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Educational inequality in Estonia: Where does it persist and how effectively has it been reduced?

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KEY MESSAGES

- Educational inequality has not declined significantly in Western countries in recent decades. In some countries, including Estonia, developments in recent years suggest that gaps are widening.
- Educational inequality is a wicked problem; reducing it requires systematic action and cooperation between stakeholders.
- Although Estonia has introduced measures to prevent educational inequality, it lacks a coherent strategic approach. In particular, reducing inequalities between schools requires sustained attention.

INTRODUCTION

Education is critically important for life chances.¹ People with higher levels of education are more likely to hold better-paid positions and face a lower risk of unemployment.² High-quality education also promotes good health, greater life satisfaction and civic engagement.³ Despite the substantial expansion of access to education in

recent decades, educational inequality – that is, the extent to which pupils' educational outcomes are shaped by their background characteristics (such as parental education or income) – has not significantly diminished in Western countries. In several countries, the opposite trend has been observed.⁴



Educational inequality, in turn, contributes to wider socio-economic divides. In other words, pupils from more advantaged backgrounds tend to receive a higher-quality education and subsequently earn higher incomes, while those from less advantaged backgrounds are more likely to receive a lower-quality education and earn less. Thus, the education system – traditionally viewed as a driver of social mobility,⁵ a means of attaining a stronger labour market position than one's parents – may instead reproduce and deepen existing patterns of social inequality.⁶

However, educational inequality is not limited to cases where socio-economic background or other characteristics statistically explain measurable academic outcomes. It may also be expressed in other ways. For example, inequality is evident when pupils' backgrounds influence their educational expectations and choices, or their mental well-being. This broader understanding rests on the premise that the purpose of education extends beyond academic achievement. Although in many Western countries the aims of education have narrowed somewhat in recent decades,⁷ with less emphasis on pupils' social and cultural development and greater focus on labour market relevance, few education systems explicitly define their sole objective as academic performance. Estonia, too, adopts a broader view. Under the Estonian Education Act, the objectives of education are 'to create favourable conditions for the development of the individual, the family and the Estonian nation, including ethnic minorities, as well as for economic, political and cultural life in Estonian society and for nature conservation, within the context of the global economy and global culture; to shape individuals who respect and abide by the law; and to create opportunities for everyone to engage in lifelong learning'.⁸

This suggests that a meaningful description of educational inequalities requires a broader range of indicators than those typically used in dominant studies in the field. For example, in the international PISA study, educational inequality is defined by analysing the relationship between pupils' socio-economic background and their academic performance; this approach has also been criticised, both for how PISA conceptualises social background and for the conclusions it

draws about educational inequality.⁹ In this article, we adopt a broader perspective on educational disparities, examining patterns of inequality in education and, as a related field, public health, which may both influence and be influenced by developments in education. We approach the issue from multiple angles, with particular attention to the role of family socio-economic background. What kinds of educational inequalities exist in Estonia, and does our education policy mitigate or reproduce them?

WHAT EDUCATIONAL INEQUALITIES EXIST IN ESTONIA?

Differences in learning outcomes or in patterns of (health) behaviour do not in themselves indicate educational inequality. Educational inequality exists when such differences can be explained by background factors beyond the pupil's control. For example, a recent study by the Foresight Centre¹⁰ shows that Estonian pupils' results in the mathematics final examination are associated with family socio-economic background, particularly the mother's income. Children of higher-income parents achieve better mathematics results.¹¹

The existence of educational inequalities in Estonia is also reflected in PISA data, which indicate that, compared with 2018, the influence of socio-economic background on pupils' mathematics skills has increased.¹² This is primarily due to a decline in the mathematics performance of pupils from less advantaged backgrounds. The gap in mathematics performance between pupils from weaker and stronger socio-economic backgrounds has widened by 18 PISA points (from 63 to 81 points). This constitutes a substantial change, as it corresponds roughly to half a year of learning for an average 15-year-old pupil. The pattern is further reinforced by the high share (25%) of low-performing pupils in mathematics among those from weaker socio-economic backgrounds. Over the past four years, the proportion of low performers in this group has increased by 8.5%. Among pupils from stronger socio-economic backgrounds, the share of low performers has remained stable at 6%.

