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## REASONS FOR DROPPING-OUT

what 379 young people say about dropping-out  
of upper secondary school

Publication from Theme Group Youth in Working Life 2013:2

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EUROPEAN UNION  
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# Theme Group Youth in Working Life

Theme Group Youth, shall act to ensure that experiences and knowledge are utilised from projects that have financing from the European Social Fund. Theme Group Youth cooperates with the Swedish Employment Agency, Communicare, The Swedish Social Insurance Agency, the National Agency for Education, the National Board of Health and Welfare, the Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions and also the Swedish National Board for Youth Affairs.

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# Foreword

At the time of this writing, there is, with financing from the European Social Fund, approximately 130 ongoing youth projects. . In most cases, young people who have not completed their upper secondary education. To get a better picture of why young people have not completed their studies, Theme Group Youth, has submitted questions to young people in all the on-going projects. This report is based on the responses to these questions and the main purpose is to provide young people's view of dropping out of upper secondary school. We have also visited projects where we have interviewed young people about their experiences and opinions regarding upper secondary school. Our ambition is to convey a picture of why they have stopped their studies and their suggestions for how upper secondary school education can be structured so that an increasing number of young people can complete their education and get their diplomas.

Theme Group Youth would especially like to thank all project managers and supervisors in the projects that have assisted with this data collection. We would also like to thank Lidija Kolouh in Theme Group Youth, who has written the report, Peter Pedersen who assisted with the data collection, and Susanne Zander for valuable viewpoints.

And thanks to all the young people and personnel in the project who have shared their knowledge and experiences.

Inger Ashing  
Chair of Theme Group Youth





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# 1. Summary

In this report, 379 young people who have not completed their upper secondary education share their experiences. We have asked questions and they have responded about the causes for dropping-out, what could have stopped them from dropping-out, and their vision of the perfect upper secondary school. The responses are from young people who participate in projects that are financed through the European Social Fund (ESF) and who have not completed their upper secondary education.

## 1.1 Bullying the foremost reason

For more than half of them, bullying is the foremost reason for dropping-out. For many, bullying started as early as their later compulsory school years. School personnel and other adults working closely with the young people have been criticized because they do nothing despite the fact that they are aware of what is going on.

The second most common reason is that they, due to a lack of pedagogical support in school, have not been able to achieve the knowledge goals, which for many have contributed to anxiety, stress, and ultimately, very low confidence in their own abilities, high levels of absences and dropping-out.

During those years when a person is forming his or her identity and gaining independence from parents, the relationship with peers is important. Exclusion, harassment and bullying lead to depression and psychological problems. Research shows that there is a clear association between learning difficulties in school and psychological problems. In other words, it is hard to concentrate and learn something new when you feel bad, and that when you cannot perform in school and do not get help and support this can lead to psychological problems.

## 1.2 Ten reasons for dropping-out

After analysing the young people's responses we can clearly see that there are mental health issues within the group. Many describe how depressed they are, that they have a general malaise, feel unmotivated and have no energy, or are just "tired of school".

The reasons for dropping-out of secondary school that have come to light from the information given by young people in descending order:

1. Bullying, social exclusion
2. Lack of pedagogical support in the school
3. Adults who don't care
4. Poor treatment at school
5. Insufficient pedagogical support in school after a long absence (due to illness or addiction)
6. The need for more practical work and less theoretical work
7. Noisy, rowdy school environment
8. Wrong choice of study programme
9. Neuro-psychiatric disabilities that are not discovered during the education
10. Poor home conditions

Bullying from peers is the primary reason for dropping-out, but young people also cite that they have felt excluded, offended, poorly treated and unjustly treated by teachers. A major problem for many is an insufficient pedagogical support. Some have fallen into addiction and once they have returned to their studies they have not gotten sufficient support and given up. They think that the school environment is noisy and chaotic and that the classes are too large.



Males especially say that they chose the wrong study programme, that there was more theoretical training in the programme than they were prepared for. Others say that they dropped-out after the work placement period when they realised they had made a wrong choice.

### 1.3 A school with tired adults

Young people describe the reception they get from personnel at the school as “tired”, lacking respect and not committed, and several young people have described prejudiced teachers. But others talk about teachers that have had great impact on their lives and who have cared about them.

One recurring theme is poor working environment, large classes and that things are chaotic. This is primarily related to lessons without a supervising teacher, but also to supervised lessons. Young people want to be in smaller groups and also have a calm working environment where there are teachers who have time for them. An 18-year old male expresses it in this way:

“What are people thinking when they put the most disorderly students in the same class? It becomes impossible for the teachers and we students cannot learn anything worthwhile. It feels nicer to stay at home and learn about things you like on the Internet.”

Schools have had exclusive rights to educate children and young people and teachers have been the most important conveyors of knowledge and pedagogy. But today via the Internet there is access to knowledge: online lectures and distance education, which over the long-term, can undermine the position of schools and the teaching profession in our society.

