

4.0 Introduction

Education as a ladder of social mobility

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KEY MESSAGES

- **Education is far more than just academic achievement – it also concerns how schools support young people’s personal growth and their development as members of society.** Grades are no more important than less visible outcomes such as cooperation and communication skills, values, sense of belonging and self-confidence. These shape young people’s capacity to cope with life’s changes and challenges. School is an environment in which long-term aspirations take shape, differences are recognised and problems are addressed collaboratively. Education functions as a social elevator when schools support not only the acquisition of knowledge but also personal growth and civic development. The analyses in this chapter show that differences across schools and municipalities in these broader dimensions are smaller than differences in academic outcomes. Recognising this may help reduce stress related to school choice in the first stages of education.
- **Up to the end of basic education, it is essential to uphold the comprehensive school principle across Estonia.** According to this principle, children begin their educational journey under broadly similar conditions, regardless of place of residence or family resources. Strong neighbourhood schools are central to this model. Outside major urban regions, population decline, disparities in teacher qualifications and limited educational opportunities create the need for flexible, region-based solutions – such as the governance model of ‘one municipality – one school’. The relatively similar average educational outcomes across municipalities support maintaining a comprehensive school system nationwide and provide a solid foundation for further educational pathways that increasingly focus on individual interests, shared societal challenges and the development of individual abilities.
- **Studying in an Estonian-medium school helps break the vicious cycle of segregation.** Learning together in Estonian-medium schools reduces the linguistic and socio-economic barriers created by parallel education systems, improves the Estonian language skills of pupils with other mother tongues, fosters social networks based on

shared interests rather than language, and broadens opportunities for educational and labour market success. The current transition to a unified Estonian-medium education system is the first major step and must be followed by genuine joint learning among children with different mother tongues. Although this has raised questions, doubts and at times open resistance among both Estonian- and Russian-speaking families, it is necessary to interrupt the intergenerational transmission of segregation. The rapid decline in pupil numbers due to falling birth rates makes the development of each young person's potential – regardless of place of residence or mother tongue – even more important for the future of Estonia's schools.

POINTS OF DEPARTURE

Education is one of the most important determinants of life chances – a social elevator – and schools are the primary arena in which society creates opportunities but may also reproduce or deepen inequalities. School is not only a place for transmitting knowledge; it is also a space for personal growth and social integration, shaping young people's futures in a broad sense, from values and career choices to lifestyle decisions affecting health. In Estonia, as in many other countries, the education system seeks to provide equal opportunities for all children, regardless of their parents' socio-economic status, cultural background, language, place of residence or other factors. This ideal rests on the assumption that education can act as an equalising force enabling every child to realise their potential irrespective of circumstances beyond their control.

Educational pathways include several turning points, and this chapter focuses on two of them. The first is the transition from basic school to upper secondary education, where interest-based choice becomes more important and proximity to home becomes less decisive. Tiit Tammaru, Kadi Kalm, David Leonard Knapp, Anneli Kährik and Kadri Leetmaa examine the relationship between education and integration by analysing where graduates of Estonian- and Russian-medium basic schools and upper secondary schools in Tallinn choose to live in adulthood. Margus Pedaste, Triin Lauri, Kadi Kalm, Äli Leijen, Anto Aasa and Tiit Tammaru discuss the future of the basic-school network, focusing on changes in the number of children living outside major urban regions and their school choices. The second turning point

concerns the length of educational pathways – how far young people progress in education. Taavi Tillmann, Mall Leinsalu and Rainer Reile analyse the links between educational attainment, lifestyle choices, and health and life expectancy, proposing concrete measures to reduce health inequalities between people with different levels of education. Mare Ainsaar and Andu Rämmer examine the impact of educational attainment on value orientations, analysing themes such as appreciation of nature, solidarity, security and innovation, and their development over time.

ACADEMIC OUTCOMES ALONE ARE NOT SUFFICIENT FOR EVALUATING SCHOOLS

In Estonia, as in many other countries, the quality of education is assessed primarily through academic outcomes – examination results, performance in standardised tests and rankings in international comparisons such as PISA. This is understandable, as the development of knowledge and skills is a central aim of education and academic results provide policymakers and parents with a clear point of reference. However, schools also fulfil two additional roles that are less visible but equally important: fostering independent and responsible individuals who value their communities, and functioning as a social elevator that broadens young people's opportunities regardless of place of residence or background.

School is an environment in which key experiences of collective life take shape – pupils learn to interact with different people, resolve conflicts,

cooperate and develop value orientations. Up to the end of basic education, the presence of a strong neighbourhood school is particularly important for ensuring equal opportunities. It enables children to begin and complete their educational journey under broadly similar conditions, irrespective of their family's distance from urban centres or economic situation, thereby reinforcing education's equalising role. The values, experiences and friendships formed at school influence the entire life course. This social and value-based dimension is essential both for personal growth and for integration into society. A key turning point in the educational pathway occurs at the transition from basic school to upper secondary education, when interest-based considerations and curriculum suitability become more important and proximity to home becomes less decisive.