Only 6% of pupils from weaker socio-economic backgrounds are top performers in mathematics,

compared with 26% among pupils from stronger backgrounds. A positive trend is that the share of top performers among pupils from weaker backgrounds has not declined in recent years. Among pupils from stronger backgrounds, however, it has fallen slightly (by 4%).¹³

The impact of social background on mathematics skills has also grown when comparing Estonian- and Russian-language schools. Notably, mathematics performance among pupils from weaker socio-economic backgrounds does not differ significantly between these school types. By contrast, pupils from stronger socio-economic backgrounds in Estonian-language schools scored 45 PISA points higher than their peers in Russian-language schools.¹⁴ The recently implemented reform to transition to Estonian as the language of instruction is expected to help reduce educational inequalities associated with the language of instruction. Public readiness for this change is evident in the marked decline in opposition to Estonian-language education among both ethnic Estonians and members of other ethnic groups.¹⁵

Fifteen-year-olds in the final year of basic school display high expectations regarding further education, future labour market prospects and social position.¹⁶ Nearly half believe they are moving towards a higher social position than their current one. However, there is a marked ambition gap associated with parental education. Pupils with at least one parent holding a higher education degree are far more likely to plan to pursue higher education than those whose parents do not (70% versus 35%). This gap in aspirations is reflected in reality: a majority (63%) of Estonia's university students have at least one parent with higher education.¹⁷ As in many other European countries, individuals with at least one parent who has higher education are overrepresented in the student population relative to their share of the wider population.¹⁸

A broad range of learning opportunities and effective participation in the contemporary labour market and society require digital competence. A recent DigiEfekt study¹⁹ shows that educational inequality in the development of digital competence – one of the general

competences defined in the national curriculum – is considerable. Digital competence depends to an unusually large extent on the class a pupil attends – that is, on the teacher and on the peers with whom the pupil learns.²⁰ (For further detail, see Article 5.4.)

From a broader perspective, educational inequality may also be observed in the association between pupils' socio-economic background and indicators of mental health, given that the aims of education extend beyond academic knowledge to include the development of skills that support further learning and successful life outcomes, including skills for maintaining mental well-being.

A recent study on schoolchildren's health behaviour²¹ highlights several concerning patterns. The most recent data (2021/2022) show that feelings of depression or sadness during the six months preceding the survey were significantly more common among young people in a poor economic situation: 36.2% of those in poorer circumstances, compared with 26.1% of those in better circumstances, reported feeling depressed or sad more than once a week in the previous six months. At the same time, around one third (30.9%) of young people in poorer economic circumstances, compared with 42.6% of those in better circumstances, reported rarely or never experiencing such feelings. A similar gap is evident in the occurrence of depressive episodes: while about two thirds (67.7%) of young people in good economic circumstances reported no episodes, the corresponding figure among those in poorer circumstances was 58.7%.²² Although Estonia has made notable progress in developing mental health services for children and young people and access to treatment has improved, provision does not meet demand. In addition to being insufficient, services remain fragmented.²³ This exacerbates inequality, as faster access to support is available through paid private services, which are more accessible to families in stronger socio-economic positions.

Several factors support mental well-being, including positive family relationships (for example, parents having time for the child and the child feeling understood) and satisfaction with school. However, these factors are influenced



by family financial circumstances.²⁴ In families facing financial hardship, relationships are rated more negatively than in families with average or good financial situations. Family conflicts are also more frequent in financially fragile households. Similarly, children growing up in economically disadvantaged families report lower levels of school satisfaction than those from families in average or good financial circumstances.

EDUCATION POLICY CAN REDUCE OR DEEPEN EDUCATIONAL INEQUALITIES

As noted above, the education system can either mitigate or exacerbate socio-economic inequality, depending on the presence and scale of educational inequalities. These, in turn, are shaped by policy choices. There is broad consensus in the research literature on which measures help reduce educational inequality and which contribute to its persistence or growth. To what extent has Estonian education policy drawn on this knowledge?

First, among measures known to reduce educational inequalities, Estonia's avoidance of early tracking deserves attention. Tracking refers to the deliberate separation of pupils into different school types or programmes with distinct learning objectives and pathways.²⁵ From the perspective of educational inequality, the problem lies in the fact that selection into tracks is closely associated with parental background: pupils from weaker socio-economic backgrounds are disproportionately directed into vocational tracks, which limits their access to higher education and, in turn, narrows their life opportunities.²⁶ The research literature consistently finds that tracking is one of the clearest drivers of educational inequality: the later pupils are separated into different tracks, the fewer disparities tend to arise. In Europe, some countries (such as Germany and Austria) begin tracking at around age ten, while others (including Finland and Spain) postpone it until after the completion of basic education.²⁷ Estonia belongs to the latter group. Since regaining independence, it has followed a comprehensive school model inspired by Finland, under which all pupils complete a common academic basic

education and choices between academic and vocational pathways are deferred until the end of basic schooling. One positive outcome of later tracking in Estonia has been identified as pupils' comparatively high average scores in civic knowledge.²⁸ Although Estonia has avoided early tracking, attention must also be paid to the risk of inequality in later stages of educational differentiation. At present, caution is warranted in relation to the ongoing school network reform. The concentration of upper secondary schools in regional centres, the reduction in available places and increasing competition may heighten the selectivity of upper secondary education. This development will likely favour pupils from stronger socio-economic backgrounds.²⁹