### 1.4 School is irrelevant

It is a problem when schools do not succeed in getting students to understand why it is important to attend school. Young people mention that they have difficulty in under-

standing the purpose behind certain subjects and why they should learn things. They want teachers who are better at motivating them. Young people want engaged teachers who care about them and believe that everyone is good at something. They want teachers who place challenging but reasonable demands and who know that people prefer different paths to knowledge.

### 1.5 Many have dropped-out of vocational programmes

Barely 60 percent have responded regarding what programme they attended and dropped-out of (224 out of 379). Of these, 106 people had dropped-out of a vocational programme, 74 dropped-out of the introductory programme and 44 dropped-out of a preparatory programme for higher education. We know little about why the vocational programme has a higher percentage of students who do not complete the programme. Reasons such as too little work placement training or practical elements, are given, others say that during the work placement period they realised that they had chosen the wrong programme. We have found no cause to suspect that there is more bullying in vocational programmes than other programmes.

### 1.6 Support and assistance could have hindered drop-outs

To the question what a perfect school would be and what could have prevented them from dropping-out before graduating from upper secondary school, the young people named the following factors:

Focus areas in descending order are

- teachers and other adults who care
- sufficient pedagogic support
- smaller classes and groups
- individual and adapted study plans





- more practical training and less theoretical training
- flexible hours and schedules

Young people feel that the adult world has let them down. Many say that they started to skip class when they were in compulsory school, but that adults turned a blind eye to this and never followed up. They cite problems at home and insufficient social contact with people their own age.

## 1.7 A dream school with engaged adults and a calm working environment

What would a perfect school in a perfect world be like according to young people?

Adults should care about students and not give up so quickly. They should ask how students are doing and be supportive – not just let go. In school, students should get

help so that they can keep up with all subjects. The groups shall be small, and preferably an individually-adapted schedule where students, together with teachers, reach an agreement regarding suitable subjects and goals, but also the possibility to adapt hours. We all learn best at different times of day and we all learn in different ways.

Some people learn better by doing and not through reading. The best thing would be if you could vary theory and practical training depending on what you are capable of.

The school should have an anti-bullying programme and adults shall be able to provide the right support directly when they see that a student is not feeling well.

The school environment is important. It is impossible to concentrate when it is loud and chaotic and the teachers should respond to young people in a positive way.





## 2. Introduction

With this report we would like to convey young people's experiences of dropping-out from upper secondary school. A lot has been written about drop-outs (see the reading suggestions), but few reports have focused on stories and experiences from the foremost experts: young people who have quit before getting a final grade.

Our study relates to young people in youth projects financed by the European Social Fund (ESF) and the results are representative for this group. Theme Group Youth, has described the target group of the projects in the reports Meaningful work based training for young people 2011:3, It pays off 2011:2, Orka jobba 2012 and Kreativa projekt

2012:6. The participants have very different needs of support. Many have not graduated from upper secondary school. They have problematic home environments, social phobias, depression and intellectual or neuro-psychiatric disabilities. Many are under stress and worried after a long period of passivity and have a low level of self-confidence

In 2011, there were 112,128 young people not in education, employment or training (NEET) in Sweden between the ages of 16–25 (8.88 percent of the population). In the ESF projects, they are a prioritised target group, and participate in all projects.



### 3. Method

In the fall of 2012, we in Theme Group Youth sent an inquiry to 197 project managers for the ESF projects that work with young people (appendix 1). Of these, there were 48 that did not have young people as a target group and 23 that were newly-started and lacked participants, and there were consequently 126 projects that were attractive for our survey. We asked the project managers to ask young people in their projects who had not graduated from upper secondary school if they wanted to answer our questions. The final date for their response was 30 April 2013.

There were several possible ways to respond. The young people could write their responses on paper or submit them via mail, or the coaches could interview the young person and transcribe the response. Approximately one-third of the responses were transcribed by coaches or project managers.

The responses consisted of approximately one to three sentences per question, but there were also young people who submitted much more detailed responses. We wanted to know their gender, age and what upper secondary programme the participants had dropped out of and posed these questions:

1. In your opinion, what would a perfect upper secondary school be like where nearly all students would want to complete their studies?
2. Why did you terminate your studies prematurely?
3. What could have prevented your decision to drop-out of upper secondary school?

Of 126 current projects, we have gotten responses from participants in 55 projects. Certain projects have few young people in the target group and others more. We have gotten responses from between 2 to 15 participants per project.

We have received responses from all Swedish regions except Stockholm, and the distribution in the other regions is relatively even with the most responses from western Sweden.

In this report, 379 young people (188 females and 191 males) between the ages of 16 and 29 responded to our questions. The average age is 20.

