state, regional, county and municipal. There are 21 regions, 21 counties and 290 municipalities.

Municipalities in Sweden have great deal of autonomy, which is regulated in the 1974 constitution (Swedish: *Regeringsform*). Their budget consists of state grants and local taxes that are combined into a single budget. The municipalities have the freedom to determine the allocation of funds, as long as certain commitments are fulfilled. These include the organisation of compulsory education.

Municipalities have a responsibility to offer childcare and compulsory school and upper secondary school through the 12th grade. They must also organise adult education, Swedish as a second language courses and social services. They are also tasked by law to organise care for the elderly and disabled. Furthermore, they are responsible for urban planning, zoning, sanitation, health and some environmental protection aspects.

3.2.2. Ministry of Education and Research

The Ministry of Education and Research is responsible for all sectors of education in Sweden. The National Agency for Education is responsible for the development of preschool, compulsory school and upper secondary school, vocational education and training and adult education. The Swedish Council for Higher Education is responsible for universities and university colleges.

3.2.3. Government agencies

3.2.3.1. National Agency for Education

The Swedish National Agency for Education is the central administrative authority for the public school system, publicly organised preschool, school-age childcare and adult education. The governing tasks and support provided by the National Agency for Education emanate from orders given by the Swedish government regarding education policies. It has overall responsibility for supervising preschool, education and governance of the education sector, as well as the implementation of Acts of Parliament and regulations. Another responsibility involves national statistics pertaining to preschool, compulsory school and upper secondary school. Based on these statistics, it initiates, develops and monitors

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research and development. Finally, the objective of the Agency for Education is to ensure that all children, students and apprentices receive the high-quality education to which they are entitled.

3.2.3.2. Swedish Schools Inspectorate

The Swedish Schools Inspectorate (Swedish*: Skolinspektionen*) is tasked with reviewing and examining schools and making sure that they meet all legislative and regulatory requirements.

The Swedish Schools Inspectorate scrutinises schools and assesses applications for independent schools. They can also be contacted if there is a suspicion that a school has done something wrong.

3.2.3.3. National Agency for Special Needs Education and Schools (SPSM)

The National Agency for Special Needs Education and Schools (SPSM) is tasked with ensuring that children, young people and adults – regardless of functional ability – have adequate conditions to fulfil their educational goals. This is done through special needs support, education in special needs schools, accessible teaching materials and government funding.

3.3. Finland

3.3.1. Local education authorities – municipalities and regions

Finland is divided into 19 regions. The regions are governed by regional councils, which serve as forums of cooperation for the municipalities in the region. The main tasks of the regions are the regional planning and development of education, business, and public health services. Additionally, there are six regional state administrative agencies (Finnish: *Aluehallintovirasto*) in Finland. These agencies work closely with local authorities and are responsible for basic public services, legal rights and permits, education and culture, occupational health and safety, environmental permits, rescue services and preparedness (Regional State Administrative Agencies, 2013).

In 2020, the government finalised the policy outlines for the health and social services reform (Health and Social Services Reform, 2021). Responsibility for organising services will be integrated, so that there will be one organiser responsible for both general and

specialised services in healthcare and social welfare. Consequently, school social worker and psychologist services will be organised by the counties in the future, but locally accessible in the same way as before.

There are 310 municipalities in Finland (Kuntaliitto, 2019) that are responsible for providing pre-primary and basic education for all children in their area. They can also offer education on other levels. Each municipality has at least one school board or similar institution established by the municipal council (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2020a; European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, 2020b).

3.3.2. Ministry of Education and Culture

The Ministry of Education and Culture is responsible for planning, outlining and implementing government policies. The Ministry is also responsible for the development of education, science, cultural, sports and youth policies, and for international cooperation in these fields. For more information about the Finnish Government https://valtioneuvosto.fi/en/government and duties and objectives of the Ministry of Education and Culture, see https://minedu.fi/en/duties-and-objectives

3.3.3. Finnish National Agency for Education and Valteri Centre for Learning and Consulting

The Finnish National Agency for Education (English: EDUFI; Finnish: *Opetushallitus*) is a national development agency working under the Ministry of Education and Culture. Its tasks and organisation are set out in legislation. The core tasks of EDUFI are to develop education and training, early childhood education and lifelong learning and to promote internationalisation in Finland. The Finnish National Agency for Education also prepares the national core curricula for general education and early childhood education and the requirements for vocational and competence-based qualifications, takes part in preparing education policy decisions and regulates, guides and provides recommendations on decision-making (Ministry of Education and Culture & Finnish National Agency for Education, 2017).

Valteri Centre for Learning and Consulting operates under the Finnish National Agency for Education. Valteri supports the neighbourhood school principal on national level by offering a wide range of services for needs associated with general, intensified and special support (Valteri Centre for learning and Consulting, 2020). Services may focus on the needs of

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individual children or young people or the needs of an entire work community, municipality or region. Together with the home municipality, Valteri promotes school attendance for those who require support.

3.4. Denmark

The Danish public sector is divided into three levels: government (national level), consisting of several sector-specific ministries, five regions (subnational level) and 98 municipalities (local level) (Local Government Denmark, 2020a). Responsibility for basic school management is shared between the Ministry of Children and Education and the municipalities. This local division pertains to the implementation of laws adopted on the national level (Ministry of Children and Education, 2018).

3.4.1. Ministry of Children and Education

The Ministry of Children and Education is largely responsible for day care, primary and lower secondary education, upper secondary education and vocational education, whereas higher education is the responsibility of the Ministry of Higher Education and Science. The Ministry of Children and Education has two subordinate agencies: the Danish National Agency for Education and Quality and the Danish National Agency on for IT and Learning. In addition, the Danish Centre for Educational Environment exists as a national institution and research centre under the Ministry of Children and Education.

3.4.2. Danish National Agency for Education and Quality and Danish National Agency for IT and Learning

The core tasks of the Danish National Agency for Education and Quality are to promote quality development in education and support the efficient operation of the educational institutions. The agency carries out supervisory and advisory tasks to ensure and support the implementation of national legislation (Danish National Agency on Education and Quality, 2020). The Danish National Agency for IT and Learning is responsible for digital developments in the field of education. The Danish National Agency for IT and Learning is also largely responsible for national statistics and data on basic education, upper secondary education and vocational education, including absence data (Danish National Agency for IT and Learning, 2019).

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3.4.3. Danish Centre for Educational Environment

The Danish Centre for Educational Environment works to promote a safe and sound educational environment in all educational institutions, therefore also supporting student well-being and learning. The centre is responsible for collecting and systemising information on regulations and practices of importance to the educational environment and making this data available to the public. The centre also carries out consultancy services and supervisory and advisory tasks (Retsinformation.dk, 2017; Danish Centre for Educational Environment, 2021).

3.4.4. Municipalities

The Danish municipalities are in charge of citizen-related tasks. Apart from basic education, their tasks include childcare, employment, social services and integration, as well as local roads and the environment. All municipalities have a municipal board with an elected mayor (Local Government Denmark, 2020b). Each municipal board has overall responsibility for the management and supervision of the municipal school system. Under the provisions of the Education Act, the municipal board determines the local school policy and economic framework and is responsible for school operation (Ministry of Children and Education, 2018).

The administrative and pedagogical management of the school is the responsibility of the individual principal (Ministry of Children and Education, 2018). Consequently, every municipal school is subject to a variety of common regulations, ensuring overall alignment between different schools. However, each municipality and school can incorporate specific local aspects (Ministry of Children and Education, 2018).

3.5. Norway

3.5.1. Local education authorities – municipalities and counties

The municipalities and county authorities are responsible for ensuring that children, adolescents and adults (in both private and public kindergartens and schools) receive a quality and adapted education and training in accordance with legislation. Chapter 13 of the Education Act establishes the responsibility of the municipality, county authority and central government. Generally speaking, the municipality must fulfil the right to compulsory

education for all students of school age in their municipality, i.e., academic, legal and financial (cf. section 13-1 of the Education Act). This means that every municipality is a school owner and responsible for the education of its residents.

The municipalities and county municipalities are therefore responsible for organising and providing primary, secondary and upper secondary education. The municipality/city council must plan and implement quality education pursuant to the national and local regulations and goals.

Norway is divided into 11 administrative regions, called counties, and 356 municipalities. The municipalities are currently undergoing continuous consolidation. The largest municipality is Oslo, with a population of over 681,000. Utsira is the smallest, with a population of under 200 (Norwegian Association of Local and Regional Authorities, 2020). Despite the considerable differences in populations, the demands placed on the municipalities and governance of the primary school system are the same for all municipalities.

There is a tendency towards fewer and larger schools, although there are still many small schools due to demographic factors. School sizes vary greatly from county to county. In Oslo 39% of schools have 500 or more students, whereas half of all schools in Finnmark have fewer than 100 students and none has more than 500 students (The Education Mirror, 2019).

3.5.2. Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research

The Norwegian Parliament and government define the goals and determine the framework for the education sector. The Ministry of Education and Research is responsible for carrying out the national educational policy. National standards are ensured through legislation, regulations, curricula, and framework plans (Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research, 2007).

3.5.3. Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training

The Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training is responsible for the development of kindergarten and primary and secondary education, as well as the implementation of Acts of Parliament and regulations. The Directorate is the executive agency for the Ministry of Education and Research. Its objective is to ensure that all children, students and apprentices

receive the high-quality education to which they are entitled (Norwegian Directorate of Education and Training, 2021).

3.5.4. Statped

Statped is part of the support system in Norway that assists kindergartens and schools with expert support within special education (Statped, 2021). As a centre of expertise within the field of special education, Statped has the important task of communicating the knowledge and expertise that lay the foundation for a society based on equality and participation. Statped works to:

- build and maintain expertise within specialised areas where the challenges are so rare and complex that the municipalities cannot be expected to have the necessary expertise.
- make their expertise known and available.
- cooperate with the municipalities and county authorities to ensure quality and adapted education and training for all: children, adolescents and adults. This can be either competence-enhancing initiatives in kindergartens or schools or a contribution in an individual case.

Following the adoption of white paper 6 (2019–2020), Statped is currently undergoing a reform that will lead to a more distinct and explicit mandate for the organisation.

4. Absenteeism in national legislation and regulatory guidelines

In this chapter, we present the legislation and regulations related to absenteeism in the four countries. Table 3 below provides an overview of national laws and guidelines in the four countries. None of the countries has a national definition of SAP, but there are national guidelines that can be used by municipalities and schools. Only Denmark has a national school absence register. Table 4 presents the existing information about the local level.

Table 3. National laws and guidelines directed towards municipalities and school owners (targeting primary school absenteeism)

School absenteeism	Sweden	Finland	Denmark	Norway
National definition of problematic absenteeism	No	No	No	No
National school absence register	No	No	Yes	No
National guidelines for how schools register absence	No	Yes (partly)	Yes (partly)	No
National guidelines for how schools follow up on absences	Yes	Yes (partly)	Yes (partly)	No (partly)
National guidelines for how school attendance is supported	Yes	No	No	No

Table 4. Local primary school authority (municipal) guidelines for how to follow up on children with school absenteeism

School absenteeism	Sweden	Finland	Denmark	Norway
Local authorities (municipalities) guidelines for school absenteeism	Most do	Most do	Most do	Most do
Common preventive measures across local authorities	No	No	No	No
Local responsibility for following up on school absenteeism (in school)	Principal	Teacher/principal	Teacher/principal	Teacher and/or EPS
Local responsibility for following on up school absenteeism (outside of school)	Principal organiser/municipality (coordinating measures to fulfil compulsory schooling)	No	No (depends)	Child and adolescent mental and other health authorities
Systematic efforts available to children with school absenteeism	Most do	No	No	No

4.2. Sweden

4.2.1. Definitions and prevalence

School absenteeism has been defined and measured in a number of national studies by the Swedish National Agency for Education (2008; 2010) and the Swedish School Inspection (2016a). The Swedish National Agency for Education also planned to conduct another study in 2020, but it had to be postponed due to the Coronavirus pandemic.

In the Swedish national studies on school absenteeism, the goal has been to be consistent with the definitions used. Despite this intention, slight changes have been made over the

years, partly due to issues that have arisen with the old definitions (e.g., making the definition of partial absence more specific).

Prolonged unexcused absenteeism (Swedish: *långvarig skolfrånvaro*) is defined as at least one month of undocumented (Swedish: *ogiltig*) absence from school from the day that the question was asked. Partial absence (Swedish: *sporadisk frånvaro*) was assessed in 2008 and 2010 (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2008; 2010) by asking about repeated unexcused absence from some lessons/subjects/days during the last two months. Later, the definition became a bit more specific. The Swedish School Inspection (2016b) defined the term unexcused repeated partial absence (Swedish: *ogiltig upprepad ströfrånvaro*) as absence from sporadic lessons/days exceeding around 5% of teaching hours during a period of two or more months.

When exactly then does absenteeism become problematic? The absence becomes problematic as soon as it lowers the student's chances of achieving the (formulated) goals. One definition of problematic school absenteeism is "Absence from compulsory activities to such an extent that the absence risks having a negative impact on the student's development towards the education goals" (SOU 2016:94). An operationalisation of this definition could serve as an alarm for schools for when the absence is to be acknowledged, something that leads to further demands regarding the assessment of whether there is a school attendance problem and then to demand a commission and measures (SOU 2016:94).

In 2008, the Swedish National Agency for Education published a report on the prevalence of prolonged unexcused absence. This was due to the increasing number of calls they had received from anxious parents about children who did not attend school. Not all of the municipalities could respond to these cases and did not know the number of students with prolonged unexcused absenteeism (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2008).

