Estonian Human Development Report 2026

EDUCATION REFLECTED IN SOCIETY

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KEY MESSAGES

Education is the foundation of Estonia's strength, but deepening inequality is eroding it. The most important question facing Estonian education is not whether to focus on fostering excellence or supporting those who fall behind. The question is whether we can build an education system that does both: one that allows talented learners to thrive without leaving anyone behind. No area of government is untouched by educational inequality. Children who are overlooked do not remain invisible – they reappear on hospital waiting lists, in police statistics, in cases of domestic violence and in social assistance registers.

Smart education must support smart development across Estonia. Estonian education is internationally recognised, but our real challenge is not topping the rankings. More important than international comparisons is ensuring that education drives development across Estonia, not just in a few major urban areas. Although Estonia performs well on educational indicators, this success has not translated into comparable improvements in public health or economic development.

We know a great deal; now we need the courage to take responsibility and act. Education is one of the most extensively researched and evidence-based fields in Estonia – we have more knowledge, data and analysis than we can fully process. Responsibility, however, is dispersed among different actors and is too often subordinated to day-to-day politics, turning research into a substitute for action rather than a catalyst for it. We know the problems exist; what we need are decisions that turn knowledge into action.

As a digital state, Estonia is not using its full potential in education. The country's digital-state data infrastructure is world-class, but data is not used effectively enough to identify problems early and respond in time. Data protection barriers and limited data literacy prevent the full potential of the digital state from being realised in education. We have built our data protection walls so high that we have forgotten whom we are actually protecting and from what.

Estonian education needs a healthy subtraction exercise. We have become accustomed to asking what more schools should do, but the more important question now is what schools should no longer be expected to do. Every new responsibility added to education comes at the expense of something we have not had the courage to remove. Relationships are the new currency of education, and building them requires giving teachers time – from kindergarten to university.

1. Education at a turning point

The will to pursue education remains strong, but inequalities are deepening

Problem: Estonia's strong commitment to education has helped the country develop even in difficult times, but we have reached a point where educational inequalities are deepening among both pupils and adults. When the will to pursue education fades during the school years, this loss of motivation continues to shape educational inequality in adulthood, including whether employees participate in continuing education.

Fact in focus: Pupils with at least one university-educated parent are far more likely to plan to pursue higher education than those whose parents do not have higher education (70% versus 35%). The most active participants in adult education are women with higher education, while those who would benefit most are men with lower levels of education, reduced work capacity and those in older age groups.

Cause: The education system is overburdened with responsibilities it cannot fulfil. Without bold prioritisation, the system risks buckling under the pressure.

Solution: Education needs a healthy subtraction exercise: before adding new responsibilities, we must decide what to remove. Teachers need time to build meaningful relationships with learners – from kindergarten to university.

2. Data literacy in education

Estonia is not using the full potential of its digital state in education

Problem: Strong PISA results mask underlying problems, and Estonia's digital capabilities remain underused in education. We do not know the full extent of educational inequality because existing data systems are not sufficiently integrated.

Fact in focus: In Tallinn, the mother's income explains 50% of the variation in mathematics examination results, compared with only 15% elsewhere in Estonia. Within just a few kilometres of each other in Tallinn, one school may have an average national examination score of 20 points out of 100, while another scores close to the maximum.

Cause: Data protection barriers and limited data literacy hinder the early identification of problems.

Solution: The systematic use of registry data must become the foundation of smart education policy, both for monitoring education and planning improvements.

Following Iceland's example, Estonia should develop a child and youth well-being dashboard that enables early identification of problems and timely intervention, including at the municipal level. In the long run, data-informed prevention is considerably less costly than intervening after problems have developed.

3. Education as a means of generating income

Education brings social standing in Estonia, but its economic returns are modest

Problem: An additional year of education brings a smaller wage increase in Estonia than it does in many other countries.

Fact in focus: Each additional year of education increases wages by only 6% in Estonia, compared with a typical 8–10% internationally.

Cause: A systemic lack of demand for high-level skills in the labour market creates a vicious cycle.