155 out of 379 young people have not stated which programme they attended. Of the 224 that stated which programme, 106 dropped-out of a vocational programme (63 males and 43 females) and 74 dropped out of an introductory programme (37 males and 37 females). The remaining 44 (18 males and 26 females) left a preparatory programme. We have also visited two ESF projects where we interviewed six participants, as well as the project managers. The interviews dealt with reasons for the drop-out and also what can be done better so that more students will complete secondary school.

In the analysis we have categorised and quantified the reasons for the drop-outs. Many provided several reasons as to why they left upper secondary school without graduating.



## 4. Why young people drop out

Our analysis show that many in the group have mental health problems; they describe how depressed they are, that they have a general malaise, are not motivated, and do not have any passion or are just “tired of school”. But they do not give mental health issues as a reason for dropping-out. In fact, mental health issues are rather a consequence of different factors. Many young people do not understand why they have to learn certain subjects and skills. The fact that they speak so much about resignation and low motivation can perhaps be due to school having a low level of legitimacy, that it does not feel relevant. Young people cite teachers who cannot describe the meaning of certain tasks. A 22-year old male who dropped-out of the introductory programme and had a school-refusal behaviour for several years describes it in this way:

“I was unlucky and got tired teachers. They could not explain why I should learn all these things. I didn’t get any help as to how I could complete, what were for me, completely unnecessary and boring subjects. It was just something that was supposed to be done. Now I can choose what subjects I want to concentrate on at my own pace and I get help when I need it.”

Young people want teachers who are better at motivating them, committed teachers who care about them and believe that everyone is good at something. Teachers shall place high but reasonable demands and be aware that people take different paths to knowledge.

### 4.1 Ten reasons why young people drop-out

Young people stated several reasons for dropping out: here, we would like to provide a picture of the factors that they cite as the foremost reasons. Harassment and bullying from peers or personnel in the school are clearly the most common causes, 46 percent cite that as a reason. The following reasons for dropping-out have been identified in the statements by the young people:

1. Bullying, social exclusion
2. Lack of pedagogical support in the school
3. Adults who don’t care
4. Poor treatment at school
5. Insufficient pedagogical support in school after a long absence (due to illness or addiction)
6. Need for more practical training and less theoretical training
7. Noisy, rowdy school environment
8. Wrong choice of study programme
9. Neuro-psychiatric disabilities that are not discovered during the education
10. Poor home conditions





# 5. Bullying the foremost reason for dropping-out

Bullying is a collective concept for harassment, threats, discrimination or violence. "Bullying" as a concept simplifies and risks taking away the focus from what it pertains to and is therefore, difficult to take action against. In our report we use bullying since that is what the young people write, and we do not know the exact causes for why the young respondents have felt excluded from the school society.

They mention bullying, they describe how they have felt invisible, excluded and a few have cited specific reasons such as threats and violence.

Not quite half of the young people (46 percent) state that they dropped out due to bullying by peers or personnel. 138 mention bullying by peers as the foremost reason for dropping-out (87 females and 51 males). An additional 32 young people mention that they have felt vulnerable, offended and unjustly treated by teachers (20 males and 12 females).

Female, aged 22:

"It is only now that I have gotten my ADHD-diagnosis. In school I often ended up in situations where I felt misunderstood and the teachers didn't care if I was bullied. Now I have good support and understand myself and others better. It would have helped if the school had had focus on anti-bullying and if the teachers had made the effort to help me in time so that things were not able to go as far as they did."

Male, aged 21:

"The bullying occurred on the playground during recess. The teachers that were there mostly stood in one

section near a stairway where they could only see a fraction of what was going on.

It was like they didn't care. If they had been more active and walked around they could maybe have stopped what was going on."The severe bullying that he experienced in the 5th and 6th grades stopped during the later years of compulsory school. But the experience contributed to him having difficulty with social contacts with his peers and difficulty in trusting adults

## 5.1 Every twentieth student is bullied

The majority of students are secure and satisfied with school but there is a group of students that is bullied or exposed to other kind of offensive treatment.

In the National Agency for Education's survey, Attitudes towards school (2009), 6 percent of the students in grades 4–6 of compulsory school (approximately 17,000 individuals) answered that they were bullied by other students at least once a month. Of these, half were bullied every week.

Bullying is more common in grades 7–9 where 6 percent of the students feel bullied or harassed by other students compared with 2 percent in upper secondary school. Together, this corresponds to approximately 28,000 students in Sweden. In total, 4 percent of the older students replied that they were bullied by other students. The percentage has varied between 2–4 percent since 1993.

In the Swedish National Board for Youth Affairs' young people survey from 2012, young people (aged 16–25) were questioned if they had been offended or unjustly treated during the most recent half year. In total, 2,254 young





people responded to the survey and 20 percent have at some time been offended or unjustly treated and 4 percent have had this occur several times during the most recent half year. It is shown that 6 percent have been offended by school personnel and 5 percent by other students.