The results showed that 1,600 students had been unexcused absent for at least one month and that 100 of them had been completely absent the entire semester. Furthermore, 5,000 students had been partially absent for at least two months and 500 students had been expelled from school (e.g., for safety reasons), and that for 100 of these students, this period lasted for one month or more. This gives a prevalence rate of prolonged unexcused absenteeism in public schools of 0.05% in grades 1–6, 0.36% in grades 7–9 and 0.35% in

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grades 7–9 in the independent schools (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2008). These results were followed up in another study by the Swedish National Agency for Education in 2010.

In the study from 2010, the number of students absent for at least one month was 1,650, while 1,100 were absent for at least two months, 600 for the entire semester and 150 for the entire school year (i.e., August 2008 to June 2009). This means a prevalence rate in grades 7–9 of 0.41% among boys and 0.39% among girls in public school and 0.34% among boys and 0.39% among girls in independent schools.

The number of partially absent students had increased since the previous study. A total of 12,100 students were now repeatedly absent some days, from some classes or some subjects during the last two months, but this concept was not specifically defined at this time either. Furthermore, 11,000 students were absent for at least two weeks during the last school year because they were granted leave.

The continuous unexcused absence was as common among boys as girls and was roughly as common in private/independent as in public schools. The absence rate tends to be higher in the later years of primary school: in grades 1–6, the total number of absent youths was 302, while that number in grades 7–9 was 1,345 (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2010).

In 2016, it was time for another report on excessive school absenteeism, this time conducted by the Swedish School Inspection. Surveys were not only sent to the municipalities in Sweden, but also directly to the principals at the schools. In the report, it is explicitly specified that all four of the compulsory school systems in Sweden were included (i.e., compulsory [9-year comprehensive] school, special school primarily for students with impaired hearing, Sami school and compulsory education for students with learning disabilities[1]). Another difference compared to earlier national studies was that this one was administered earlier in the school year: December 2015 to February 2016.

Similar, however, is the number of students with prolonged unexcused absenteeism: in November 2015, there were 1,676 students absent for at least one month, 262 of which for

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[1] In Swedish: *grundskolan, grundsärskolan, specialskolan, sameskolan*.

more than a semester. This equals a prevalence rate of 0.07% in grades 1–6 and 0.39% in grades 7–9. These rates are very similar to the Swedish National Agency for Education (2008, 2010) findings, unlike partial absence, which had increased. In the Swedish School Inspection (2016b) study, approximately 18,000 students had repeated unexcused partial absence, 0.70% in grades 1–6 and 4.3% in grades 7–9. Furthermore, 2,531 students were absent for at least two weeks during the year 2015 because they were granted leave.

4.2.2. The Education Act (*Skollagen*)

The most recent version of the Swedish Education Act (SFS 2020:800) came into force in July 2011. The first chapter states that the purpose of education in the Swedish school system is to help students acquire and develop knowledge and values. It also states that education given should stimulate the desire and appetite for lifelong learning. The legislator highlights the importance of taking into consideration the needs of each child. One major goal set out by the legislator is that the school system should help make up for individual differences in background and serve as an equaliser that helps all children complete school with good results.

In Chapter1, §8, the legislator makes references to the Swedish Discrimination Act, which states that each school has a duty to counteract discrimination and promote equal rights and opportunities in other ways, regardless of gender, gender identity, ethnicity, religion, faith, sexual orientation or any kind of disability (SFS 2014:960).

The third chapter of the Education Act mentions each child's individual developments toward the goals of their learning. It states that children must be given the guidance and stimulation that is needed to succeed in school. Every child must be supported in his or her personal development according to his or her needs and background.

According to the third chapter of the Education Act, students with learning difficulties or disabilities that affect their capacity to succeed in school must be given adequate support to counteract the consequences of the difficulties (SFS 2010:800).

The seventh chapter of the Education Act deals with mandatory schooling and the right to an education. It states that students in compulsory school must participate in the activity organised to provide the intended education unless they have a valid reason not to attend.

4.2.3. School guidelines and school absence registration

The laws concerning responses to absenteeism and the rights and obligations of parents and students regarding mandatory schooling are regulated in the Education Act. Relevant passages are described below.

The legal guardian of a child is responsible for making sure that the child fulfils the duty of mandatory schooling (SFS 2010:800).

The responsibility of the principal organiser is regulated in §22. The principal organiser must make sure that children enrolled in mandatory schooling run by the principal organiser must fulfil their school attendance requirements.

When a child enrolled in mandatory school starts or leaves a school with a different principal organiser than the home municipality, the principal organiser must immediately inform the other municipality. The same rule applies if a school absence investigation has been initiated (SFS 2010:800).

If a student has repeated or prolonged absence from mandatory school, the headmaster of the school, regardless of whether the absence is authorised or unauthorised, must immediately investigate it, unless it is unnecessary to do so. This investigation is mandatory and must be done together with the child, student welfare staff and the child's legal guardian (SFS 2010:800).

If the requirements for an investigation into the need for special support for the child are met, such an investigation must also be initiated. Once an investigation concerning absence is initiated, the principal must immediately report the absence to the principal organiser (SFS 2010:800).

4.2.4. National guidelines and regulations

The mandatory part of school activities can take place on no more than 190 days per school year and the law also states the maximum number of hours each student can spend in school each day. Students in compulsory school grades 3 to 9 are allowed to be in school for eight hours at the most, while children in preschool class and the first two grades of compulsory school are allowed to be in school for six hours a day. School activities cannot be scheduled on weekends or other public holidays (SFS 2010:800).

In Sweden, there are no national guidelines that strictly regulate when and what schools must do in cases of student absence. The law and guidelines regarding school absence focus on the child's right to an education and state that each school must make sure that each child is awarded that right. That includes making sure that the child achieves the education goals in each subject. If school absenteeism is problematic, the school must work to overcome that obstacle.

4.2.5. Governing guidelines for municipalities (principal organiser)

General guidelines are defined in the law (stated above under 2.3.1), but the specific manner in which each school fulfils these guidelines is decided by the school.

The responsibility of the home municipality (§21): the home municipality must make sure that children in mandatory education who do not attend one of the home municipality's own schools receive an education, nonetheless. When it comes to children in mandatory education as described in §19a, the home municipality must coordinate efforts between the organisations and public agencies concerned. When it comes to the disclosure of information, the limitations stipulated in Chapter 29, 14§, apply together with the Public Access to Information and Secrecy Act (2009:400) and Regulation (2018:608).

Order of penalty (§23): If a student in compulsory education does not fulfil his or her duty of mandatory schooling and the cause is that the legal guardian has not fulfilled the obligations, the home municipality may order the legal guardians to fulfil these obligations. Such an order is associated with a monetary penalty. After an order is made, such a penalty takes immediate effect (SFS 2017:1115).

It is up to the student's home municipality to make sure that students who are enrolled in compulsory education but do not attend regular classes receive an education, nonetheless. This is the absolute responsibility of the municipality.

SKR is a Swedish organisation in which all Swedish municipalities and regions are members. SKR is a member and employer organisation tasked with supporting and contributing to the development of municipalities and regions. SKR has worked extensively to get different parts and levels of society to work together more effectively in treating mental illness. They have published guidelines on how to turn absence into attendance (Swedish Association of Authorities and Regions, 2013).

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4.2.6. Responsibilities and reporting obligations for schools

As mentioned above, the principal organiser of a school is responsible for investigating the causes behind a student's absence. However, it is not stated how thorough that investigation must be.

There are also no national guidelines for schools concerning when they should respond to absence. It is up to individual schools and municipalities to define when they deem absence to be serious enough to warrant investigation and intervention.

Each municipality must track the extent of absence in all schools in the municipality. But the data is not collected on a national level and is not compiled. Consequently, no national data on the extent of absence in Swedish schools is available.

Since there are no national guidelines that strictly state when and what schools must do in case of student absence, it is up to the individual schools to determine how to use the information about absenteeism.

4.2.7. Local level

4.2.7.1. Principal organiser's absence monitoring system

Swedish schools are required by law to register the attendance of all primary and secondary school children. The reporting systems of each school differ considerably.

Municipalities use different electronic mapping systems for their schools. Independent schools may also use different systems than schools organised by municipalities. Almost all schools in Sweden have an electronic mapping system. The systems are used to register and provide information on student absence, grades and other information regarding students. However, this information is not available on the aggregate level, not even for public schools.

There is considerable variation as to the accuracy of the information registered in these systems (regarding absenteeism). There is also significant variation in how schools use the information.

In general, Swedish schools tend to respond to instances of school absence in one of the following ways.

An automated message to parents of the absent student, usually in the form of a text message or email. A person from school, usually a teacher or student welfare staff member, texts or emails the parents and informs them of the absence. The child's teacher or someone from the student welfare staff calls the parents and informs them of the absence.

Some schools also contact the student. This is done more often with older students. The content of the contact can, of course, differ greatly. Some express concern and ask what kind of help the child needs and some simply inform parents of the school absence. Unexcused absence is also included in the end of term report.

4.2.7.2. Guidelines for principal organisers on absence follow-up

Most Swedish schools and municipalities have their own guidelines about when to intervene regarding school absence and how to follow up, resulting in considerable variation among different municipalities and schools.

4.3. Finland

4.3.1. National guidelines and regulations

The current Basic Education Act was implemented in 1998, but there are numerous amendments. According to the Basic Education Act, a child of compulsory school age must attend basic education or otherwise obtain knowledge corresponding to the basic education syllabus. As mentioned earlier in section 2.3, the extension of compulsory education in Finland makes secondary education mandatory until the age of 18, and hence this consistently affects the Basic Education Act. The law requires that the education provider (usually the municipality) monitors student absence in basic education and notifies the student's parent or guardian of unexcused absences. The parent of a student in compulsory education is responsible for ensuring the completion of compulsory schooling. If a child of compulsory school age does not participate in the education as provided under this act, the local authority in the student's place of residence must supervise his or her progress.

 Students are responsible for attending school. An unexcused absence does not result in the requirement to repeat a school year. If a student is chronically absent from school, misses exams and does not demonstrate his or her competence by other means available, he or she

does not complete the syllabus as required. In this case, the student is in danger of failing the subject.

These are the main laws and regulations regarding school attendance in compulsory education in the Finnish educational system (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2020a):

Compulsory education, section 25:

1. Children permanently residing in Finland shall attend compulsory schooling. Compulsory schooling shall start in the year during which the child turns seven. Compulsory schooling shall end when the basic education syllabus has been completed or ten years after the start of compulsory schooling. Please note the extension of compulsory education in Finland (see section 2.2).

2. If, owing to the child's disability or illness, the objectives set for basic education cannot be achieved in nine years, compulsory schooling shall begin one year earlier than provided in subsection 1 and be 11 years in duration.

Completion of compulsory schooling, section 26:

1. A child of compulsory school age must attend basic education as provided for in this act or otherwise obtain knowledge corresponding to the basic education syllabus. Those in prolonged compulsory schooling referred to in section 25(2) above shall participate in pre-primary education during the first compulsory school year (Amendment 477/2003).

2. The education provider shall monitor student absence in basic education and notify the student's parent/guardian of unexcused absence. The parent/guardian of a student in compulsory education shall see to it that compulsory schooling is completed (Amendment 477/2003).

3. If a child of compulsory school age does not participate in education provided for in this act, the local authority in the student's place of residence shall supervise his or her progress.

Right to instruction, section 30:

1. An enrolled student is entitled to instruction in accordance with the curriculum, guidance counselling and sufficient support in learning and school attendance on school days as the need arises (Amendment 642/2010).

Student Welfare Act, 1287/2013:

1. Students are entitled to individual student welfare, which aims to help students to learn, be healthy, experience well-being and a sense of inclusion, and to prevent problems from arising. The purpose is also to ensure that high-quality student welfare services are available and that students have access to early support services, such as the school's social worker and psychologist.

Student obligations, section 35:

1. The student shall attend basic education unless he or she has been temporarily exempted for a special reason.

2. The student shall complete his or her assignments diligently and behave appropriately.

Dereliction of supervisory duties, section 45:

1. If a student's parent/guardant neglects his or her duty to ensure the completion of compulsory schooling, he or she shall be sentenced to a fine for dereliction of a duty to ensure completion of compulsory schooling.

Also stated in section 18 about special teaching arrangements:

1. A student's education may to a certain degree be arranged in a manner other than provided in this act provided that:
(1) the student is considered to have some degree of prior knowledge and skills corresponding to the basic education syllabus;
(2) the completion of the basic education syllabus would in some respect be unreasonable for the student in view of the circumstances and prior learning; or
(3) it is justified for reasons relating to the student's health.

There are no commonly agreed definitions for problematic school absence in Finland. In addition, there are no national recommendations on when and how to respond to school attendance problems and early school leaving. Currently, only school failure (i.e., persons of compulsory age who do not participate in comprehensive education and those having left

comprehensive school without a leaving certificate) in compulsory education has been followed by Statistics Finland. The number of students who fall into either of the following two categories is low (0.6% in the 2018–2019 academic year), but has increased over the past few years. In 2019, there were 420 students who did not finish their compulsory education.