Second, the research literature increasingly emphasises investment in high-quality early childhood education and care as a means of reducing educational inequality. This priority appears to be recognised in Estonian policymaking. The primary function of pre-school institutions (such as kindergartens) is no longer merely to provide childcare that enables parents to participate in the labour market. Equally important is children's comprehensive development, including the foundation of social and emotional skills that support successful learning and life outcomes.³⁰ High-quality early childhood education and care is particularly important for children from weaker socio-economic backgrounds, as it can help level the starting position for later schooling.³¹ Investment at this stage is also among the most cost-effective ways to address educational inequalities, since the disadvantages that accumulate over time have not yet taken root.³²

All children in Estonia have the right to high-quality early childhood education and care, and participation rates are high (81% of children aged 1.5–3 and around 94% of those aged 4–7 attend kindergarten).³³ Nevertheless, access remains uneven. In municipalities experiencing rapid population growth, it can be difficult to secure a place, especially for children under three.³⁴ Qualification requirements are in place for kindergarten teachers (higher education and pedagogical competence), and although comprehensive data on compliance is lacking, it

is known that approximately three quarters hold a higher education degree.³⁵ Continued efforts are needed to ensure that early childhood educators are valued on a par with general education teachers, as their salaries often lag behind those of school teachers and their societal recognition is lower.³⁶ It is also important to examine whether families from different backgrounds can in practice access high-quality early childhood education and care, and to consider this evidence when allocating places and setting fees. From the perspective of reducing educational inequalities, preferential access for children from weaker socio-economic or otherwise vulnerable backgrounds may be justified. At the same time, provision must take into account the needs of parents working night shifts, weekends or late hours, ensuring that services are genuinely accessible.³⁷

Third, among approaches known to reduce educational inequality where Estonia still has room for development, preventing segregation between schools deserves particular attention. Warning signs have been evident for years. As early as 2019, PISA data showed that Estonia's level of socio-economic segregation was close to the OECD average.³⁸ A 2023 study by the Foresight Centre presents an even starker picture, showing that in Estonia, in some schools the median monthly income of pupils' families is below €1,000, while in others it exceeds €4,500. Segregation between schools contributes to educational inequalities because factors that support educational outcomes tend to cluster in some schools, while undermining factors accumulate in others. These include positive peer effects, strong parental support and cooperation with the school, and a high proportion of qualified teachers, as opposed to low peer motivation, behavioural difficulties, challenging family circumstances and a shortage of qualified teachers. Such a situation requires deliberate policy intervention. Otherwise, patterns of inequality reproduce themselves, giving rise to the so-called Matthew effect, whereby the strong – schools and pupils – grow stronger and the weak fall further behind.

To prevent the accumulation of advantage and disadvantage, targeted support for those lagging behind – both pupils and schools – must be a

central focus. This, in turn, requires a diverse set of policy instruments:

- controlled school choice,³⁹ meaning the central allocation of school places based on agreed principles of fairness, combined with counselling and meaningful options for families;⁴⁰
- recruitment systems that incentivise qualified and experienced teachers to work in more challenging schools;⁴¹
- training for teachers and school leaders that strengthens awareness of the links between pupils' socio-economic background and educational outcomes;⁴²
- funding models that allocate additional resources to schools with a higher proportion of pupils from weaker socio-economic backgrounds.⁴³

In Tallinn's selective schools, information about admission policies is not equally accessible to all families. This gives an advantage to those from stronger socio-economic backgrounds and reproduces educational inequality year after year. As a result, there is still a considerable distance to go before a genuinely regulated system of school choice is in place.⁴⁴ To date, Estonia has not systematically incentivised qualified teachers to work in more challenging schools, with the partial exception of recruitment efforts in Ida-Viru County in the context of the transition to Estonian-language instruction. While necessary, this step alone is insufficient to reduce educational inequalities. Moreover, training for school leaders and teachers does not appear to place sufficient emphasis on the relationship between socio-economic background and educational outcomes.⁴⁵ Although the school funding system takes into account the higher costs associated with educating pupils with special educational needs, the same logic has not been applied to pupils from weaker socio-economic backgrounds, even though effective teaching in such contexts similarly requires additional resources.⁴⁶ In general, while a systemic approach – including a legal framework, clearly defined roles and coordinated measures – has been developed to support pupils with special educational



needs, no comparable systemic strategy has been implemented to address socio-economic inequalities in education.⁴⁷