### 5.1.1 Young HBTQ-persons are vulnerable

The Swedish National Board for Youth Affairs' report, *Hon, Hen, Han* (2010:12) describes living conditions for young homosexual, bisexual and trans-gender persons (HBT). It is illustrated that mental health is much worse among young HBT persons than among heterosexual young people. Upper secondary school is an incredibly important period in young people's lives and it is often in school that many young people are confronted with hate crimes. And school is an environment that young people cannot choose to avoid. The Swedish National Board for Youth Affairs is of the opinion that schools must become better at developing practices for the work against offensive treatment, harassment, threats and violence. Sex and social life education also needs to become better.

In the report, many young homosexuals, bisexuals and trans-gender persons state that their needs seldom has been put forward (Swedish National Board for Youth Affairs 2010:12).

### 5.1.2 Young people with disabilities are bullied at home and in school

In the group of young people with disabilities that go to school (not upper secondary school for individuals with intellectual disabilities), 13 percent have felt unsafe or scared in school during the most recent half year, compared with 6 percent of other young people (Swedish National Board for Youth Affairs' report, *Focus 12*).

The percentage of young people with disabilities that have been subjected to bullying by the family or relatives

is 5.2 percent compared with 2.3 percent among young people without disabilities. For the alternative, bullied by others, the percentage is 12 percent, compared with 2.4 percent for young people without disabilities.

In the group with disabilities there is no discernible difference between age groups and between females and males. One of the young interviewees that the National Board for Youth Affairs talked to elaborated on what could improve the situation in schools.

*Inez, aged 25:*

"It's difficult to summarise something but ... you would think that teachers would have more knowledge within the subject, then it would certainly be easier to discover in time. I mean, none of my teachers have, I have always heard that I am weird from teachers and others. My parents have also heard that I am weird, they have noticed that it is something that is not said about the other students but they have never done anything about it, it has always been me that had to shape up and not ... them that have to change, it has always been like my own fault for everything, even when I was bullied it was my fault. The teachers, or the principal at one of the schools I went to, said that it was my own fault that I was assaulted because I didn't try to be normal ... so ... I only had myself to blame, that I needed to learn to adapt. I had no idea what they meant so that... (nervous laugh) ... yes, it wasn't exactly fun ... so that is what I think has been the worst, that information is lacking about it all, because I believe that if there was better information to teachers it could be, in any case, a little better in schools with understanding, but it's not, there is no information and you can't ask that teachers go around in their free time searching for different diagnoses and stuff, it's actually ... impossible to ask that, people should be able to get some kind of education exactly like you get with everything else, they have education days, they





should have education days for that also.” (Ungdomsstyrelsen 2012:3, p. 139)

### 5.1.3 What we can do to counteract bullying

In the responses from the young people to Theme Group Youth it is illustrated how important it is to have good teachers who care about the students and that teachers that are perceived as “bad”, “tired”, not committed, or treat students in an offensive way, can contribute to why students change schools or drop-out. OECD gives Sweden a series of recommendations for the work with young people and mental health, including increasing resources in schoolhealth care in order to identify and give support to students with mental health issues (OECD 2013). In the report, OECD also emphasises the importance of competence development for all school personnel so that everyone can recognise mental health problems and know what support is available.

Young people want the adult world to act and care about them. The National Agency for Education’s report, *What works?*, describes the preventive work in schools that work strategically in order to counteract bullying (National Agency for Education 2011). According to the National Agency for Education, a functioning work against bullying is created through what is called in the evaluation, a full-school-effort.

This means that all personnel and all students are aware of how a person reacts in the event of offensive behaviour or bullying and that everyone is involved and that the working method is established in the entire personnel group and among students. When the entire school is committed, this affects students’ perceptions of participation and how they act towards each other. At schools characterised by having a “tough climate”, success has been achieved in reducing the percentage of bullied students whereby the entire staff has been involved in the work. A mutual attitude creates a joint view among personnel

about how the work against bullying shall be carried out. One of the school leaders expresses it in this way:

“Yes, it is well established amongst all school personnel, including peripheral personnel such as cleaning staff, janitors and kitchen staff. If they see anything when they are on duty during breaks they know which teacher to contact and that it is important to do so immediately.”

At school, cleaning staff and janitors also act as on-duty staff during breaks and the joint strategy is also established among students. This is what a rector says in one of the evaluated schools in the National Agency for Education’s report, which has the lowest percentage of bullied students:

“We believe in zero tolerance when it comes to bullying. If we have not been in contact with parents or initiated a process the same day (if something has possibly happened), we view this as a failure on our part. We want to make a major effort to ensure that it is not only one person, for example, the school counsellor, who takes care of this, but that it is the responsibility of everyone” (National Agency for Education, (Ungdomsstyrelsen 2012, p. 15)

### 5.1.4 Research is in agreement

Researcher Anders Lovén, in an ongoing research project called *Osäkra övergångar* (Uncertain transitions), has interviewed 120 young people between the ages of 21 and 23 about why they dropped-out of upper secondary school with incomplete grades. His results are well in accordance with ours.