4.3.2. Governing guidelines for municipalities (school owners)

Education providers, municipalities and private education providers prepare local curricula and annual plans based on the national core curriculum provided by the Finnish National Agency for Education. The local curricula complement the objectives, core content and other aspects related to instruction, with a local emphasis. Monitoring, reporting and intervention in absence are stated in the core curriculum in section 8 on school and student welfare (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2020b). Dealing with absence is one of the issues subject to local decisions and included in school welfare plans. Student welfare in basic education and related plans are set out in the Student and Student Welfare Act (1287/2013). Education and social welfare, as well as health administration, stipulate student welfare as a cross-sectoral cooperation, ensuring an effective and coherent whole.
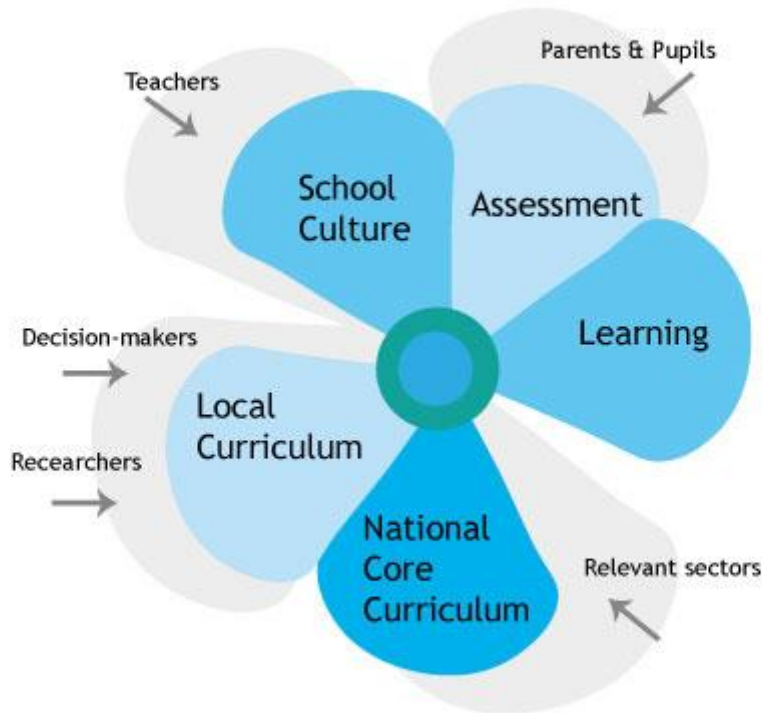
Figure 6. National core curriculum for basic education (figure from Valteri Centre for Learning and Consulting)

Promoting student welfare is the duty of all employees working in the school community, as well as experts responsible for student welfare services. On the municipal level, the education provider appoints a steering group that is responsible for the general planning, development, guidance and assessment of student welfare in that municipality. In addition, each school has a student welfare team that focuses on communal student welfare and multi-professional support in the entire school. However, questions concerning an individual student are discussed in a multi-professional expert group that is established as required in each case and with the permission of the parent and child.

The sections of the curriculum concerning student welfare should be prepared in cooperation with the officials in charge of social welfare and healthcare service tasks in the municipality. On the local level, the entirety of student welfare plans consists of three plans that jointly steer the planning and implementation of student welfare. These plans, which are formulated in cross-sectoral cooperation, are the following:

- A plan for the well-being of children and young people, which includes a section on student welfare
- A description of student welfare as included in the local curriculum
- A school welfare plan

The school welfare plan should include the monitoring and reporting of and intervention in absenteeism as part of the communal student welfare and its approach. As Finland lacks national guidelines on problematic school absenteeism, the guidelines for following and reporting school attendance are provided in local and school curricula, so the policies vary among schools and municipalities. Most municipalities have created models and action plans for responding to unexcused absence, but the measures and means vary considerably. Education providers also have the duty to provide support for learning and school attendance to all students. This means both educational support and school welfare services alike, as mentioned earlier.

4.3.3. School guidelines and school absence registration

As stated earlier, the guidelines for monitoring and reporting absence are established on the local municipal level. The extent of school absence is often followed by individual schools and data is not systematically collected by the municipalities, Finnish National Agency for Education or Statistics Finland. This means that the collected data is not reported systematically anywhere and it is not often used for decision-making at any level. Since there is no national structure or guidelines, it is up to individual municipalities to determine how to use this information.

However, schools are required to have an action for school attendance problems in their student welfare plan. Teachers monitor student absence on a class-to-class basis and register the data in electronic databases prescribed by the municipality. This database allows teachers to report excused and unexcused absences. It can be programmed to collect more

detailed information on absenteeism if desired. This is also determined on the school or municipal level. Students and guardians also have access to this database.

The first national level report on problematic school absence (Määttä et al., 2020) was conducted by the VIP network at the beginning of year 2020 (read more in section 6.3.). According to school staff (N = 459) working with grade 7–9 students, the results showed that there are around 4,000–5,000 (2–3%) grades 7–9 students in Finland whose school attendance problems prompted schools to tailor their services to help these students. The survey also indicated that municipalities have created their own models and limits for acceptable amounts of unexcused absence. The survey also shows that there is considerable variety in the guidelines as to when to intervene in absenteeism. In some schools, it is mandatory to take action with fewer than 30 hours of excused or unexcused absences during the semester. On the other hand, there are schools where students can be absent for over 100 hours before any measures must be taken. The most common guideline for intervening in Finnish schools is with 30–50 hours of excused or unexcused absence.

4.4. Denmark

4.4.1. The Education Act (Folkeskole Act)

School absence is only mentioned directly in the Education Act once. Section §39, subsection 3, states that the Minister of Children and Education shall establish regulations on student attendance, including follow-up on absences (Retsinformation.dk, 2020a). These regulations are provided in the 'Ministerial Order on Student Absence in the Folkeskole' (Danish: *Bekendtgørelse om elevers fravær fra undervisningen i folkeskolen*) (Retsinformation.dk, 2019a), which is referred to as the Absence Order and described in section 3.2.

Although not mentioned directly, school absence is addressed in part 5 of the Education Act regarding compulsory education. It states that all children residing in the country are required to attend basic schooling or education that measures up to these standards. Compulsory education applies from 1 August in the calendar year in which the child turns six. It ceases on 31 July with completion of the 9th grade. It also states that the parents/guardians are responsible for the child's fulfilment of its educational obligations and that they must not obstruct this. It is the responsibility of the principal that all students

enrolled in the school attend their respective lessons. The municipality must ensure that all children residing in the municipality are enrolled in a municipal school or receive an equivalent education (Retsinformation.dk, 2020a).

In addition, the Education Act stresses the school's obligations in relation to the educational environment that is considered "the very foundation for learning" (Ministry of Children and Education, 2014a, p. 3). The Education Act also states that instruction must be planned and organised so that all students develop academically, personally and socially, and that they thrive in the school communities (Retsinformation.dk, 2020a, §18,2). The Ministry of Children and Education (2014a) points out that a sound educational environment is important for student motivation to learn as well as their ability to do so. Consequently, school attendance is indirectly promoted through the school's obligation to address student welfare and the educational environment.

The 'Ministerial Order on the Student Educational Environment' (Danish: *Bekendtgørelse af lov om elevers og studerendes undervisningsmiljø*) outlines the obligation of all schools (and educational institutions) to promote student development and learning, including the psychological aspects of the educational environment. These regulations imply an obligation of all schools to prepare an anti-bullying strategy, including a strategy for digital bullying (Retsinformation.dk, 2017).

For purposes of tracking and strengthening student welfare, all schools are also obliged to conduct an annual measurement survey on student welfare (Retsinformation.dk, 2020a, § 56b). The measurement tool was created by the Ministry of Children and Education and the results are to be used on the class, school and municipal level to support local welfare-enhancing work. The results are also to be included in each municipality's quality report, in which the municipality describes future work on student welfare (Ministry of Children and Education, 2020c).

4.4.2. Special arrangements

The Education Act addresses circumstances in which a student cannot meet the obligations of compulsory education. Under exceptional circumstances, special arrangements can be made to meet the student's needs. If the student's physical and/or mental health, according to a doctor's judgement, does not allow for enrolment in full-time education, a temporary

part-time schedule may be warranted (Retsinformation.dk, 2014a). If a student is absent due to a long-term illness (e.g., a medical condition), instruction can take place in the student's home or at the hospital (if hospitalised). It should, to the greatest extent possible, be provided by one of the student's teachers and it is incumbent on the school to defray the costs of this instruction (Retinsformation.dk, 2014b). In very special cases in which previous teaching cannot continue and it is temporally impossible to place the student in any type of educational context, individual instruction can be arranged (Retsinformation.dk, 2014a). However, special arrangements should generally be considered a temporary solution for as short a time period as possible.

In addition, it is possible to repeat a school year if a student has been without instruction for an extended period of time or if other special reasons indicate that the student will benefit from such measures (Retsinformation.dk, 2019).

4.4.3. New regulations on school absence

As mentioned above, new regulations on school absence were stated in the Absence Order (Retsinformation.dk, 2019). They came into force on 1 January 2020 and are elaborated on in the Ministry's guidelines for the order (Ministry of Children and Education, 2019).

The Absence Order provides three categories of absence: 1) absence due to illness, disability, etc., 2) extraordinary exemption and 3) unexcused absence, and it lays down rules for the recording and registering of absence (Retsinformation.dk, 2019).

4.4.3.1.   *Absence due to illness, disability, etc.*

Absence due to illness, disability, etc. includes cases in which a student cannot attend school due to the risk of contagion or for the sake of the student's health and welfare (Retsinformation.dk, 2019). According to the Ministry of Children and Education (2019a), 'disability, etc.' encompasses specific diagnoses such as ADHD or psychosocial issues such as self-harm. This form of absence also includes necessary medical or dental appointments.

4.4.3.2.   *Extraordinary exemptions*

Under special circumstances, the principal can authorise an absence in the form of an extraordinary exemption. An extraordinary exemption is typically permitted for events of exceptional significance for the child and the child's family. However, as all students are required to attend school daily, requests should be assessed restrictively, taking into account

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the specific circumstances and relevant background context (Ministry of Children and Education, 2019a). A decision is specifically based on the extent to which the absence will have a negative impact on 1) the student's acquisition of skills and competencies, 2) the student's motivation and learning readiness, 3) the student's general development and 4) other student skills and competencies (Retsinformation.dk, 2019).

The above-mentioned categories are defined as excused (Danish: *lovligt*) absence (Retsinformation.dk, 2019).

4.4.3.3. Unexcused absence

Absence that is not justified according to the criteria above is defined as unexcused (Danish: *ulovligt*). Absence is registered as unexcused if the student's parents fail to notify the school about the cause of the absence the same day or, under special circumstances, within a reasonable amount of time (Retsinformation.dk, 2019). Special circumstances include situations in which the parents have been prevented from notifying about the absence (e.g., if the child has been acutely hospitalised). How the 'reasonable amount of time' is defined is up to the individual school and depends on the specific case. However, as a rule, it should not exceed one week from when the absence took place (Ministry of Children and Education, 2019a). In addition, absence must be registered as unexcused if the parents fail to comply with the principal's request for a doctor's note (Retsinformation.dk, 2019).

4.4.3.4. Economic sanctions for parents

The new regulations on student absence imply injunctions with economic sanctions for parents when students have high rates of unexcused absence. The rationale behind the injunctions is to ensure active parental involvement in bringing children to school (Ministry of Children and Education, 2019b). More specifically, schools are now required to notify the municipal board when a student's unexcused absence exceeds 15% within a quarter. The municipal board then decides whether the child benefit received by the parent (i.e., a universal public benefit per child under the age of 18) will be ceased in the following quarter. If the municipality decides to cease child support, this only applies for one quarter. The municipality must receive new notification from the school to consider ceasing the child benefit for the next quarter. When a student's unexcused absence reaches 10%, the school must inform the parents and warn them about possible economic sanctions (Retsinformation.dk, 2019).

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4.4.4. School guidelines and school absence registration

Schools are required by law to monitor and record attendance daily. Student absences must be registered in an electronic system that can be accessed by the municipal board in accordance with the absence categories provided for in the Absence Order (Retsinformation.dk, 2019).

For students in grades 0-6, the minimum requirement is one daily attendance registration at the start of the school day. For students in grades 7–10 who are allowed to leave the school area at recess, attendance must also be registered at the end of the school day (Retsinformation.dk, 2019). The individual principal decides the exact timing of the registration and can decide to record attendance more frequently (e.g., in each class) if preferred. The principal also sets out additional registration rules if a student is tardy or leaves school before the school day has ended (Ministry of Children and Education, 2019).

4.4.4.1. Guidelines on unexplained absence

Schools are to follow up on all unexplained absences in a timely manner. Schools are to contact parents in order to identify the reason for the absence. This applies to both long-term consecutive absences and frequent short-duration episodes. The exact time frame is not specified, but depends on the overall evaluation of specific circumstances, including the student's age and absence history. However, the first contact with the parents should be made considerably earlier than before the student's unexcused absence reaches 10% (Ministry of Children and Education, 2019).

4.4.4.2. Guidelines on absence due to illness, disability, etc.

If the authenticity of the illness is questioned or if the absence lasts for more than two weeks, schools can ask parents to provide a doctor's note. If a student is absent for more than 15 school days, the principal is required to consider whether instruction at home or at a hospital (when hospitalised) is to be initiated. Long-term absence due to a student's diagnosis, disability, etc. should give rise to considerations as to whether new or supplementary support initiatives are needed to help the student resume schooling. Finally, the Ministry of Children and Education (2019) emphasises that a high rate of sickness absence may indicate that the student and student's family need supplementary support measures. In such cases, the school is required to notify social services because all school professionals have a duty to report (see below).

