

English summary

“Knowledge promotion reform – from word to deed” is a government programme aiming at strengthening the school sector’s ability to improve schools in line with the goals of the Knowledge Promotion Reform. The main instrument in the programme is to support school improvement projects that are based on a tripartite cooperation between schools, school owners and external competence. The programme has had a budget of 195 million NOK for the period 2005–2009, of which 125 million NOK has been awarded as direct project support.

The main research questions in the evaluation have been to what degree and under what circumstances tripartite cooperation strengthens the ability of schools to improve their work and create a better learning environment for the pupils. As the tripartite cooperation is a main element in the programme, these questions also address the questions whether the programme has achieved its aims of improving schools and their learning environments.

The programme represents a direct involvement in local improvement processes which is a new element of Norwegian educational policy in this decade. It can be seen as a predecessor of the shift in education policy signalled in the government White Paper nr. 31 (2007–2008) about quality in school. The paper signals more support and guidance from the national level to local school owners.

High demands and expectations and good support and guidance are two key dimensions in realising national school policy on a local level (Hopkins 2007). On a general level, one might be supportive of the idea of a program to support local improvement processes. Whether the premise of tripartite cooperation is a good idea and whether it works in practice is however something that needs to be examined empirically. Case studies of a few chosen projects and survey material is the main empirical basis for the evaluation.

A main finding is that the support of external competence persons and units only to a modest degree has influenced teaching and the work that is done in the classroom. The tripartite cooperation thus often does not influence the most important element in the learning environment: teaching. In most cases, the support has not been very close, judging by the frequency of contact between teachers and the competence persons and units. In most cases, we therefore see few examples of changes in teaching practice.

On the other hand, we find that most case schools have strengthened their improvement capacity, in other words that they have increased their ability to work with school

improvement. Among other things, schools have increased their ability to assess their own practices systematically, including using an analytical tool called “Ståstedsanalysen” within the programme. However, schools that had a weak improvement capacity to begin with, have often not succeeded in becoming “self sufficient” during the three-year project period. It is not likely that these schools and school owners will manage to continue and run a successful improvement process on their own without further external support. Schools with a better improvement capacity to begin with have on the other hand managed to improve substantially, even with infrequent support from the external competence units.

One might question the value of a strengthened improvement capacity if it cannot be utilised in improving teaching. We do not have a solid basis to make a firm conclusion on what types of efforts are required from the external competence units to move forward to improving teaching practices. The evaluation suggests however that a critical factor may be that the efforts are “goal situated”, that is that the activities take place as close as possible in time and space to the classroom and the teaching situation. The programme could initially have made stricter requirements to focus attention on teaching. Many projects would probably have gained on working with improvement of *both* teaching and the schools’ improvement capacity, not considering these as two separate phases where one must precede the other.

We cannot avoid pointing out that the case and survey findings provide different, sometimes opposing, views. The surveys give a more positive impression of the effects of the projects on improving teaching than the case studies do. Are we as researchers more critical in our judgments than what teachers and head masters are? We don’t believe the explanation lies in our cases being atypical. Rather we think teachers and head masters often feel they themselves have learned something from taking part in the project. It would not be uncommon to report changes in teaching practices in a survey, even when changes are small, if the general attitude towards the project is positive. In the cases, however, it has been clear that the “project room” often has been far from the class room, and that teaching practices have remained largely unchanged. An additional methodological point is that many teachers have not responded to the survey, with the risk that the teacher data are not representative.

The evaluation does not provide evidence to reject the idea of a tripartite cooperation between schools, school owners and external competence as a model for school improvement processes. The external competence unit and the school owner can provide important demand and support functions in such processes. However, the evaluation shows that certain factors are crucial if such a model shall succeed in increasing improvement capacity and provide a better learning environment. These factors are well established in the school improvement literature. One of the crucial factors are teachers’ confidence in the external competence units. This is to some degree related to the ability of the competence unit and the project leadership to adapt to the

school and its past. Knowledge of improvement processes, leadership through various phases of development and good communication that encourages participation in the processes are other important factors.

Even if we do not reject the idea of a tripartite cooperation, it is questionable whether it should be necessary to require support of external competence units to obtain grants from the programme. We believe that external support from competence units can be appropriate and necessary in many cases, but not all. At least equally important is it to mobilize the internal forces that are involved in the daily teaching at the schools: school leaders, teachers and pupils. In the evaluation, we have interviewed pupils at the case schools. The pupils appear little involved in the projects, and they can see few changes in teaching as a result of the projects. We believe that a stronger internal cooperation on the schools that involve school leaders, teachers *and* the pupils might sharpen the focus on teaching and pupils' learning.

The evaluation does not have a design or a time scale that makes it possible to fully map the dissemination effects and the effects of the programme on the school sector at large. Transferring good practices from project schools to other schools requires a conscious approach on the receiving end to what prerequisites both schools have for change. It is not a simple task to transfer good practices successfully to other schools and school owners. The evaluation shows that good methods, ideas and practices from the projects are often transferred to other schools which have the same school owner as the project school(s), but that further dissemination of good practices from individual projects takes place more randomly and mainly by the external competence units. However, at the central level, the programme secretariat has done much to make tools, methods and experiences within the programme available to schools and school owners outside the programme. The tool "Ståstedsanalysen" has become a tool for school improvement which reaches many schools outside the program. Also other forms of dissemination, such as "Artikkelstafetten" (detailed description of each project experiences available on a net site), has a potential of providing valuable input and inspiration to school improvement processes. So far, the overall measurable dissemination effects of the programme are moderate.

The programme seems to have improved the external competence units' ability to aid schools and school owners in school improvement processes. Most of these units, albeit not all, believe they will continue with such work in the future. That strengthens the possibility for future positive long term effects of the programme.

The programme also seems to have contributed to further national policy development through the new program for guidance ("Veilederkorpset") that is mentioned in White Paper no 31 (2007–2008) and which is introduced as a pilot project in two counties from 2009–2010. This program draws upon experiences made within the programme with guidance as a method for improving schools as organisations.