Lovén states that learning difficulties, insufficient support and help from the school, truancy in upper secondary school and later, change of programme, often occur before students drop-out. Some young people say that they fought a lot and created disturbances, others say that they





became quieter and kept themselves in the background.

Their stories indicate that schools, municipalities and adult society have failed. Sweden is a patchwork quilt of efforts. Government guidelines and earmarked government subsidies are needed for this particular group of young people. Many say that they have gone from a harmonic primary school, to difficulties in lower secondary, to a chaotic upper secondary school experience.

Almost half state that they have been bullied. Self-esteem takes a real hit and that is something students take with them through school. The schools do not know how to handle this and many times they do too little," says Anders Lovén.

Lovén's study shows that a portion of young adults live on the border of the financial existence minimum. They have no jobs, sleep during the day and stay up all night, some are provided for by their parents, alcohol enters the picture rather early among every third student, either through own abuse or abuse by parents. Yet, parents mean quite a lot for these young people, especially mothers, states Lovén. And a number of teachers have also had an impact, those that are engaged and committed for a long period of time.<sup>1</sup>

### 5.1.5 Learning difficulties are a background factor

Ann-Sofie Strand has carried out studies with 90 young people at two upper secondary schools in a municipality in southern Sweden with approximately 30,000 inhabitants: The young people had 30 percent or more unapproved absences and the focus of the study is on students as a part of the school system. The comprehensive purpose was to investigate in what direction the support factors and risk factors in the school system pull students (Strand, A-S 2013). The final results indicate that several risk factors could be changed to support factors that contribute to an increased participation in school work. This involves identifying those factors that promote students' and school personnel's well-

being through continuous documentation.

A positively changed school climate would mean that several efforts were working together to pull students in the direction toward school.

A closer examination of what constitutes support factors within the school system raises questions regarding normality and deviation, in other words, who gets the support measures and who doesn't. Strand writes:

"Today's schools are characterised more by the question of knowledge goals and to what extent these have been achieved than by the students' abilities and strengths. The importance of the school environment for students' well-being has sometimes been neglected. The result can be weakened solidarity with the school among talented young people who lack challenges in school. A lack of solidarity may also be applicable for young people with different types of difficulties. Both student groups lack knowledge goals that are related to their prerequisites. ... Truancy can be considered as social exclusion from a sense of belonging to a class, often caused by the student's difficulties in understanding the teacher's instructions due to learning difficulties. Exclusion can also arise through bullying, when the class is perceived as not interesting, does not provide any challenges, or does not offer anything new" (Strand, A-S 2013: p. 7–8).

How the truant young people's earlier school situation during compulsory school is portrayed based on the school's and their own perspective is central in regard to how things evolve later on. In our material, we have seen that one of the foremost reasons that young people have interrupted their studies prematurely has been insufficient pedagogical support. Many have tried, and in the end given up, and of them, some of them are part of a group that is sometimes called grey-area students (section 6.2.1).





## 6. Lack of pedagogical and adult support

It is problematic when a young person does not complete upper secondary school. We know that this has long-term consequences for that person's continued future prospects. An upper secondary school education does not guarantee a good job, but a person who lacks an upper secondary school education often has a weak connection to the labour market. A little over one-fourth of the young people in this survey (101 persons) bring up insufficient pedagogical support in school in their stories. They mention that teachers did not provide sufficient help and that they no longer had the desire to continue: 65 males and 36 females mention this as the foremost reason.

### 6.1 What young people say

#### 6.1.1 Adults who don't care

It is striking that young people expressly state that they did not get the help they needed or were ignored. They request early reactions from teachers and other adults.

Male, aged 22:

"It would be much better if the teachers cared and followed-up more. For example, if they saw that someone's grade was falling they could help that person more. The same is true if they saw someone having social problems and that person was being excluded and bullied."

Female, aged 19:

"I was bullied until I finally decided to stay at home. If I had gotten support and if someone in school or at home had cared and asked why I chose to stay at home, maybe things would have worked out better."

Male, aged 27:

"More teachers are needed for every class. I lacked the opportunity to have good teachers who were available when I needed them. I could sit in class for a long time and raise my hand for help, but finally I just gave up, you fall behind and just don't feel like catching up."

Female, aged 18:

"Imagine if teachers could work so that every student succeeds instead of teaching in the same way for everyone."

#### 6.1.2 Insufficient pedagogical support in school after a long absence

Several young people give examples of how they have gotten through problems with addiction and illness and come back to school only to be met by misunderstanding and ignorance of their needs.

Male, aged 22:

"I started skipping class in the 7th grade, but was able to get into an introductory programme. Started using drugs but was able to get clean because I decided that I would get a life and that I had to have an upper secondary school education. The teachers at school put a pile of books in front of me the first week of school and said that I needed to read all of them in order to catch up. I got no support and was super stressed-out and gave up."