Professionals in public services, including school staff, are subject to a duty to report if they have reasonable grounds to believe that a child or adolescent under the age of 18 needs special support. According to the Ministerial Order on Social Services (Retsinformation.dk, 2020b), this may include cases in which the child is not fulfilling its educational obligations. Such cases may be an indication of difficulties in the child's situation, which the regulations in the order aim to resolve (i.e., preventing or satisfying a need arising from impaired physical or mental function or special social problems). In addition to high rates of sickness absence that may indicate the need for supplementary measures in the family, frequent or prolonged episodes of unexcused absence may indicate social difficulties in the student's situation, such as mental health problems, abuse or other issues that may cause the student's health and development to be at risk. It may also be due to the family not having the cultural background and/or understanding of the importance to attend school continuously. Finally, the duty to report encompasses cases involving frequent school changes, especially when the child does not change residence. In cases of problems that cannot be addressed in the ordinary home-school cooperation, the school staff must notify social services (Retsinformation.dk, 2020b).

4.5. Norway

School absenteeism is not mentioned specifically in the Education Act, but there are still sections in the Act that are relevant to consider when discussing absenteeism and are covered below.

4.5.1. Registration of school absence

Section 2-1 of the Education Act states that children and young people both have a "right and obligation to attend primary and lower secondary education". The municipality must have a satisfactory system for absence registration (provisions of the Education Act, section 3-38). All school absence during grades 8–10 is stated on the diploma. How absence is to be registered is regulated in section 3-41 of the provisions of the Education Act.

The Directorate for Education and Training has published school absence guidelines (Regelverkstolkningar frå Udir, 2019). These guidelines cover the responsibilities of schools

and school owners pursuant to the Education Act and the provisions of the Education act. As a rule, the municipality is required to fulfil the student's right to an education, whether this concerns regular education or special education. It follows that the municipality must follow up on a student when absent from school.

The guidelines divide absence in primary and secondary school into excused and unexcused. Excused absence is either due to health-related reasons or a granted leave of absence. The school (i.e., the principal or municipality) can grant a leave of up to two weeks. Unexcused absence must be followed up on and the school/municipality is required to contact the home to investigate the situation. The school/municipality may then report the unexcused absence to the child welfare authorities (cf. Education act, section 15-3) and, as a last resort, to the police.

There are no national guidelines for how teachers and schools must register school absence and therefore no national registry data. The municipalities use different electronic registration systems and have the autonomy to develop their own guidelines and routines to maintain these guidelines. In some instances, local school owners have guidelines for this (often established in Visma or the Vigilio teacher manual), but there is no information available on how this is done nationally.

4.5.2. Student's school environment

"All students are entitled to a good physical and psychosocial environment conducive to health, well-being and learning" (section 9 A, the Education Act.) The Education Act goes on to state the there is an "[o]bligation to act to ensure students a good psychosocial school environment" (section 9 A-4). This means that schools must act quickly and appropriately when a student does not feel safe or welcome at school. The student may complain to the county governor if the school fails to act (section 9 A-6).

4.5.3. School health services

The Municipal Health and Care Act (Lov om kommunale helse- og ormsorgstjenester), section 3-2, states that all municipalities must have school health services. The school health services must contribute to good health among children and young people, so that they experience a sense of achievement, well-being and structure in everyday school life. The school health services cooperate with the school and act as a link between the students, school and other health services (https://www.helsenorge.no/hjelpetilbud-i-

kommunene/helsestasjon-og-skolehelsetjeneste/skolehelsetjenesten/#hva-er-skolehelsetjenesten). They are a part of the support system, together with Statped, EPS, the social welfare system, child welfare, child and family protection agency and other municipal low-threshold services for parents/families.

4.5.3.1. National guidelines

The Norwegian Directorate of Health has formulated national guidelines (Nasjonal faglig retningslinje, 2019) for school health services. All recommendations are based on legal regulations, research, preferably a systematic review of the research, and consensus of the Norwegian Directorate of Health work group on the specific topic (Nasjonal faglig retningslinje, 2019). Chapter 5 of the guidelines is dedicated to problematic school absence and states that the school health services must cooperate with the school to follow up on students with excessive school absence.

4.5.4. Employment requirements

The Education Act regulates the employment of teaching professionals: "[p]ersons appointed to teaching positions in primary, lower secondary and upper secondary education must have relevant professional and educational qualifications" (section 10-1). Furthermore, "[t]eaching staff must have relevant qualifications in the subjects that they teach" (section 10-2).

The Education Act does not specify any requirements for other professions in schools apart from teachers and principals. However, schools also employ teaching assistants, childcare professionals, social educators and other professionals.

4.5.5. New regulatory guidelines

From 2017 to 2019, a committee reviewed and reported on the current Education Act and proposed a new Education Act. The committee submitted its official report on a new Education Act (NOU 2019:23) and the report is currently being distributed for comment. Rewriting an entire act is time-consuming and the new act is not expected to be implemented until 2022.

The recent white paper 6 (2019–2020) suggests that schools should have a clearer duty to follow up on students with absenteeism in primary and secondary schools. The white paper refers to the Education Act, Chapter 9A (see above), and states that a good physical and

psychosocial environment is the foundation for school attendance. The duty to follow up on absence is already mandated (section 9A-4), but the committee responsible for white paper 6 has now made clear that this duty also encompasses absenteeism.

5. Local guidelines – examples of good practices

Societal changes, research results and experiences with SAP-related work make clear the need to develop local guidelines in schools and municipalities. This chapter examines a number of good practices related to SAP in the Nordic countries.

5.1. Nordic generalisations of local guidelines

Firstly, there is a focus on early detection and action in response to school attendance problems. All the same, they do not distinguish between excused and unexcused SAP. As regards excused absence, schools use 10–20% cut-off rates. If a student's absence is above the cut-off rate, the contact teacher (mentor) is required to contact the student's parents or guardians.

Secondly, the municipalities emphasise a stepped approach, depending on the severity of the absence. As severity increases, agencies other than the school itself will typically become involved (e.g., social services or healthcare services) and interventions will progress to the necessary level.

There are no standard local guidelines and the type of treatment offered varies greatly among municipalities.

5.2. Sweden

The Swedish Education Act states that schools have an obligation to investigate the repeated absence or extended absence of a student. The law does not distinguish between excused school absence (e.g., the student is sick) and unexcused absence. In both cases, the obligations of the school are the same. An investigation into what causes the absence must be conducted. The student's parents must also be informed.

The investigation must be conducted in cooperation with the student's parents or guardians and together with the student welfare staff at the school. These general guidelines apply to all schools in Sweden, regardless of the principal organiser of the school.

But the specifics on compliance with this requirement are left to each principal organiser. The exact manner in which schools and municipalities address school attendance problems varies greatly. Sometimes, there is also a discrepancy between the routines that exist on paper and how they are implemented on the school and municipal levels.

Most schools and many municipalities have guidelines or plans that prescribe how they should respond to school absence. Some are more detailed than others. Some are made by individual schools, while others are made by the municipality and intended to be applied by all public schools in the municipality. Independent schools make their own plans, but naturally they must adhere to the requirements stated in the Education Act.

Many municipalities in Sweden have formed school attendance teams to which schools can refer problematic cases. The solutions offered by such teams also vary considerably. Some teams have a large number of cases per staff member, which, of course, limits the intensity of treatment, while others have only a few cases.

In this document, we include examples of guidelines from three different municipalities. It is important to remember that it is not certain whether these examples are followed by all schools in the municipalities in which the plans exist.

5.2.1. Municipality of Sollentuna

In Sollentuna, the guidelines have five steps. These guidelines state:

- **Step 1**: All students with absences that give the school cause for concern are contacted. The contact teacher (mentor) contacts the parents and tries to find out why the student is absent. If any adjustments to the class environment or pedagogical approach are needed, they are made by the contact teacher. The contact teacher is responsible for this step.
- **Step 2**: If the absence is recurring, the contact teacher holds a meeting with the parents, student and, if necessary, representatives from the student welfare staff. During the meeting, the consequences of the absence are discussed and a plan is made with actions intended to help the student. After the meeting, the contact teacher informs all of the student's teachers and the student welfare staff representatives. The contact teacher is responsible for this step.
- **Step 3**: If the above-mentioned steps do not help, the contact teacher reports the case to the principal and also contacts the student welfare staff. A social and pedagogical

assessment is made, which is then used to prepare an action plan. Once the measures in the action plan have been made, follow-up meetings are held. Multiple meetings may be required. The principal is responsible for this step.

- **Step 4**: In the fourth step, other agencies may become involved. Treatment actions or more individualised actions, such as a reduced course of study, may be determined. Cooperation with social services and child mental health services may take place during this step. The principal is responsible for this step.

- **Step 5**: In the fifth step, notification is sent to the municipality that the student is absent. Efforts and actions are still in place at the school and treatment plans may also be made.

5.2.2. Municipality of Arvika

In the municipality of Arvika, the guidelines also consist of a stepwise approach, as in Sollentuna. The guidelines provide a timetable for different actions and who is responsible for each step in the timeline. The goals of the guidelines are: 1) early intervention and an assessment that is used to create helpful action plans, 2) clarification of which profession and person in school is responsible for each step and 3) better cooperation between social services and schools in the municipality. The guidelines direct schools on how to register absence. Arvika bases the steps in their model on a timeline.

- **Week 1**: If the school considers the absence to be worrying, the student and parents will be contacted by the contact teacher by email or phone. The contact teacher is responsible for this step.

- **Week 1–3**: If sporadic absence or a clear pattern of absence is detected, the contact teacher meets with the parents. The absence is reported to the student welfare staff and an investigation of the causes of the absence is made using assessment tools. An action plan is made and monitored. Documentation of the process is required. The contact teacher and special needs education teacher are responsible for these interventions.

- **Week 4–6**: If the absence continues, the student welfare staff meets with the parents. An enhanced assessment is made and a more detailed action plan prepared. The principal prepares an action plan and social services are contacted, as well as the school attendance team in the municipality. The contact teacher follows up on the situation weekly from this point on.

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- **Week 7–9**: The school attendance team becomes more involved, either in a tutorial or a more treatment-oriented capacity. Actions are intensified. If necessary, cooperation with healthcare and child mental health services is also intensified. Regular follow-up between all parties takes place and all actions are documented.
- **Week 10–**: As above, except the municipality is also informed by the principal. If necessary, the school works even more closely with treatment intervention providers, such as the municipal school attendance team, child mental health services or other healthcare providers.

5.2.3. Municipality of Karlstad

The guidelines in Karlstad are based on Kearney's theories on factors that affect attendance and absence. System theory is also part of their approach. To determine absence causes, they use a model based on the notion that attendance is affected by four factors. These factors make the student go to school, stay at school, go home or stay home and are affected by risk and protective factors. A student's attendance is the sum of these factors.

The actions taken by schools in the municipality of Karlstad follow this model:

- **A**: Identification of attendance status. Early intervention is key here. The principal of each school is responsible for making sure that all absence is registered and followed up on. The principal decides the level of absence before an investigation is initiated. Each school must continuously determine whether if the absence poses the risk of a negative impact on the student's chances of attaining the goals of the education. The guidelines state that the teacher who is responsible for the student must react if the absence rate during the last three months exceeds 10%.
- **B**: A thorough assessment of what is causing the absence is made. The extent of the assessment differs from case to case. To be able to judge the level of assessment needed, school stuff must have knowledge of which factors are important to assess and use assessment methods that provide answers to the causes of the student´s absence. Recommended assessment tools are listed in the guidelines.
- **C**: An analysis is carried out of the assessment results. The analysis is made by the principal and representatives of the student welfare staff. The pedagogical, social, medical and mental health perspectives and their effect on school attendance are analysed.

- **D**: The information from the analysis, along with a consideration of the student's specific needs, form the foundation for the actions made in response to the student´s absence. All actions that are proposed or tried out are documented, sometimes as part of an action plan.
- **E**: The effects of the proposed actions are evaluated and followed up on continuously. Schools may need to go through the assessment phase several times in order to determine actions that truly help the student.

The guidelines also contain suggestions on how to cooperate with social services and healthcare providers.

5.3. Finland

Different guidelines in municipalities for addressing school attendance problems have resulted in a wide variety of models being used in Finnish schools. Most municipalities discriminate between problematic and unproblematic absence, but the actions taken to combat absenteeism vary considerably. In a recent survey by Määttä and colleagues (2020), 88% of participants reported that their school had a model for handling school attendance problems. Of these, 65% agreed that their model was working relatively well. The greatest problems in the models concerned:

- Insufficient familiarisation with and commitment to using the chosen model
- Insufficient resources at the school for handling the problem
- Problems in multidisciplinary teamwork and responsibility sharing

The less extensive guidelines contain only general recommendations for monitoring school attendance. These guidelines do not provide limits in terms of hours or procedures for initiating cooperation. In Finland, many municipalities have developed some kind of stepped approach for addressing problematic absence.

5.3.1. Helsinki region model

In step models, the actions to address school attendance problems become increasingly comprehensive and profound the longer the student has been absent. An example of a step model was provided through a regional *Lape project* and is widely used in the Helsinki region (image 4).

a) In the first step, the focus is on preventing school attendance problems: promotion of student participation, cooperation between parents or guardians and the school, systematic absence registration.

b) If someone is worried about a student's absence, a meeting is held between the parents or guardians, student and homeroom teacher as step two. The school welfare team may also be consulted at this stage.

c) If the student has over 30 hours of unexcused or otherwise worrying absence, the teacher schedules a meeting and invites those who might be able to help the student with the problem. At this point, a thorough screening of the reasons for the situation is made (e.g., SRAS-R) and an expert group established if the need arises to clarify an individual student's need for support and to organise services.

d) If this does not make any difference in attendance and a student misses more than 50 hours of school, external specialists (social welfare, special healthcare, etc.) are called in to meet with the student and the student's parents or guardians. An action plan is made and a person who is responsible for follow-up is appointed.

e) If the situation continues and no drastic change is seen, social welfare services or child welfare services are contacted if the student has been absent from school for over 70 hours.

