



Inclusive education: A suitable learning place for every Dutch child

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Introduction

As of 1st August 2014 Dutch schools will have a duty to care. This means that schools have the responsibility to provide a suitable learning place to every child. Mainstream and special needs schools must co-operate in regional alliances to offer children such a learning place at one of the mainstream schools, if needed with extra support in the class room, or at a school for children with special needs. This factsheet describes the Dutch government's plans up to February 2013.

Current situation

1. The Dutch educational system

Primary education

Primary education in the Netherlands encompasses mainstream primary schools and primary schools for children with special needs. Primary education is intended for all children aged four to approximately twelve years.

Secondary education

Mainstream and special needs schools in the Netherlands offer secondary education. There are four types of secondary education that prepare for either work and further vocational training or further higher education (e.g. university). Entrance is based on a national test in the final year of primary school.

Secondary education encompasses schools providing:

- Practical Training (PRO; age 12-18).
- Pre-vocational secondary education (VMBO; 4 years, age 12-16).
- Senior general secondary education (HAVO; 5 years; age 12-17).
- Pre-university education (VWO; 6 years, age 12-18).

All four types of secondary education are for children aged twelve and over.

Secondary vocational education and higher education

Students who have successfully completed pre-vocational secondary education can enrol in secondary vocational education (MBO; 1-4 years). This type of education prepares students for a wide range of occupations, from franchise manager to mechanic or nursing assistant.

Students who obtained a HAVO or MBO level 4 (highest level) diploma can enrol in higher professional education to do a non-academic bachelor course (4 years) at a university of applied sciences (HBO), sometimes followed by a non-academic master course. Students with a VWO diploma or non-academic bachelor degree may go to a university to do an academic bachelor (3 years) and/or master (often one to two years) course.

Important characteristics of the system

According to Dutch law children must go to school from the age of five years old, but most children start school when they are four years of age. Young people must attend school until the age of eighteen or until they have obtained a basic qualification (a HAVO, VWO or MBO level 2 diploma).

In the Netherlands there is freedom of education, i.e. the freedom to found schools, to organise the teaching in schools and to determine the principles on which they are based. This is described in article 23 of the Dutch constitution. Partly because of this the Dutch educational system consists of state schools and denominational schools. State schools are run by the government. They do not work on the basis of a denomination or philosophy of life and are accessible for all children and teachers. Denominational schools are founded by individuals or private organisations. Often these schools are run as an association, of which parents can become members, or as a foundation. Denominational schools are allowed to refuse students and teachers on grounds of principle. Both public authority schools and denominational schools are free to organise their education according to certain pedagogical principles, such as Dalton or Montessori. The Ministry of Education, Culture and Science finances all types of schools.

2. The Dutch educational support system

Currently, students that need extra educational support may receive relatively minor support in mainstream schools or more substantial support in services designed for children with special needs.

Mainstream education

Students who need relatively minor support can attend mainstream education with the aid of so-called 'student specific funding'. Mainstream schools use this funding to provide teachers and students with extra support or to buy extra teaching aids. Schools should spend the funding on education, not care. Students up to fourteen years of age may also attend special schools for primary education in case they experience learning difficulties or difficulties in their upbringing or in case they need more support and attention in general. These schools have smaller classes and more experts. Students are given more time to master the same knowledge and skills as their peers at other mainstream primary schools.

All mainstream primary schools and the aforementioned special primary schools collaborate in approximately 240 alliances to organise the support for students. And all mainstream secondary schools and secondary schools that provide certain types of practically-oriented education collaborate in alliances too, 83 in total. Every alliance has a 'permanent committee for care for students' that advises parents and the school about the support for students. In addition the committee assesses whether a student that needs more substantial support can be admitted to a special primary school or a practically-oriented secondary school. The committee is bound to national assessment standards.

Special needs education

There are four clusters of special needs (primary and secondary) education for students that can not receive the support they need in mainstream education:

- Cluster 1: for students who are visually handicapped.
- Cluster 2: for students with a hearing loss and students with severe speech and language disorders.
- Cluster 3: for students who are physically or mentally handicapped and students with chronic illnesses.
- Cluster 4: for students with a psychiatric or conduct disorder.

The special needs schools, except the schools in cluster 1, cooperate in 34 regional expertise centres. Each expertise centre has a committee that assesses whether students can be admitted to special needs education. When students are admitted they also have the possibility to attend a mainstream school with the aid of student specific funding. In the current educational support system parents are responsible for finding a suitable school for their children, including going through assessment procedures.

Relevant legislation

Three laws in the Netherlands regulate the educational support for children in primary and secondary education. These laws are:

1. The Primary Education Act: regulates educational support in mainstream primary education (including special schools for primary education).
2. The Secondary Education Act: regulates educational support in mainstream secondary education (including certain types of practically-oriented secondary education).
3. The Expertise Centres Act: regulates special needs primary and secondary education.