Female, aged 19:

"I had horrible stomach pains one summer and these continued into the fall. When I came back to school I was extremely behind in my studies and did not receive any help."





I was really stressed-out by the whole situation. I changed schools twice, but got extremely tired of school."

### 6.1.3 Neuro-psychiatric disabilities that were not discovered during the education

Neuro-psychiatric disorders is one of the fastest growing-type of diagnosis for young people and there is a major deficiency in the support given to these young people. It is also clear that many students go for many years in compulsory and even upper secondary school, often with poor school results, without being identified or getting the right tools to succeed (Olsen, T and Tägström, J (2013).

Female, aged 19:

"I had a hard time finishing things in school and struggled, but it is only now that I know that I have ADD, and now I get a lot of support and know that I can finish things. I have an app that helps me to remember important meetings and that reminds me when I'm supposed to do things."

### 6.1.4 School is not meaningful

The educational system has a complex assignment to foster young people into knowledgeable and democratic citizens. In order for this to succeed young people must perceive education as meaningful and they must feel that they are participating. But many express just the opposite experience.

Male, aged 19:

"Imagine if schools could explain the purpose behind what we do there and why. Students should have inspiring teachers, not tired teachers. It didn't feel meaningful and I didn't see any purpose with anything at all. I wanted some type of context that I could associate with school."

Male, aged 22:

"I never understood the meaning behind many subjects and I guess I've been unlucky with getting tired teachers. They could never get me to understand the purpose behind studying. If it had been in the least bit fun I would have probably found the motivation to continue."

### 6.1.5 Need for more practical elements

39 males and 7 females (12 percent) state that they thought there would be more practical elements in the programme they had chosen, but that there was too much theory. Other reasons that are named include that the work placement period was perceived as very difficult, or that they understood that they had made the wrong choice. Several think that they received poor guidance and counselling prior to the selection of a programme.

Male, aged 21:

"I thought that I would have more practical courses and that I would have more to do. There was too much theory and in the end I lost my motivation."

Male, aged 18:

"I think that I was given the wrong information when I selected the programme. I thought I would be at a work-place and learn a lot, but instead it was normal studying, more than I was prepared for. I wanted to work and was tired of all the meaningless things you have to do in school!"

Female, aged 22:

"My workplace training was incredibly difficult. I was not happy and got a lot of criticism for everything I did. I understood that I would never again want to work within that occupation."





Male, aged 24:

“I chose a vocational programme because I have difficulty studying and reading. It was totally boring. If there had been more support from teachers and practical lessons and a lot more practical work I would never have dropped-out.”

We have previously investigated work-based training, which is the most common method for ESF projects that work with young people (Meaningful work-based training for young people, 2011:3). At the same time that many young people in our current study want less theory and more practical work, we know that there are young people in ESF projects that need a long period of preparation before they feel equipped and motivated to start a work placement.

## 6.2 Research about support to young people

### 6.2.1 “Grey-area students”

There is a group that many project managers and coaches are worried about, the so-called grey-area students, young people with complex, diffuse problems. They are described as a heterogeneous group with a common denominator, they have no diagnosis that indicates intellectual disability, but are perceived as being weakly gifted. A project manager in an ESF project<sup>3</sup> expresses it like this:

“It is absurd to think that all students can achieve the education goals in compulsory and upper secondary school. This belief subjects many young people to long-lasting discomfort in school and their faith in themselves declines over the years until finally they give up hope and quit. We have to tailor education alternatives that allow our young people to develop those functions they are good at and focus on their resources.”

The problems for children and young people with lower IQs have been focused on in an articles series by Eva Tideman and other writers (Svenska Dagbladet 15th-24th of October 2012). What they say is that children and young people with an intelligence quota between 70 - 85 are too well equipped to go to a school for the intellectually disabled, but they are not able to achieve the goals in compulsory school. Schools must start talking about this in a respectful way, instead of making both the students and the problem invisible. The entire upper secondary school years can be painful for students who get assignments they don't understand. In addition, in today's schools there are major demands on the ability to plan your work, work in projects, and work independently.

Many students have concentration difficulties and need “external support for inner thinking” but risk hearing “you can if you really want to” or “shape up,” which instead just worsens an already weak sense of self-confidence. Absenteeism or truancy can then become a necessary way out of a completely impossible situation.

Since low IQ in children is such a sensitive subject, it can be difficult for a child and his or her parents when this is confirmed, even if the parents suspect this. It can be a sad experience. But it can also be a benefit for students to have confirmation that they have difficulty with theoretical reasoning and that it is important to emphasise those areas the students are more skilled in.

The second most common reason for dropping-out that the young people who have shared their experiences with Theme Group Youth have given is insufficient pedagogical support to achieve the knowledge goals as well as a desire for more practical elements and less theory. Many could be able to develop their full potential through learning-by-doing instead of only studying theory and learning by rote (John Dewey 1916).