Preventive actions

Communal student welfare strives to increase student participation and communality.

Flowing collaboration between student homes and school.

Systematic and constant monitoring of student attendance.

Bringing up concern

Student's absenteeism raises concern at home or at school.

Classroom teacher/ class supervisor discusses the matter with the student and legal guardians, agrees on contacting student welfare services.

Consultation of student welfare services, low threshold

More than 30 hours

If the situation does not normalize after the discussion and there are more than 30 hrs. of absences, the teacher calls up a meeting. This meeting gathers those agents that student and the guardians assess are needed to support them. Mostly, school welfare services are included and possible other specialists are consulted. If needed, a multiprofessional expert group is formed and this group together agrees on actions to be taken and how the situation is followed.

Thorough mapping of the reasons contributing to absenteeism and the overall situation, for example with The School Refusal Assessment Scale – Revised

More than 50 hours

If needed, consultation of specialists outside school and starting collaboration. Support measures are considered together, and the plan of action on follow up and professional responsibilities are agreed together. One person is agreed to be in charge on the co-operation and information flow. School's possibilities to support the student are thoroughly discussed and planned.

Contact required by the social welfare law (i.e., CPS) taken under consideration

More than 70 hours

If the measures of support and follow ups are not enough to reduce absenteeism, contact required by the social welfare law is taken and notification of child protective services (CPS) is considered. The school has administered a comprehensive investigation, and report of the situation and multiple support actions have been taken in co-operation with the guardians and specialists. A date for follow up meeting and person in charge are agreed.

The students' situation is under constant monitoring and notifying CPS is considered

Figure 7. Monitoring and addressing school attendance problems in Helsinki region (Socca 2018)

5.3.2. Municipality of Kotka

Another commonly used model for actions that address school attendance problems in Finland is the so-called **swim lane model**. In this model, there are various lines and duties for the different parties in the process. In the following model from the city of Kotka, there are lines for the student, parent or guardian, teacher, special needs teacher, student counsellor, school psychologist, school nurse and school welfare counsellor (Figure 8). It is the student's responsibility to attend school, the parent or guardian's responsibility to inform the school about an absence on the same morning and the teacher's responsibility to follow up on absence on a daily basis. If there are unexcused absences or extensive (20–50 hours) excused absences, the teacher contacts the student and his or her family. Support from the school is organised if necessary. This may mean different ways to organise instruction, school welfare services, support from an expert group or disciplinary actions, such as attending school activities in addition to regular school hours. If attendance problems continue, a multidisciplinary -professional team of experts is established and a common plan

with follow-up actions prepared. In the case of absence of more than 100 hours, a child welfare notification is made.
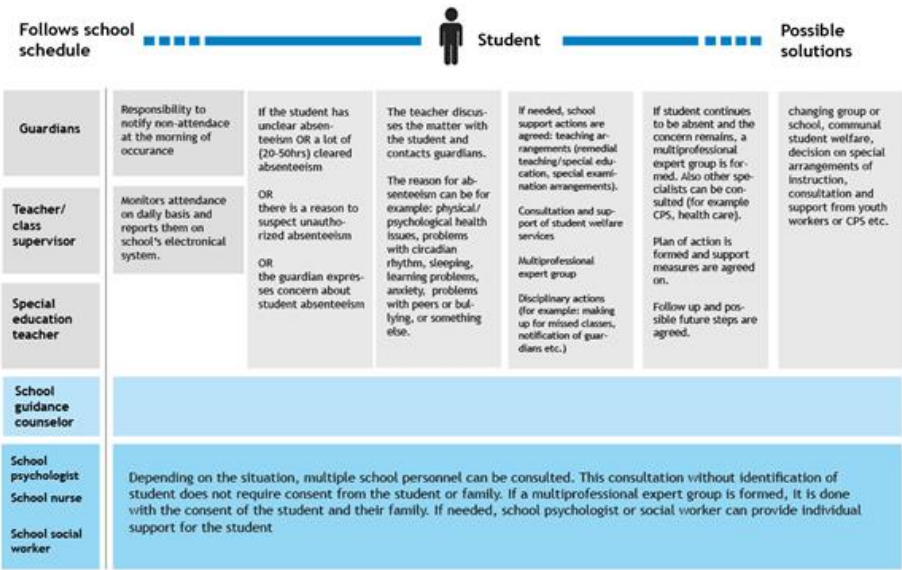
Figure 8. 'Swim lane' model from the city of Kotka (Kotkan kaupunki, 2019)

5.3.3. Municipality of Mikkeli

In parallel models**,** school actions are clearly separated between excused and unexcused absences. According to the early stage of support model addressing student absence in the city of Mikkeli (Mikkelin kaupunki, 2020), teachers are required to contact the student's parent or guardian immediately. For instance, if a student's absence is unexcused and a teacher does not receive confirmation or an explanation from the parent or guardian the same day, the teacher needs to contact the parent or guardian that same day. If a student has unexcused absence of 15 to 20 hours, the teacher contacts the school counsellor to meet with the student. If the situation remains unchanged and the student still has unexcused absence, the teacher contacts the parent or guardian for a multidisciplinary meeting (e.g., with a school counsellor, principal, psychologist, nurse, etc.) at school. If necessary, the teacher contacts child welfare professionals together with the parent or guardian. If a student has 100 hours of unexcused absence, the principal reports this to the Director of Education in Mikkeli for future action.

5.4. Denmark

As described above, national guidelines on school absence have been developed. However, as basic education is the responsibility of the municipalities by virtue of the Education Act, these guidelines are relatively general and leave room for customisation on the municipal and school levels. Municipalities are not required by law to prepare action plans on school absence, so this is done to varying extents in the various municipalities. In addition, many municipalities do not post their plan or strategy, if any, on their website. However, as far as is known, school absence is gaining increasing attention in the municipalities (Metodecentret, 2017) and concrete action plans are developed with increasing frequency.

Most Danish municipalities somehow distinguish between absence that is problematic and unproblematic. However, such distinction presents practical difficulties, as pointed out by Fisker and Rønne (2019). Problematic absence is often defined as a specific number of days within a certain period, but there is no consensus as to the threshold at which absence becomes problematic, i.e., when the absence has a rate or scope that is worrying and negatively affects the student's academic development and well-being (Fisker & Rønne, 2019). As mentioned above, the Danish government has established 15% in a quarter as the maximum limit before economic sanctions for the parents may be imposed. However, this number only includes unexcused absences and not the student's overall absence rate. Absence due to illness, disability, etc. may also give rise to concern about the student's health and well-being, but no specific national guideline has been established for when schools are to act on student absence.

There are significant local differences across municipalities and schools. In addition, as schools specify the categorisation of absences themselves, local variations exist in how absence in registered. For example, schools may have different policies on special exemptions. Some schools permit holidays outside of the regular dates, while others do not (Thastum, 2019a).

The municipalities of Aarhus, Aalborg and Silkeborg are provided as examples from Denmark and are not necessarily representative of municipal practice regarding school absenteeism. As there are local differences between municipal policies and the management of school absence, it would be a rather difficult task to choose representative examples. However, it

should be pointed out that Aarhus, Aalborg and Silkeborg are municipalities with a focus on absenteeism that have taken initiatives to prevent and reduce it. They have been selected as examples of how procedures and action plans can be developed. Not all Danish municipalities have a focus on or devote efforts to addressing school absence to the same extent and not all municipalities have developed concrete strategies, definitions or procedures.

5.4.1. Municipality of Aarhus

The municipality of Aarhus has created guidelines for schools in relation to school absence (Aarhus Municipality, 2019). The guidelines pass through national legislation, but also include guidelines based on local decisions.

As there is no fixed definition of when absence is problematic in a national context, Aarhus Municipality has developed a definition of absence patterns that require extra attention. The municipality has conceptualised absence as 'attention-requiring' based on four early warning signs. These are: 1) four or more episodes of absence during the past month, 2) 10% unexcused absence during the past month, 3) 11 or more episodes of absence during the past school year and 4) more than 10% absence during the past school year. The definition is made to ensure that absence patterns are detected and acted on at an early stage. When a student meets one or more of the criteria, this is indicated in a monthly report that is submitted to the municipality's principals. The user of the report can access a visual overview of each student's absence rate, making it easier to identify absence patterns. Each school is required to consider the nature of the absence as to whether it gives rise to concern. If so, the school must prepare an action plan to reduce the absence rate in collaboration with the parents of the student concerned (Aarhus Municipality, 2019).

The municipality of Aarhus has not prepared specific guidelines on initiatives or actions that should be taken. They have, however, prepared a handbook on absenteeism that contains background knowledge (e.g., causes, consequences and prevalence of absenteeism), as well as a 'toolbox' to provide inspiration when addressing absenteeism. The handbook is based on academic literature and interviews with students and school staff working in the municipality. The toolbox can therefore be considered the school district's 'best practice'. As focal areas for school absenteeism efforts, the handbook presents a list of protective factors, risk factors and indicators of problematic absenteeism. Protective factors can be a good class

culture or consistent absence policy, while risk factors can be school transitions or family issues, and indicators may be a shift in attendance or missing homework. Absence-related efforts also comprise tasks on various levels: activities that are generally preventive, group activities in the class or community that address emergent problems and individual-oriented interventions. The handbook includes different examples of strategies on each level. For example, differentiated teaching may be part of the general preventive work, while offering counselling may be a strategy to address emergent problems and individualised tuition can be used as a temporary strategy for handling cases of severe attendance problems (Aarhus Municipality, 2013).

The municipality of Aarhus has established an 'absence team' that focuses specifically on school absenteeism.

5.4.2. Back2school

Starting in the autumn term 2020, Aarhus Municipality implemented the Back2school programme (Thastum et al., 2019) to support students in grades 0–9 with persistent absenteeism. Back2School is a manual-based intervention programme designed to help the student return to regular school attendance. It was developed by researchers from the Centre for the Psychological Treatment of Children and Adolescents at Aarhus University and has been tested and modified in recent years in collaboration with Aarhus Municipality and the Innovation Fund Denmark (Lomholt et al., 2020).

Back2School in the revised version consists of a comprehensive assessment interview with the child and parents or guardians, 11 sessions of cognitive behavioural therapy with the child and parents or guardians, four meetings with the school and a final booster session. The manual comprises problem-specific modules that address such problems as anxiety, depression and/or behavioural problems that negatively affect the child's school attendance, modules addressing school attendance problems, as well as modules with a focus on parental guidance and school consultancy. The approach is based on a case formulation (Lomholt et al., 2020; Thastum et al., 2019).

The intervention is carried out by a psychologist from the EPS trained in the programme. The municipality of Aarhus aims to complete 60 courses each year.

5.4.3. Municipality of Aalborg

The municipality of Aalborg is another example of a Danish municipality that has prepared a definition of a type of absence that may give rise to concern, so-called 'worrying absence'. Worrying absence is defined as sickness or unexcused absence for at least five consecutive days and/or seven out of 20 school days and/or 15 out of 60 school days. In Aalborg Municipality, a student is considered a 'dropout student' if his or her absence rate fits this definition. The student is then registered in the administrative system as such. As in Aarhus, a special dropout team has been established in the EPS, consisting of three social counsellors, whose core tasks are to help schools with dropout students and ensure that schools take actions in relation to these students (Aalborg Municipality, 2017).

Aalborg Municipality has prepared a manual with specific action guidelines for worrying absence that it has published on its website. The municipality describes the manual (2017) as a set of minimum expectations for how schools address absence, with a special focus on early intervention. The manual clarifies the concepts of school refusal and truancy, which are defined in accordance with Heyne et al.'s (2018) definition, in which the differences primarily pertain to parental knowledge and whether the child actually has a desire to go to school (as is often the case with school refusal, but not with truancy). However, it emphasises that these types of absence commonly overlap and can be included in the concept of school refusal behaviour (Kearney & Silverman, 1994).

To help identify early signs of absenteeism, the manual presents a list of protective factors, risk factors and indicators, which are inspired by – and very similar to – the ones from Aarhus Municipality. The manual also presents a case formulation model to be used when working with dropout students. The model is based on Carr's model (2006) and includes predisposing, precipitating, perpetuating and protective factors for attendance problems that help with understanding the student's individual case.

All municipal schools in Aalborg are expected to prepare local principles for managing student absence. This includes establishing a clear procedure for identifying worrying absence, as well as a systematic approach to dealing with it. The minimum requirements for such an approach are divided into three steps:

Step one: If worrying absence is observed, the class teacher contacts the parents or guardians to ask about the student. It is determined whether there is a need for further initiatives. The pedagogical team for the student in question has weekly contact with the parents or guardians concerning the student's attendance. A decision is made as to whether the compulsory education must be met through home/hospital instruction, part-time instruction or individual tuition.

Step two: If absence continues, the causes must be mapped in more detail and the class team must prepare a description of the student's academic, personal and social development. An action plan is compiled, describing goals, partial goals and initiatives to be met and taken. It is decided whether the family group in the social services department or EPS should be notified. The family group is a team of social counsellors who offer support to families, as well as children and adolescents in need of individual support. As in step one, a decision is made as to whether the compulsory education must be met through home/hospital instruction, part-time instruction or individual tuition. In step two, it is possible, but not required, to involve the dropout team. The dropout team can conduct a thorough analysis of the problems based on the analysis model described above.