SUMMARY: EDUCATIONAL INEQUALITY AS A WICKED PROBLEM

Estonia has implemented measures that can be regarded as exemplary from the perspective of preventing and mitigating educational inequality. Notably, early tracking – a practice widely identified in the research literature as one of the most powerful drivers of educational inequality – has been avoided. Investment in high-quality and accessible early childhood education and care is another approach with preventive potential. Expectations are also high that the ongoing transition to Estonian-language instruction will help reduce disparities, although only time will tell whether the reform achieves this aim.

From the standpoint of educational inequality, one of the most serious concerns is the insufficient policy focus on preventing segregation between schools. Measures suitable for addressing this challenge – such as controlled school choice, targeted school funding, and targeted teacher recruitment and training that addresses educational inequality – have either not been implemented in Estonia or have not been applied systematically. As a result, family background continues to exert a strong influence on learning outcomes and career expectations, while significant differences between schools create favourable conditions for the reproduction of inequality. This situation will not resolve itself. Meaningful change requires coordinated and systematic policy action based on a clear strategy for reducing educational inequalities.

Educational inequality is often described as a wicked problem because of its inherent complexity.⁴⁸ Wicked problems require equally complex solutions. Addressing only a single strand may do more harm than good, as tackling one aspect in isolation can generate new problems elsewhere.⁴⁹ The admission policies of Tallinn's selective schools provide a clear example. Shifting to strictly proximity-based admissions is unlikely

to reduce inequality in a context of residential segregation. Families with stronger socio-economic backgrounds would continue to benefit, as they are more likely to afford housing in central districts. In such circumstances, multifaceted solutions are required, combining controlled school choice with targeted school funding and other measures outlined above. The key point to remember – with educational inequality as with other wicked problems – is that these problems are not inevitable. While it may be impossible to

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Education is critical for life chances, as it opens pathways to better employment, improved health and greater life satisfaction. In Estonia, educational inequality has deepened – pupils' educational outcomes and ability to cope with schooling are shaped to a significant extent by factors only weakly related to their individual characteristics, such as family socio-economic background or home language. The problem is complex and requires a comprehensive response that addresses its multiple dimensions.

Change must begin in the pupil's immediate environment and can be supported by municipalities and the state. Estonia currently lacks a coherent strategic approach to addressing this challenge. The article identifies several areas that require reform and outlines possible solutions.

A strong starting position. Life trajectories begin in early childhood. High-quality early education and effective parental support can lay the foundation for a successful life course. Estonia benefits from qualified kindergarten teachers and child-centred pedagogical approaches, but access to early childhood education places remains uneven. Action at the national level is needed: raising kindergarten teachers' salaries, improving working conditions and ensuring access for children from vulnerable backgrounds.

Reducing segregation between schools. Educational attainment varies markedly between neighbourhoods: some are characterised by highly educated parents, while in others average parental education levels are lower. For children, attending a local school is generally advantageous. A short journey to school not only reduces travel time but also supports friendships and a sense

of community. At the same time, segregation can be addressed through a range of targeted policy measures:

- Training and professional development should strengthen teachers' and support specialists' understanding of the fundamentals of learning and of evidence-based teaching methods. All pupils benefit when instruction builds on prior knowledge through individualisation, supports autonomous motivation, develops general competences, reconsiders assessment practices, reduces fear and excessive competition, and ensures access to support services.
- Qualified and early-career teachers should be incentivised and comprehensively supported – through competitive salaries, housing assistance and other measures – to work in disadvantaged areas and schools.
- University teams can provide targeted support to schools facing greater challenges. Change is more effective when the entire school is involved in the process. Whole-school development programmes are already implemented at Tallinn University and the University of Tartu, but state support is needed to ensure that teams from disadvantaged schools can participate.
- Finally, entry tests for the first grade should be abolished. Although Estonia has largely avoided early academic selection, or tracking, some schools in larger cities still admit pupils through entrance tests and provide additional instruction, often in a foreign language. Higher parental education levels – and the greater capacity to prepare children before school that this entails – contribute to social stratification.

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