The positive impact of education on life chances increases significantly with the length of the educational pathway. Equally important are outcomes that are not directly captured by tests – communication and cooperation skills, value orientations, sense of belonging and self-confidence – in other words, personal growth and the development of a full member of society. A long and continuous educational trajectory strengthens an individual's position in the labour market, helps break the intergenerational transmission of inequality, and enhances the capacity to cope with inevitable changes and challenges over the life course. Educational attainment is also associated with longer and healthier lives, as more educated individuals tend to make more informed choices that support health, well-being and active participation in society.

THE COMPREHENSIVE SCHOOL PRINCIPLE SHOULD BE UPHELD UNTIL THE END OF BASIC EDUCATION

For the education system to fulfil its equalising role and provide children with genuinely equal opportunities, the basic-school network must be consistently strong and accessible across the country. Its sustainability is affected by

regional demographic change. People, jobs and educational institutions are increasingly concentrated in Tallinn and its surrounding areas, while the number of children is declining outside major urban regions. This places pressure on smaller schools and often forces families to choose between relocating to a city or sending their children to an urban school. Population projections indicate that by 2050 the number of basic-school-age children outside major urban regions will decline substantially, raising concerns about the long-term sustainability of the current school network.

Despite population decline, most children living outside major urban regions attend their neighbourhood school where one exists. At the same time, the presence of a neighbourhood school does not eliminate school-choice-driven mobility to urban schools. Parents' decisions between a local and a city school are shaped primarily by teacher qualifications, school reputation and family socio-economic background. The higher the qualifications of teachers in the neighbourhood school, the lower the likelihood that a child will move to an urban school. Conversely, higher parental socio-economic status – both at the level of the individual family and the wider school community – increases the likelihood of such mobility.

Although differences between schools are more pronounced in larger cities, such as Tallinn and Tartu, average educational outcomes across municipalities – both academic results and broader measures of personal growth and civic development – vary only slightly. High-quality education can be obtained in towns and rural municipalities across Estonia. One way to uphold a strong comprehensive school principle nationwide until the end of basic education would therefore be to apply the governance model of 'one municipality – one school' in municipalities outside major urban regions. This would help reduce disparities within municipalities while allowing schooling to continue across multiple sites within a single municipality. It could also ease tensions associated with restructuring the school network.



UNIFIED ESTONIAN-LANGUAGE EDUCATION SUPPORTS INTEGRATION

For many years, the Estonian education system has operated parallel educational tracks, with a large share of Russian-speaking children attending Russian-language kindergartens and schools. This has limited everyday exposure to the Estonian language and culture and reduced opportunities to form early connections with Estonian-speaking peers. As a result, successive cohorts of predominantly Russian-speaking young people have grown up in a linguistically and socially separate environment, which has constrained their opportunities in the Estonian labour market and increased the likelihood that they envisage their future outside Estonia. This is not only a linguistic issue. The parallel education system is often intertwined with socio-economic differences, as residence in predominantly Russian-speaking neighbourhoods, lower incomes and more limited employment opportunities reproduce these patterns across generations.

Studying in Estonian-medium schools helps break this cycle. Russian-speaking young people who study in Estonian acquire stronger language skills, form more friendships with Estonian-speaking peers, are more likely to attain higher education, perform better in the labour market and, in adulthood, are more likely to live in neighbourhoods shared with Estonian-speakers. This reduces the intergenerational transmission of inequality. By contrast, young people educated in Russian-language schools face greater difficulty in moving beyond these patterns.

The current transition to a unified Estonian-language education system is therefore an important step that broadens social mobility opportunities for all young people, regardless of nationality or mother tongue, and supports integration. However, changing the language of instruction alone is not sufficient. The next challenge is to promote meaningful joint learning among children with different mother tongues in ways that encourage genuine interaction and cooperation. This is complex, as integration depends on the willingness and engagement of all parties. Former Russian-language schools have,

on average, had weaker academic outcomes, and some Estonian families are reluctant to enrol their children in these schools. Demand remains higher for schools that have previously provided instruction in Estonian. Consequently, some Estonian parents perceive that the burden of integration falls disproportionately on their children. If joint learning is introduced without careful preparation, it may deepen resistance. Progress will depend both on narrowing performance gaps between schools and on reducing residential segregation, which would help distribute Russian-speaking young people more evenly across neighbourhoods and schools.

HOW DO WE MOVE FORWARD?

Education functions as a social elevator for as many young people as possible when, alongside imparting knowledge, it supports personal growth and integration into society, provides genuinely equal opportunities at least until the end of basic education across Estonia, and encourages young people to continue their studies for as long as possible.

First, school is more than a provider of good education – it shapes values, social relationships and worldviews. For decades, Estonia has operated parallel educational tracks, with Estonian- and Russian-language schools functioning separately. Studying in an Estonian-medium school helps break this cycle by strengthening language skills, broadening social networks and expanding life opportunities.

Second, it is essential to uphold the comprehensive school principle across Estonia at least until the end of basic education. This requires a well-qualified teaching workforce and flexible solutions that also ensure high-quality education outside major cities. Greater cooperation between small schools in less populated areas and improved governance models can support coherence.

Third, a longer educational pathway benefits both individuals and society – people with higher levels of education are healthier, live longer and make more informed choices.