Step three: In case of persistent absence, schools are required to involve the dropout team and a dropout case is created in the EPS. The school calls a meeting with the dropout team, parents or guardians and other relevant parties, during which the dropout team carries out the multifactor analysis described above. In step three, the family group must also be notified, which then prepares a detailed description of the student's difficulties and school's response. An action plan is compiled and individual responsibilities and deadlines for tasks agreed.

Each year, the school administration conducts a search of the administrative system, focusing on students with more than 20% absence. The dropout team reviews the list of these students and compares it to the students already registered as 'dropout students'. In case of incongruence, the school is contacted and required to call a meeting for purposes of a joint analysis and preparing a plan of action (Aalborg Municipality, 2017).

Municipality of Silkeborg

The municipality of Silkeborg has formulated a strategy to reduce school absence called 'Presence instead of absence' (Danish: *Fremmøde frem for fravær*). This strategy has a special focus on the relationship between absence and well-being, both academically and socially. It is based on research pointing to a strong relationship between high absence rates and student failure to thrive, both socially and academically (Silkeborg Municipality, 2020a). Social well-being refers to student perceptions of affiliation or belonging with the school, class and community, as well as a sense of security and bullying, while academic well-being refers to student perceptions of their own academic ability, as well as their concentration and problem-solving skills (Thastum, 2019b).

Silkeborg Municipality has decided that attendance is to be increased over the next five years. To succeed in this goal, a number of tasks have been defined:

- A structured approach to absence registration and follow-up
- Involving parents/family as a resource in preventive actions, as well as in cases in which worrying absence is already present
- Close collaboration between professionals, parents or guardians and students
- Possibility for professionals to consult. Consequently, student absence should be prioritised during, for example, team meetings
- Devoting special attention to vulnerable children at greater risk of developing school attendance problems (Silkeborg Municipality, 2020a)

'Well-being on all fronts' (Danish: *Trivsel på tværs*) is a collaborative model used in Silkeborg Municipality with an intensified focus on early intervention in children's emotional well-being. Children ages 0–6 undergo a well-being assessment twice each year. If the assessment results cause concern, the parents or guardians are contacted immediately and called in for a meeting. The main goal is to ensure a systematic and digitally supported determination of children's well-being, aimed at achieving, which permits anticipation of potential future problems. To create an overview and ensure the fastest possible help, the municipality uses the colours green, yellow and red to designate each child's position. Green means no cause for concern, but if a child is in a yellow or red position, the parents or guardians are informed and invited to a 'focus meeting', during which the concerns are

discussed, as well as the changes needed to help the child thrive. The focus is on situational, relational and contextual factors that contribute to the child's failure to thrive, which are also the main targets of interventions and initiatives (Silkeborg Municipality, 2020b).

Four schools in the municipality are currently working with the 'Well-being on all fronts' approach. The model applies to students in grades 0–4 and is based on three core values:

1) A systemic and appreciative view of the child and the child's behaviour, i.e. the child and his or her behaviour must be viewed in relation to the social context and there must be a significant focus on the child's strengths and resources.

2) Involvement of parents or guardians, i.e. parents or guardians are included as collaborators of professionals and considered a resource in addressing the child's problems.

Interdisciplinary collaboration, i.e., multidisciplinary resources are considered of significant importance for initiatives. This requires common terms and an understanding of each other's practices (Silkeborg Municipality, 2020b).

5.5. Norway

Municipalities have developed and implemented regulations and guidelines for schools for excused and unexcused SAP as required by law (Regelverkstolkningar frå Udir, 2019). Three examples from Trondheim, Bærum and Frogn as presented below.

5.5.1. Municipality of Trondheim

In Trondheim Municipality, the local regulations and guidelines for excused and unexcused SAP must be followed by all schools and consist of seven steps (Trondheim Municipality, 2020):

1. Absence registration. The contact teacher continuously updates SAP in the electronic database and each subject teacher registers SAP in his or her own absence sheet.

2. Absence notification. Parents or guardians are required to write a note to the school when their child is absent.

3. Early signs of SAP. The contact teacher meets with the student and parents or guardians, who are informed that school attendance is mandatory and that it is the responsibility of the parents or guardians to ensure that the student attends school at the right time.

4. Contact between school and parents or guardians. Parents or guardians must call the school on the third day of SAP or the contact teacher will call them the same day to determine whether the SAP are valid and excused. The contact teacher may also contact the student directly. If relevant, the social educational advisor and school management are informed. The school nurse is informed after receiving consent. The parents or guardians are contacted immediately if the SAP are invalid and unexcused. The social educational advisor and school management are informed in this case. A meeting on the student's absence is held between the school and parents or guardians, either in person or by phone. In cases of high SAP, both parents or guardians and the student are summoned to attend a meeting at school. A SAP pattern screening is carried out to determine possible causes and an attendance agreement is made with the necessary adjustments. The principal informs the parents or guardians and student about compulsory education. The school nurse attends such meetings and the interventions are evaluated after two weeks.

5. Problematic absence limits. With SAP of more than three days in one month, the causes of the SAP are examined. If the sickness absence rate is higher than 20%, the student's parents or guardians must submit a doctor's note and the school nurse is involved. With tardiness more than three times, the parents or guardians are informed by the contact teacher. In the event of more frequent tardiness, the parents or guardians and the student are summoned to a meeting at the school. If there is an unexcused absence from a single class, the parents are informed. In the event of frequent unexcused absence, the school convenes a meeting with the student and parents or guardians.

6. Arenas for discussing absenteeism at school. School management reviews the total SAP three times a year in connection with its prevention plan. If there are concerns about the absence rates of individual students, regular meetings are scheduled between the contact teacher and management. It is important to discuss absences and propose actions immediately. SAP is a separate item on the agenda during weekly meetings. In the event of high SAP rates, this is addressed at the first possible meeting with the school's internal socio-pedagogical or resource team.

7. Notification to external assistance services. When a school has identified absence patterns and possible causes of absence, has tried various measures in collaboration with the student and home and attendance agreements do not lead to positive change, the school reports this to the child and family services for discussion (health services are not connected to educational authorities in most municipalities and this type of contact must be agreed on). The case is then discussed with EPS together with health and social care professionals and the school receives help in dealing with the case.

5.5.2. Municipality of Bærum

Bærum Municipality has developed guidelines for schools on how to identify, prevent and work with SAP by dividing it into four phases (Bærum Municipality, 2018):

1. Absence prevention. Preventative work to establish a safe school environment. Absence is registered daily. Monthly SAP reviews are carried out by the contact teacher and, twice each semester, together with the team leader. School management reviews the school's total SAP rate of twice each semester.

2. Identification and contact. The contact teacher identifies SAP at an early stage and calls the parents or guardians to determine whether there is cause for concern.

3. Assessments, actions and evaluation: collaboration contract. The team leader is informed and responsible for properly following up on absence. The contact teacher contacts the student and his or her parents or guardians to schedule a meeting to evaluate the situation. Actions are then determined and implemented. After three weeks, a new assessment is made. The student can return to school if the problem has been resolved or evaluated for another three-week period.

4. Further actions needed. EPS is contacted and, if relevant, the EPS advisor assumes responsibility for further coordinating the serious absence problem. This may entail involving other relevant parties to help carry out a thorough assessment of risks and available resources. Regular evaluations are carried out with long-term or frequent absence.

5.5.3. Municipality of Frogn

The municipality has a 10% absence limit and aims to ensure that students thrive at school and want to attend school. Frogn Municipality has developed an absence action ladder with five levels for schools to use (Frogn Municipality, 2020):

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1. Communication with student and contact with parents or guardians: same day. When the 10% limit of excused absence has been exceeded, the contact teacher talks with both the parents or guardians and the student that same day. If the absence is of no serious concern, the follow-up ends after one conversation. Otherwise, the conversation is escalated to level two.

2. Meeting with contact teacher, parents or guardians and student: within a week. During this meeting, the parties involved evaluate the situation and determine the reason(s) for the absence and then agree on actions that can help improve the situation. A new evaluation is made after three weeks and if the contact teacher and/or parents or guardians are still worried about future absence, level 3 on the ladder is introduced.

3. Adapted education team: within a week. At this level, a meeting is held with the contact teacher, parents or guardians, student and advisors from the EPS to determine new actions to help solve the absence problem. The situation is re-evaluated after three weeks and if there are still absence concerns, the next step is level 4.

4. Application to psychosocial work unit for children ages 6-17 years. In cooperation with the parents or guardians and student, school management applies for support. The psychosocial work unit comprises various professionals working with children and adolescents in the municipality. Relevant professionals are included to help get the student back in school.

5. Regular meetings with all stakeholders involved. Regular meetings are held every three weeks at school and with the school. The representatives attending the meetings include school management, the contact teacher, the psychosocial work unit, the specialist health service, the student's general practitioner, etc. If the student is in lower secondary school, he or she also attends the meetings and it can sometimes be helpful to invite friends or other people from the student's social network to attend the meetings. Coordination and cooperation take place regularly until there is no longer a concern about absence.

6. Initiatives and actions – prevention and treatment of attendance problems

This chapter describes documented prevention and treatment approaches to SAP in the Nordic countries aimed at supporting and improving practises. A multi-tiered model approach is common among the Nordic countries, where initiatives, actions, guidelines and registers target SAP on a three-level scale: universal, targeted and intensive (Kearney, 2016).

6.1   Multi-tiered model
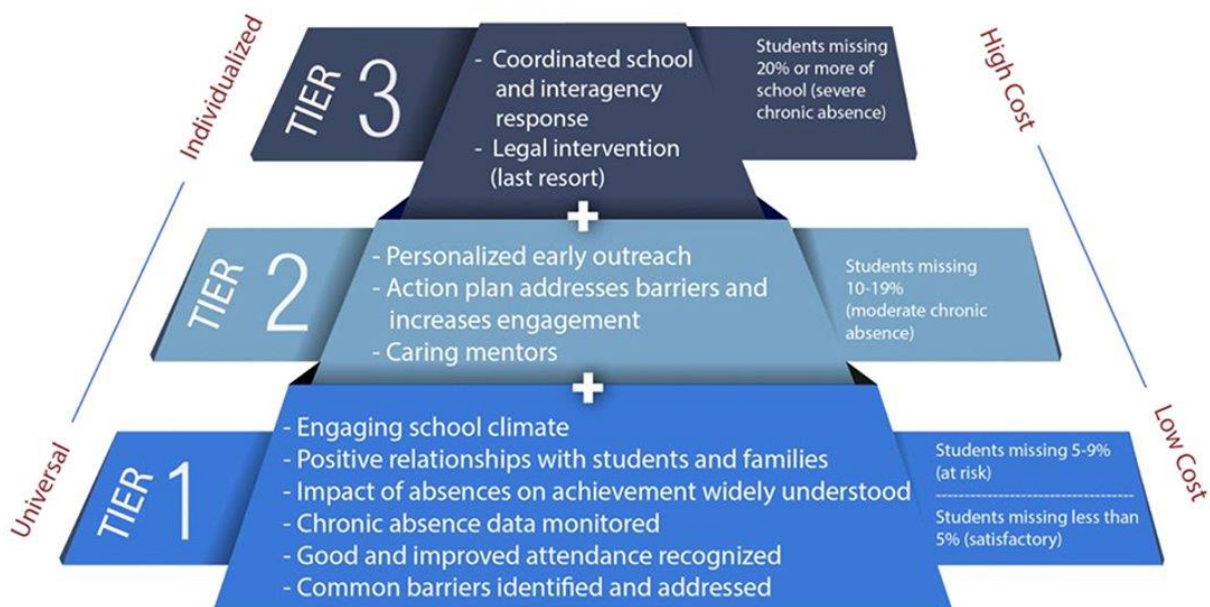
Figure 9. Multi-tiered model for problematic school absenteeism (Kearney, C. A., 2016)

The tiered approach (Figure 9) divides students into three tiers reflecting the level of anticipated need for support (Kearney, 2016). In our report, most approaches aimed at SAP across the Nordic countries are based on the implementation of this theory of intervention.

Tier 1 is the universal prevention and education approach that concerns 50-100% of students. It includes information on categorising absence, patterns of absence, trends in absenteeism, early warning signs of school refusal behaviour, general predictors of absenteeism and reasons for missing school. Tier 2 concerns the 11-49% of students with a

history of absence (missing 10-19% of school) or with a risk factor that makes attendance tenuous. It addresses students with anxiety-based and non-anxiety-based cases of school refusal behaviour and those who require engagement mentoring provided by peers and teachers. These students require a higher level of more individualised support, in addition to universal support. Tier 3, the highest level of need, often concerns the top 10% of the population who require more intensive and individualised responses. It addresses ongoing and severe cases of SAP with complex or habitual problems, including problematic parents and family dynamics. According to Kearney (2016), there are highly challenging and long-lasting cases of problematic school absenteeism on the Tier 4 level, involving severe psychopathology (Kearney, 2016). Tier 4 includes specialised programmes, intensive case study and management and second chance approaches to address students who are at a very high risk of dropping out or who have already left school for a year or more.

6.2   Sweden

6.2.1   Hemmasittarprogrammet (HSP)

HSP is a multimodal and manual-based treatment programme. The target group is 10 to 18-year-olds with chronic and severe school refusal, though the method can also help young adults (18 to 24-year-olds) return to work and/or school. The programme is divided into three phases: 1) assessment phase, 2) treatment phase and 3) maintenance phase (Magelungen, 2017).