### 6.2.2 Connection between school, learning and health

Many young people stated that they feel bad, but did not cite this as a reason for leaving upper secondary school prematurely. But research shows that there is a clear connection between learning difficulties and poor mental health. In the report, School learning and mental health (2010) it is stated:

- Early difficulties in school, particularly reading and writing difficulties, create mental problems.
- Relations with classmates and teachers are connected to school failure and poor mental health, but relations with friends and teachers can also protect against the development of mental health problems.
- Comparisons with classmates affect self-image. The effects vary depending on group composition and type of school.
- Difficulties in school and mental problems remain for a long time.
- Health problems that are due to school usually decrease when students start secondary school and come into contact with new activities, roles and choices.
- Expending major effort without it giving results can lead to depression.
- There is a connection between different types of mental problems and these are also connected to many somatic and psychosomatic symptoms.
- Competence levels and performance in school are related to mental health.
- Good results in school have a positive effect on self-image.
- A good self-image does not directly contribute to better results, but other factors that are related to self-perception (motivation and experienced inner and outer control) affects learning and results.

In the report, Children's health, care and welfare 2013 (National Board of Health and Welfare 2013) we can see that the health of children and young people, and the social conditions in Sweden are good even in comparison with other welfare countries. This especially applies for infants and school-age children, but not for those that are a little older. Different symptoms for decreased mental well-being (fatigue, sleep problems, headaches, etc.) are more common among Swedish fifteen-year-olds than among fifteen-year-olds in many other countries.

Health developments among young people have not been as good as for children and the elderly. For example, the risk of dying in the age range 15–29 has been unchanged for the last 15 years. The number of suicides is not decreasing among young people, which is occurring for other age groups. Since the 1990s, the percentage of young people that are treated for addiction, anxiety, depression, bipolar conditions, autism and ADHD has increased steadily. The National Board of Health and Welfare's report also shows that children and young people that have been subjected to violence on repeated occasions have poorer mental health than adults. The National Board of Health and Welfare believes that health and medical care fails to report to the social welfare board if they suspect violence, and that the cooperation between health and medical care, police and schools does not function sufficiently well (National Board of Health and Welfare, 2013).

### 6.2.3 New technology can help students

When young people write about deficiencies in support and what support they would have needed in order to stay in school they have primarily named increased access to teachers. But they have also mentioned other types of support, for example, technical solutions can be good.

The new school act strengthens the rights for students who needs support and help and the requirement that





the school investigate and identify students' needs for special support has become much clearer. But the Swedish Schools Inspectorate's quality review of the school situation for students with disabilities simultaneously shows that schools have difficulty adapting the school situation in accordance with every student's needs (Swedish Schools Inspectorate, 2012). School personnel want to support and meet the needs of students with cognitive difficulties but lack knowledge about how they should adapt teaching to the individual student's needs (Swedish Social Insurance Agency, 2012, Swedish Institute of Assistive Technology, 2013).

The Swedish Institute of Assistive Technology has been assigned by the government to coordinate trial operations where they test using technology in a new way in upper secondary schools, upper secondary schools for individuals with learning disabilities and adult education. The effort is called The Path to Jobs and is a three-year project, which shall contribute towards strengthening students with various impairments and difficulties by increasing technology use in the school and during work placement training. The goal is that the technology will provide support to students with cognitive disabilities and increase their possibilities to achieve their goals within the appointed time. The assignment involves:

- testing technical support for students with learning disabilities
- educate teachers and other on the use of technical support
- develop methods for knowledge transfer regarding technical support to apprenticeship placements and employers
- formulate a model for needs assessment connected to the curriculum requirements for goals and the consequences of learning disabilities
- develop educational material that can be distributed nationally.

The final report will be presented in September 2013 but there is already an interim report, *Teknikstöd I skolan – Technical support in schools...* (Swedish Institute of Assistive Technology (Hjälpmedelinstitutet) 2013), that indicates that knowledge is lacking about cognitive disabilities, their effect on learning and possible types of support in upper secondary school.

If the pedagogue in the classroom does not understand what the students' difficulties are due to, and does not know the consequences of certain disabilities, and does not know what support exists, it affects the student's conditions to learn, develop and achieve established goals. (Swedish Institute of Assistive Technology, 2013, p. 2).

The Swedish Institute of Assistive Technology carries out trial operations in several municipalities and schools where, with the help of special pedagogues and adapted technical solutions, they work with students in a way that provides pedagogical support without stigmatising them. The young target group has been identified with the following questions:

- Do you have difficulty starting a work assignment?
- Do you easily forget instructions?
- Do you have a hard time concentrating when you study?
- Do you have difficulties in planning and structuring your studies?
- Does it often happen that you are unable to submit your assignments on time?
- Do you get to your classes on time?