Solution: Businesses must move towards more complex, higher-value work that requires advanced qualifications.

4. Education as a ladder of social mobility

Schools shape both opportunities and inequalities

Problem: Schools can create opportunities, but they can also deepen inequality. Educational attainment is becoming an increasingly important determinant of how long people live and how many of those years they spend in good health.

Fact in focus: Attending an Estonian-medium school doubles the likelihood that a young person whose first language is Russian will live in a predominantly Estonian-speaking neighbourhood as an adult. In Estonia, people with basic education have a life expectancy 11 years shorter, on average, than those with higher education.

Cause: A vicious cycle of segregation has emerged. Wealthier families can afford to send their children to better schools outside their local area, while for others, the quality of education often depends on where they live. These differences can lock young people into a social position that persists into adulthood.

Solution: Completing the ongoing national transition to Estonian-language education will help break the cycle of segregation. Outside larger cities, the principle of "one municipality, one school" should be adopted to ensure that everyone has access to a strong local school. A longer educational pathway benefits both individuals and society – people with higher levels of education live longer and make more informed choices.

5. Software updated – but what about learning?

Technological change must be accompanied by a reassessment of teaching and learning

Problem: Artificial intelligence may deepen educational inequalities because it primarily benefits learners who already have strong self-regulated learning skills.

Fact in focus: AI is not a cure-all. Alongside its opportunities, we must also recognise the risks, such as widening educational inequality and declining learning skills.

Cause: The current focus is on what technology can do rather than what learners actually need. Dependence on a handful of major technology companies also poses a serious long-term risk.

Solution: Strict requirements must be established for digital learning services used in general education. AI-based solutions should focus on helping pupils overcome their individual learning obstacles rather than simply providing answers.

6. Sustainability through the lens of education

Higher educational attainment does not automatically lead to more sustainable behaviour

Problem: Estonians generally have strongly favourable attitudes towards sustainability, but Estonia ranks last among the Nordic and Baltic countries in sustainable behaviour.

Fact in focus: People with higher levels of education may actually place a greater burden on the environment, as higher incomes often come with larger ecological footprints. Pupils are well informed about sustainability issues, but their participation in sustainable activities remains limited.

Cause: Knowledge does not automatically translate into behavioural change. Societal values, institutional arrangements and opportunities to act often matter more than education alone.

Solution: As values and opportunities to act are crucial, the state and local authorities must create conditions that make environmentally responsible choices easy and realistic, as educational institutions cannot establish sustainable practices on their own.

7. Education as the foundation of a safe society

Extracurricular education is an investment in public safety

Problem: Young people are at greater risk of offending when they perceive their school environment as disorganised, feel weakly connected to their school or have limited access to extracurricular activities. Yet extracurricular education often fails to reach those who need it most.

Fact in focus: On school days, 46% of offences committed by teenagers occur between 14:00 and 20:00 – precisely when parents are at work. Only a quarter of 16–19-year-olds participate in extracurricular education.

Cause: Double exclusion: children with special educational needs and those from low-income families tend to be excluded from both school life and extracurricular education. Young people who reach the age of 15 without offending are more likely to remain law-abiding as adults.

Solution: Access to extracurricular education must be improved, particularly for 16–19-year-olds and young people from less affluent families. Effective prevention requires interventions to be designed around when risks arise, whom they affect and the forms of risk behaviour being targeted.

Estonian education 2050

Estonia needs to find the right pace and direction for education

Problem: Estonian pupils report low enjoyment of learning.

Fact in focus: Estonia is among the countries in PISA that combine above-average mathematics performance with a below-average sense of belonging at school.

Cause: A weak sense of belonging at school may contribute to pupils' low enjoyment of learning and, in the longer term, undermine the vitality of the education system and societal development.

Solution: We must keep pace with change without exhausting ourselves. This includes making smart choices about what to stop doing. The continued vitality of Estonian education will depend on how we navigate the educational landscape – advancing with the elk's steady stride, charging ahead in a wild boar's rampage, moving cautiously with the fox's stealth or making agile adjustments with the hare's zigzag.