The assessment phase aims to understand the reasons for school refusal by asking questions about the school experience, family problems and the person's lifestyle. The assessment provides valuable information about the social and study skills that the child will need to return to school. The treatment team holds meetings with the parents or guardians, principal and teachers to uncover learning and social problems, family and peer stresses, and whether there has been teasing or bullying.

All information becomes part of a behavioural analysis (i.e., describes behaviours with a frequency that should be reduced). A treatment plan is made based on the analysis. A strong relationship between the therapist, child, parents or guardians and teachers is crucial if the plan is to be effective.

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The treatment for school refusal focuses on changing the daytime activity schedule, getting a good night's sleep, waking up at the right time in the morning, normal use of the internet, teaching skills to cope with anxiety and negative thoughts about school, helping parents and teachers support social interaction and discourage avoidance behaviours, teaching and rehearsing social skills, encouraging peer contact and dealing with family conflict.

An evaluation of HSP (Strömbeck et al., 2021) shows that most young people were totally absent from school before treatment and had also been absent for a long time. The percentage of young people who were completely absent from school was 76% before treatment, 41% after treatment and 27% at follow-up. Before treatment, attendance was 6.2% full-time, 18.1% after treatment and 30.3% at follow-up. Levels of anxiety and depression were also lower after treatment, both for the young person and the parent. The average length of treatment was 11.9 months.

6.2.2 Nytorpsmodellen and Skolkontakt ('Nytorp model' and 'School contact') by the Center of Neurodevelopmental Disorders at the Karolinska Institute (KIND)

KIND has been working to develop evidence-based methods to help children with special needs and or developmental disorders succeed at school. Two of these methods are the 'Nytorp model' and 'School contact'.

The Nytorp model consists of several techniques that aim to help create better treatment: clarity, predictability, structure, personal goals, motivation and quality of life. The starting point of the model is the assessment process. Assessment is important for student experiences, motivation and joy. The overall goal of the model is better cooperation between the parties present in the student's environment. Parents, teachers and other important people around the student are helped to better cooperate and coordinate interventions. This helps the student increase attendance rates and get better grades.

'School contact' is a manual-based group social skills training for children (ages 8–17) with a high-functioning autism spectrum disorder (ASD). Participants are taught to use social skills in interactions with peers in a natural environment (i.e., school). The target group for the programme are children with social skills difficulties and/or special needs, often accompanied by neuropsychiatric disorders (the programme is often used, but is not mandatory). The tools and skills in 'School contact' aim to strengthen the student's self-

efficacy, quality of life and both functional and social skills. The programme is based on CBT, observational and model learning (Karolinska Institutet, 2020).

6.3 Finland

6.3.1 National VIP network theme group

Until recently, school attendance problems in compulsory education were considered truancy problems in Finland. At the same time, the need for mental health services among children and adolescents with school absence problems has been increasing rapidly. Consequently, the need for models and actions to help all students who are not attending school for various reasons has been acknowledged. To fill this gap, a national theme group for school refusal was established in October 2018, consisting of experts in this field. The group is responsible for organising annual meetings and seminars on the subject and collecting information about good practices in Finland and abroad. The theme group is part of the VIP network, a national programme aimed at improving methods for students in need of intensive multidisciplinary care and rehabilitation. The VIP network is part of the current joint development efforts of the Finnish National Board of Education (NA) and Finnish Ministry of Education and Culture.

The National VIP theme group also includes a network of researchers, currently connecting researchers from the University of Jyväskylä, University of Helsinki, Åbo Akademi, Valteri Centre for Learning and Consulting and Helsinki and Uusimaa hospital districts. This group of researchers aims to collaboratively provide new information on the subject by utilising different datasets on the school and community levels.

6.3.2 Tuuve – supported online teaching in specific situations

One of the few national programmes aimed at students enrolled in compulsory education with school attendance problems was Tuuve, which ended at the end of 2019. Tuuve's goal was to develop and monitor a programme based on blended learning concepts to help school-refusing students attain their final diploma and continue their studies on the secondary level. The Tuuve programme was funded by the Ministry of Culture and Education and implemented in collaboration by the Valteri Centre for Learning and Consulting and Otava Folk High School.

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The Tuuve programme was developed for Tier 3 students at the end of their compulsory education (ages 15-17). The other criteria were that the student had been diagnosed with a condition that partly caused the school attendance problems, all local resources and forms of support available in the school and municipality had been tried and exhausted (special needs support) and that the student was currently receiving local multidisciplinary support, such as specialised healthcare and/or social services.
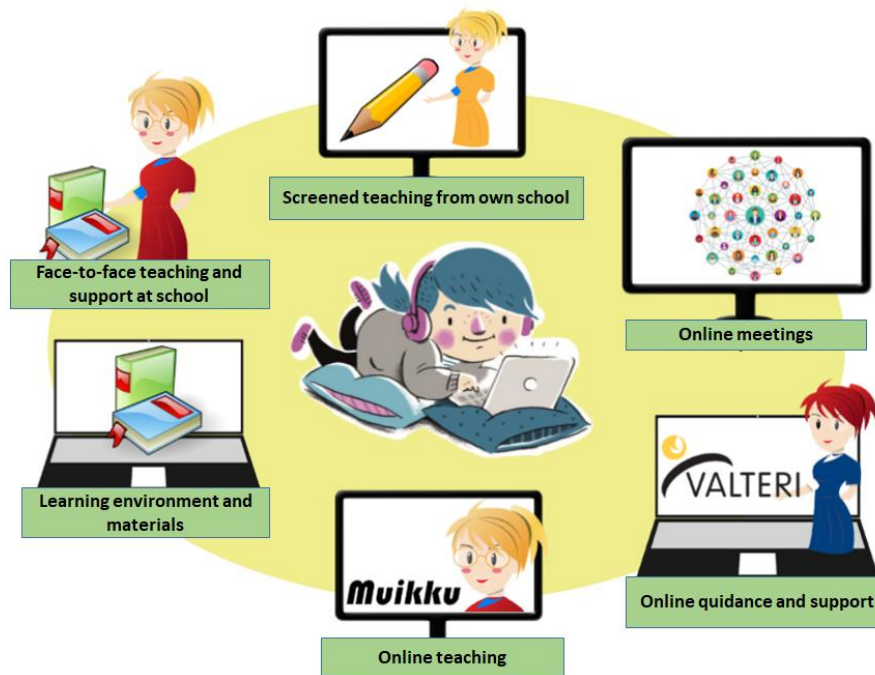
Figure 10. Blended learning in the Tuuve programme (Sergejeff, Pilbacka-Rönkä & Mantila, 2019)

The Tuuve programme helped around 100 students finish their compulsory education. Most students attended the programme for one to two years. Around two thirds of the students were girls and one third were boys, who mainly suffered from depression and anxiety. More than 85% of the students progressed to a secondary education, either vocational studies or at an upper secondary school (Sergejeff, Mantila & Pilbacka-Rönkä, 2020.) A small guide on absenteeism with background knowledge and practical tips was also published for parents and professionals (Sergejeff, Pilbacka-Rönkä & Mantila, 2019).

6.3.3 Operation SKY (Finnish: *Sitouttava KouluYhteisötyö*) – enhancing school engagement

Promoting school engagement and preventing school attendance problems are the priorities of the SKY programme, funded by the Ministry of Education and Culture for the years 2021–2023. The ultimate goal of the programme is to produce a national model for addressing SAP, with a focus on preventive measures on the school level.

The national model is developed and tested through local pilots. These pilots are formed by clusters of collaborating municipalities. Development work is done jointly. During the development process, the pilots are supported and supervised by the Ministry, which also provides training and workshops. The Finnish Education Evaluation Center (FINEEC) supports, monitors and evaluates these pilots. It also gathers essential information for recognising strengths and development targets. The Finnish National Agency for Education updates the national curriculum and provides in-service training for school staff.

Operation SKY is part of a comprehensive action plan to prevent bullying, violence and harassment in schools and educational institutions that has been developed by The Ministry of Education and Culture.

6.4 Denmark

6.4.1 New allocated funds

During the autumn of 2020, several Danish municipalities received special funds allocated for municipal efforts aimed at problematic school absenteeism and the general well-being of children and adolescents. These funds are time-limited and the nature of the projects initiated varies greatly from municipality to municipality. Moreover, they do not only target SAP.

6.4.2 Collaboration model for school absenteeism

The National Board of Social Services (under the Ministry of Social Affairs and the Interior) is funding a new school absenteeism project aimed at students in grades 0–10 with worrying school absenteeism, emerging attendance problems or a lack of desire to attend school. The objective of the project is to increase the attendance, well-being and coping skills of this

target group. It has a special focus on vulnerable children (e.g., families already subject to social measures) and children with developmental and attention disorders. The background of the project is that school absenteeism is generally perceived as a difficult challenge in many municipalities. Cross-disciplinary work in particular, including the division of responsibilities between educational and social aspects, is experienced as challenging. It was therefore decided to develop a model that strengthens municipal collaboration and initiatives connected to school absenteeism. Municipalities accepted for the funds (3) are expected to contribute to the development and evaluation of the model in order to make it attractive, realistic and implementable in Danish municipalities. Core elements of the model are the identification of absenteeism, delineation of problems using a holistic approach and organisation of initiatives based on the resources, strengths and motivation of the individual child (National Board of Social Services, 2020).

6.4.3   Low-threshold treatments

Special funds have also been allocated to selected Danish municipalities with the view to implementing low-threshold treatment options in the EPS during a two-year period. These funds are administrated by the Danish National Agency on Education and Quality. The target group is children and adolescents who are not thriving emotionally, who are at risk of developing a mental disorder or who are presenting early symptoms of a mental disorder. Low-threshold treatment is intended as a shorter course of treatment aimed at preventing the development of mental problems and increasing the well-being of the individual child or adolescent.

Not all municipalities have received funds, but the objective of the funding is that all Danish municipalities will be able to offer high-quality treatment options that will reduce the number of psychiatric referrals in the long term (Ministry of Children and Education, 2020d). Several municipalities have applied for the Back2School programme, which means that treatment options for children and adolescents with problematic school absence will become more available across the country. All the same, this is not the only SAP project that has been initiated.

6.5 Norway

6.5.1 National 'Los' projects

Dropping out of upper secondary education can have significant (negative) consequences, both for the individual concerned and for society. Through this grant scheme, a professional is designated to help young people ages 12–23 years with school attendance problems by providing close follow-up and support (Norwegian Directorate for Children, Youth and Family Affairs (Bufdir), 2021). The goal is to improve cooperation between the state and municipality on measures aimed at ensuring that more young people succeed in school and complete upper secondary education as the basis for long-term employment.

The Directorate of Health, the Directorate of Labour and Welfare, the Directorate for Integration and Diversity, the Directorate for Education and Training and the Directorate for Children, Youth and Family offers grants that help children and young people maintain their connection to school and/or working life (Norwegian Directorate for Children, Youth, and Family Affairs (Bufdir), 2021).

A comprehensive overview of these grant schemes makes it easier for the state, municipality and other actors to manage and use the schemes in a more coordinated and targeted fashion for vulnerable children and young people with regard to, for instance, attendance problems and SAP.

6.5.2 Children and young people ages 0 to 24 years

Problems related to schooling, intoxication, living conditions or mental health early in life can create major problems for the individual and for society later on. Those who drop out of school have both a higher sickness absenteeism rate and higher consumption of welfare benefits than those who finish school, putting them at greater risk of prolonged marginalisation, possibly for the rest of their lives.

All those working with children and young people, health organisations, kindergartens, child welfare professionals, schools and the Directorate of Labour and Welfare must work together more effectively and services must be better coordinated. To strengthen this work in the municipalities and counties, several ministries and directorates work together to remove obstacles in regulations, coordinate measures and instruments and do more of what

works. Central coordination is necessary for local collaboration to succeed (Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2020).

Initiatives and actions:

- Working according to evidence-based knowledge
- Coordinating services for a more holistic and effective approach
- Working across sectors and coordinating efforts

The Directorate of Education and Training leads the cooperation between the various directorates: Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, Ministry of Child Equality and Inclusion, Ministry of Health and Care Services, Ministry of Knowledge, Directorate of Labour and Welfare, Directorate for Youth and Family Affairs, Directorate of Health, Integration and Diversity Directorate, Education Directorate.

6.5.3 Activity-based duties for the school

Everyone working at the school has the duty to keep abreast of the situation at the school and to intervene if they see offenses such as bullying (https://www.udir.no/regelverkstolkninger/opplaring/Laringsmiljo/skolemiljo-udir-3-2017/6.-hva-skal-skolen-gjore-aktivitetsplikten/). School management must promote a culture based on respect and trust in order to prevent school absenteeism. The school's culture sets the framework for what is acceptable and what is not, and for how staff and students interact. Common rules and routines are important for fostering a good school culture, as well as common values, norms and perceptions of reality (Regelverkstolkningar frå Udir, 2017).

According to the protocol, the school should develop inclusive communities that promote health, well-being and learning for all (Regelverkstolkningar frå Udir, 2017). A positive relationship builds on the willingness of the adults to care for all students, i.e. to show an interest in the individual and his or her situation, to support students professionally and socially and to have expectations in terms of development. This is important for all students, especially those who are struggling at school for various reasons, such as SAP (Regelverkstolkningar frå Udir, 2017).

Good collaboration between the school and home contributes to good learning conditions for each student and a good learning environment for everyone at school. The school should

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facilitate productive dialogue, so that the parents and school can arrive at joint decisions that benefit student learning and development (Regelverkstolkningar frå Udir, 2017).