Problems regarding the current educational support system

According to the Dutch government and sector organisations the current educational support system is too complex and faces several problems:

1. *Fragmentation within the system.*
There are separate procedures for students with minor and more substantial difficulties. Parents themselves have to find a suitable school for their children which is complicated.
2. *Complexity and bureaucracy.*
At the moment there are five to fourteen alliances of schools in every municipality. Every alliance has its own assessment system. Parents go through different procedures if their child needs minor support first and substantial support after that. The assessment procedures take up a lot of time and effort of both schools and parents.
3. *Increased use of support.*
In the last decade the amount of children in special needs education and children with student specific funding in mainstream education increased enormously. One of the reasons may be that in the current system primary schools and students do not benefit from choosing the cheapest option.
4. *Lack of integral organisation of support and care for youth.*
Although teachers, care coordinators and social workers cooperate increasingly the educational support and the care and support for youth in general are still organised separately. This means that services are adjusted to one another insufficiently.
5. *Insufficient quality and experience.*
Education offered at about 25% of the special needs schools does not meet the Education Inspectorate's quality standards. Many teachers in mainstream education experience difficulties in supervising students with specific educational needs and in adapting their teaching to the different needs in their classrooms.

Desired situation

According to the Dutch government every student should receive proper education, i.e. have a suitable learning place, including children who need extra support. The government's objective is to allow as many children as possible to go to a mainstream school, which is regarded as the best preparation for continuation schooling. Education at special needs schools should remain available for those children that really need it.

The government aims to have shorter and more coherent assessment procedures for minor and more substantial educational support. Waiting lists should disappear and the administrative burden must be reduced to the minimum. The expenditure should be more transparent and manageable. Also it should be less appealing to mainstream schools to refer students to heavier educational support services, like special needs schools. Educational support services and the support itself should be better adjusted to the labour market and child welfare services and their support. And teachers should be prepared for supervising students with specific educational needs.

Therefore the government will revise the system. This factsheet describes the government's plans so far.

Duty to care

On 9th October 2012 the Dutch Senate adopted the Act on Inclusive Education¹. The law comes into effect on 1st August 2014. From then onwards schools have a duty to care. This means that schools will have the responsibility to provide a suitable learning place to every child. Mainstream and special needs schools must co-operate in regional alliances to offer children a learning place at one of the mainstream schools, if needed with extra support in the class room, or at a school for children with special needs. The schools should closely involve parents in this matter.

In practice this implies that if parents sign up their child for a school, the school's board of governors concerned must offer a suitable learning place at its school or at another school for mainstream or special needs education within the regional alliance. The board must also offer extra educational support at school if needed. The removal of students' educational limitations should be the starting point instead of diagnosed disorders. The government will abolish the national assessment standards in order to give school governors more freedom. It will not be necessary anymore to diagnose disorders by child welfare services in order to get funding for extra educational support or a learning place at a special needs school. Schools will compose a so-called educational support profile in which they outline the educational support that they can offer to students. Teachers will be trained to supervise students with different educational needs.

Collaboration between schools

The former alliances will cease to exist. Mainstream schools and special needs schools in cluster 3 and 4 will collaborate in 76 new regional alliances in primary education and 74 new regional alliances in secondary education. These alliances will receive their own budgets for educational support which will make them responsible for offering and bearing the costs of both minor and more substantial educational support. After a period of transition the funding will be divided among the alliances in proportion to the amount of students. The total amount of learning places in special needs education will remain 70.000, but there may be regional shifts.

Regional alliances will draw up a support plan that outlines the level of educational support that the alliance offers, its coherent offer of support services, its funding distribution, its procedure to refer students to special needs education and the way the alliance informs parents. Both parents and teachers can join the 'support plan board' in which they will have influence on the alliance's policy and division of budgets.

The government expects that educational support offered by regional alliances will be more made-to-measure. Regional collaboration between schools is also expected to lead to better cooperation, expertise exchange and adjustment between alliances and municipalities.

¹ The Dutch term is *passend onderwijs* which literally means 'suitable education'. However in Europe the term inclusive education is more common and therefore this term is used in this factsheet.

Related changes

The development of inclusive education does not stand alone, but is connected to policy, budget cuts and decentralisation measures in the fields of long term care, employment and child welfare. For more information on the latter please read the factsheet [The decentralisation and transformation of the Dutch youth care system](#) that the Netherlands Youth Institute published in 2012.

Timeline

The Dutch Ministry of Education, Culture and Science is responsible for providing the overall framework. Relevant sector organisations are responsible for supporting the implementation of inclusive education.

The new Act on Inclusive Education comes into effect on 1st August 2014. The table below shows the time schedule of the implementation of this new law.

<i>School year</i>	<i>Stage</i>
2012/2013	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Alliances draw up a draft support plan, form a support plan board and prepare having a corporate body.
2013/2014	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Alliances have a corporate body.• Alliances discuss their concept support plans with the municipalities involved.• Support plan boards discuss the concept support plans.• Alliances send their final support plans to the Education Inspectorate.
2014/2015	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• The new Act on Inclusive Education comes into effect:<ul style="list-style-type: none">○ Start of duty to care and end of national assessment standards.○ Alliances are responsible for executing their new tasks.• Special needs schools receive the funding for no-residential support.• Alliances receive the funding for minor support, a part of the student specific funding and the funding for regional expertise centres.
2015/2016	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• The new system for dividing the funding starts.• Government reallocates the funding among the alliances in proportion to the amount of students.
2020/2021	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Reallocating the funding has been finished.

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