6.5.4   PALS

PALS is a school-wide model of measures aimed at developing a positive school culture that strengthens the students' academic and social skills, as well as prevents and reduces problem behaviour, included school absence. All students and staff in grades 1-10 are in the target group for the model, in which everyone is involved both in and outside of the learning situation in all school areas. PALS is the Norwegian adaptation of the School-Wide Positive Behavioural Intervention and Supports (SW-PBIS) framework. The model has been further developed and adapted to Norwegian conditions by the National Development Centre for Children and Adolescents (NUBU), which is also responsible for administering education and implementing the model in Norway (Asheim, M., Patras, J., Eng, H., & Natvig, H., 2018).

Generally speaking, the Norwegian initiatives and actions are based on preventative programmes for anti-bullying, social and emotional learning programmes (SEL) (Casel guide, 2013), as well as overall well-being.

6.6   Preventative measures

In this report, preventative measures have been described as both universal and tertiary, as an effort to prevent absenteeism on a broad scale before it begins (universal) or to prevent additional problems in an existing situation (tertiary) among students with absenteeism (Kearney, 2016). According to Kearney (2016), some general principles are needed to prevent SAP.

We believe that national or even shared Nordic definitions in Tier 1 systems would provide structure for universal preventative measures and interventions. These national or Nordic structures could be defined and monitored by guidelines categorised as three adjustments for support: awareness, social and academic (Kearney, 2016). *Awareness adjustment support* involves describing the problem with increasing knowledge and data collection in order to create national definitions. It has its clear methods for monitoring absenteeism and utilising the data, including national and municipal guidelines for carrying out low-threshold

interventions, such as school dropout prevention programmes, education programmes and collaboration with parents/peers, teachers and students on specific topics, as well as a focus on involvement and participation in general. *Social adjustment support* entails student welfare, student and teacher relationships, peer relationships, anti-bullying programmes, wider programmes for inclusion, involvement and well-being, school-based socio-emotional learning programmes to develop social skills and manage emotions, etc. *Academic adjustment support* may involve detecting learning difficulties, differentiated versus structured instruction, remedial special education support, academic assistance for students, teachers and peers, flexible attendance solutions, enhancing problem-solving skills and promoting goal-setting to prevent SAP.

Table 5 below categorises preventative actions and initiatives described earlier in the report according to tier support levels (Kearney, 2016).

Table 5. A categorisation of preventative actions and initiatives on tier support levels

Actions and initiatives	Awareness adjustment support	Social adjustment support	Academic adjustment support	Tier support level
'Home sitter' programme (Hemmasittar)		x		2
Nytorp model		x		3
School contact		x		3
National VIP theme group	x			1
Tuuve			x	3
Operation SKY	x	x	x	1
Funding for school absenteeism collaboration model	x	x	x	1
Funding for low-threshold treatment, including Back2School		x		3
Collaboration and actions aimed at SAP	x	x	x	1
Low-threshold options in municipalities	x	x	x	1
Los	x			2
0–24	x	x	x	1
School-based activities	x	x	x	1
PALS		x		1

7   Discussion

This is the first of two reports in the Erasmus+ project *Problematic School Absence – Improving Systems and Tools*. The aim of the project is to describe and improve guidelines targeting school attendance problems in primary and lower secondary education level. A common understanding of this multilateral phenomena and measures to prevent and target it are needed. Only then can we attempt to effectively address the short- and long-term academic problems and socio-emotional distress associated with this. We began by mapping and describing existing definitions and guidelines on problematic absenteeism on the school, municipal, national and transnational levels. This resulted in an overview of all efforts currently being made in the Nordic countries to prevent, help and follow up on primary and secondary education -aged students at risk of SAP.

The objectives of this first report were as follows: 1) define and interpret SAP internationally and nationally, 2) describe the educational school and support systems in the Nordic countries, 3) provide overviews of prevalence and registration rates in the Nordic countries, 4) give examples of Nordic initiatives and actions to prevent and treat SAP and 5) discuss and compare Nordic strengths and limitations in the Nordic countries in terms of SAP. Our main goal is to provide an integrated SAP framework and guidelines to define and address SAP within the Nordic countries.

7.1   How to approach SAP?

In the literature, SAP are defined as heterogeneous and caused by many factors on different levels: individual, family, school and community (Kearney, 2016).

To sum up this report, we can state that school absence is a distinct, shared and rising problem in the Nordic countries. Different countries, municipalities and schools have tried to address and overcome this problem in various ways, but there is still much work to be done. There are a number of promising, similar and strengthening practices, though also many unsolved limitations. Below, we discuss a few shared promising approaches and limitations concerning actions targeting SAP.

Strengths

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- Early SAP detection and intervention prevents a 'wait to fail' approach (i.e., structured monitoring of school attendance)

- Utilising cut-off rates of 10–20% for excused absence (as a precursor to emerging SAP)

- A stepped approach, depending on the severity of the SAP (with set timelines, school- and municipal-level action plans)

Limitations

- Absence registration that does not distinguish between excused and unexcused

- No standard guidelines or national registry of SAP

- Various approaches among the municipalities

- Insufficient familiarisation with and commitment to the chosen model

- Insufficient resources inside the school for addressing the problem

- Problems in multidisciplinary teamwork and sharing of responsibilities

Unfortunately, the above limitations are in addition to what makes school absenteeism problematic in practical terms when it comes to legislation and administration on the school, municipal and governmental levels, both nationally and across the Nordic countries.

In general, there is increasing awareness of SAP across the Nordic countries in terms of early detection and intervention as important to preventing SAP from becoming chronic and severe.

7.2 Schools and support systems

In terms of government and administration, the Nordic countries are all divided into regions or counties and each region or county is made up of several municipalities. The municipalities in all four countries are responsible for providing compulsory education, in addition to other services.

The educational systems are compulsory and free for all children and adolescents in the Nordic countries (with a few exceptions, e.g., asylum-seeking children). Compulsory education is ten years and children start school at age six (according to newly ratified

legislation in Finland, starting from 08/2021 compulsory age is 7-18 years). All of the countries have a national curriculum for compulsory education.

The Nordic support systems have in common the Education Act, the three-tiered support system (Kearney, 2016) and student welfare or educational psychological services. Norway and Sweden also have national agencies for special needs education in schools and kindergartens (Statped, SPSM).

The municipalities are not organised and funded in the same way in each of the countries, but they all receive funding from the state and through taxes. The municipalities in Norway and Sweden have considerable autonomy to decide how to organise the education in their area and how much of the budget is to be allocated to education. This means that there are differences across the municipalities within each country and across the countries. The municipalities must organise and provide the education in compliance with national policies and regulations.

In the future, how will the Nordic educational school and support systems be adapted to become more inclusive and target the heterogeneous group of students with SAP instead of being directed exclusively towards the mainstream student? That question will be addressed in the second report of this Erasmus project.

7.3 Prevalence and absence registration

National prevalence rates from the Nordic countries are inconsistent or not applicable both within and between the countries, except for Denmark. This is one of the reasons why valid statistics and research data are lacking or unreliable. Due to variations in definitions, the prevalence rates vary and are not comparable. Without these numbers, it is difficult to distinguish between the guidelines and initiatives that target SAP. Furthermore, it is almost impossible to investigate any effects, as pre- and post-data do not exist. Consequently, the prevalence rates and consequences of SAP in the Nordic countries appear to be a 'black box' in a worldwide perspective. Also, because of this, we will not know whether SAPs increase or decrease due to the Covid-19 pandemic, except by using the dropout rates from upper

secondary schools before and after the pandemic. More systematic documentation must be established and applied in order to provide evidence-based practices.

The Nordic countries address SAP by defining contributing factors and using systems to register attendance and absence. The school systems and municipalities have established guidelines for how and when to intervene in response to SAP. Despite this, we believe more could be done to prevent, detect, manage, treat and monitor the prevalence of SAP. This report reveals that the guidelines, initiatives and actions are carried out in different ways and followed up on to limited or varying degrees, both nationally and across the Nordic countries.

Table 6. Registration of absenteeism in the Nordic countries

Registration	Sweden	Finland	Denmark	Norway
Is absence registration required by law?	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
How is absence registered? What are the registration procedures?	Registered electronically by the teacher	Registered electronically by the teacher	Registered electronically by the teacher	Schools have autonomy to develop their own guidelines and procedures
Minimum requirement for registration frequency	Daily	Teachers monitor student absence on a lesson-by-lesson basis	Once daily for students in grades 0–6 Twice daily for students in grades 7–9	Teachers monitor student absence on a lesson-by-lesson basis
Is absenteeism registered in categories?	1) Unexcused 2) Excused (e.g., sick, granted leave)	1. Unexcused absence 2. Excused (e.g., sick, granted leave)	Yes 1) Unexcused 2) Illness, disability, etc. 3) Extraordinary exemption	Yes 1) Excused. a) Health-related absence. b) Granted leave 2) Unexcused absence
Who is responsible for registration?	Principal	In general: principal (Teacher reports any concerns to multidisciplinary student welfare service)	Principal	In general: principal (Teacher reports any concerns to student welfare service)

How is the registration used?	Follow-up on attendance, schools are not obligated to report absence rates on the municipal level	Follow-up on attendance, schools are not obligated to report absence rates on the municipal level	Follow-up on attendance, the school is required to report the registration to the municipality. Absence data is stored in a national database under the Ministry of Children and Education	Follow-up on attendance, schools are not obligated to report absence rates on the municipal level
When is registration performed? What time of the day?	Teachers monitor student absence on a lesson-by-lesson basis	Teachers monitor student absence on a lesson-by-lesson basis	If once (grades 0–6): In the morning. If twice (grades 7–9): In the morning and afternoon	Teachers monitor student absence on a lesson-by-lesson basis
What do schools have to do in case of absence?	Parents are contacted the same day. In case of prolonged absence, the school is required to conduct an investigation	Schools are required to follow up on their student welfare plan in terms of absence and contact the parents (there is variation between absence hours/rates among different municipalities and within schools)	Schools are required to follow up on unexcused absence, consider the need for special support, notify the municipality if a student has 15% unexcused absence (economic sanctions), report whether school absence is suspected to be an indication of the student not thriving and/or the family needing social support measures	Schools are required to follow up on their student welfare plan in terms of absence and contact the parents (there is variation between absence hours/rates in different municipalities and within schools)

One important factor for the Nordic countries in reducing SAP is to elaborate on how to ensure consistent and valid registration, as there is a clear need for this. Even with national guidelines for registering and monitoring absences, as is the case in Denmark, there is still room for improvement. This is patently evident from a recent Danish feasibility study of the Back2School programme (Lomholt et al., 2020) in which the primary outcome was based on absence data drawn from the official absence registry collected by the schools and provided by the municipality. The data revealed major flaws in absence registration, resulting in a misleading picture of some student absenteeism. For example, if a student was chronically absent, the school sometimes stopped registering his or her absence, meaning that the

student would erroneously be registered as attending regularly. The data also revealed significant differences between the absence rates reported by the municipality and by the parents.

One of the problems with school registration systems in Denmark may be that absence is often registered as whole days, without registering tardiness or early departure. If school absence is registered more frequently, e.g., by the hour, this might provide a more accurate picture of overall prevalence, as well as the individual student's situation. The other Nordic countries register absence during every lesson of the school day. In addition, it may be helpful to register attendance rather than absence, so that 'missing data' is not interpreted as not absent. Another factor for success might be if the schools and municipalities were to use the same definitions and systems for registering SAP, at least nationally, if not on a Nordic level. We also believe that SAP should be covered by law, as in Denmark, through national guidelines and a national registry. Danish guidelines, however, only specify actions in response to unexcused absence.

7.4   Prevention, initiatives and actions

The report reveals that most of the Nordic countries lack definitions and monitoring guidelines for SAP that guide Tier 1 support on the universal level. The Nordic countries do not address SAP specifically on the Tier 1 level, but more in terms of information and recommendations regarding school climate, well-being and anti-bullying in general. National or even shared Nordic definitions in Tier 1 systems could therefore be monitored by guidelines categorised based on three adjustments for support: awareness, social and academic (Kearney, 2016). Furthermore, universal screening practices should be implemented and assessed using standardised instruments in order to determine whether initiatives and actions are effective as preventative measures of SAP on the Tier 1 level (Kearney, 2016). This is of interest for the second report, in which three good examples of initiatives and actions from each Nordic country are presented and discussed based on existing evaluations.

7.5 Conclusion and future direction

Nordic collaboration in the Erasmus project is the first step towards sharing and learning from each other. Together we can address and overcome shared challenges, such as a common definition of absence, a united procedure for collecting information on prevalence by improving registration practices and evidence-based utilisation of the data from national registries. We recommend more systematic documentation, as these are the main issues that must be addressed jointly by the Nordic countries. For the future, perhaps we should focus on improving and strengthening practices on Tier levels 1 and 2 and the aftermath of Covid-19. In our opinion, the challenges are nationwide and universal across the Nordic countries. The Covid-19 pandemic has influenced schools and society tremendously – but what impact has it had on students with SAP? What are the pros and cons? How can we improve and do better in the future? What have we learned about online, distance and blended learning, flexible school days and the importance of social contact when a student is absent?

These issues and questions will be discussed further in the second report of the Erasmus project, which proposes shared guidelines, initiatives and routines to prevent, detect, manage, treat, monitor and follow-up on SAP across the Nordic countries, also from a stakeholder perspective. Our second report will present an approach for establishing a Nordic model to address SAP in primary school on the local, municipal and government levels.

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