# 7. Poor work environment

Schools are Sweden's largest workplaces. There are 235,000 employees and 1.4 million students (Swedish Work Environment Authority, 2011). The ultimate responsibility for the work environment in the municipal schools lies with the municipality's politicians, but the politicians often delegate the daily work with the school's work environment to the principal. The responsible authority for independent schools is also responsible for the work environment. The Work Environment Authority states in the report, *Hot och våld i skolan* (Threats and violence in schools, 2011), that there is many different types of threats and violence in Swedish schools. And this has a series of negative consequences, for example, poorer health among both students and teachers, increased absence, less satisfaction at school, a concern for more violence, and thoughts about changing schools among both teachers and students. Based on a health perspective this is also a very important issue to work with. For employers, it is also important to work with these issues for the purpose of creating a good work environment and being an attractive workplace where teachers want to work.

Male, aged 20:

"In my school the teachers' main responsibility was keeping order with all the boisterous and loud students. It was a chaotic school and I had a headache every day and in general just felt bad."

## 7.1.1 No sense of solidarity in the class

Young people describe an insufficient feeling of solidarity and community at school and in the class, and as was mentioned previously, these are important factors for health. A good work environment in the school provides good results (*Vända frånvaro till närvaro* (Turning absence into attendance), SALAR 2013).

Female, aged 18:

"I was totally invisible in my class, felt no sense of belonging and the teachers did not make an effort to make us feel like we belonged together as a group. If I had felt that I belonged and if this was enjoyable and fun I would have stayed."

Female, aged 22:

"Our mentor was not interested in creating a group feeling in the class and no teacher seemed to care about how the students felt. I felt no sense of belonging with anyone and I know that I was not alone in feeling this way. The atmosphere was not very good and felt hopeless."

Male, aged 21:

"I couldn't keep up and when I tried to read and learn (I have dyslexia) some people in the class were bothered by this. I was bullied and threatened and those guys carried knives. The teachers didn't care, they didn't dare, so my big brother had to go in and take care of the whole thing. It was worst during the lessons when we didn't have a teacher, then the troublemakers played loud music and fought – it felt hopeless."

## 7.1.2 Too large classes or groups

Female, aged 21:

"I don't do well in large groups and can't absorb anything! All my energy went to trying to just deal with the situation in the class and in school just so I didn't break down. Now, I understand that I am not alone in feeling this way in larger groups. Things work much better for me now. Now I can choose to be in smaller groups and sometimes I can also study alone at home."





Classes that are too large are cited as a problem for 21 percent of the young people. 34 young people have written that the main reason is that they cannot handle being in large groups and that they suffer from social phobias (15 males and 19 females), 47 young people cite boisterous, rowdy and chaotic school environments as a major problem (24 males and 23 females). When teachers' pedagogical time in schools is spent breaking up disturbances and taking care of noisy, boisterous situations in the classroom, everyone feels bad, both students and the teachers. Those students that suffer most from boisterous, rowdy, loud learning environments are those that need the most adult support in order to meet the study requirements or those with social phobias. The young people that have answered our questions currently get individually-adapted and tailor-made education in various ESF projects. When those who have cited a chaotic work

environment in the questionnaire describe a perfect school, a common recurring solution is studies in smaller groups and at an individually-adapted study pace.





## 8. Reasons outside the school

### 8.1.1 Six females became pregnant and twelve cite eating disorders

We have interviewed two young women who have interrupted their studies due to the fact that they became mothers during upper secondary school. Neither of them is together with the father and currently they have sole custody.

Female, aged 22:

“I had a child during my last semester of upper secondary school. It was planned that I would start studying again but my child was sick and I had no possibility to think about studying. My choice of programme was exactly right for me, I attended a restaurant and kitchen programme and I hope I can eventually work in that industry.”

Another young woman that we met told us about how she was harassed and unmotivated in upper secondary school. She started socialising with others that also did not feel comfortable, or felt invisible, in school. She was accepted to the introductory programme but quit after a few weeks. In the interview she mentioned that her mother was an alcoholic and unable to care much about her situation. When she found out she was pregnant she did not consider an abortion. Today, she has sole custody of her little boy and feels that she is always welcome to the ESF project which is located close to where she lives.

Female, aged 19:

“I like just to come here. When a staff member has time, they play with my son and I get a moment just to talk and socialise. I don't know what I want to do in the future, but I guess that will come. I am thinking about taking one subject at a time if I am able and feel like I can. Everyone who works here

is so nice and really cares. The only thing I have dreamed about is working on a boat at sea. That is a dream I have.”

Twelve young girls mention eating disorders as a reason for dropping-out. They have not indicated in their responses whether they have gotten support and help during their time in upper secondary school and have only written briefly: I had an eating disorder and felt bad or was depressed.

### 8.1.2 Poor home conditions

Eleven young people cited poor conditions at home as the foremost reason for dropping-out and many others name poor relationships at home as one of many factors that ultimately caused them to drop-out. We have analysed the statistics of the group of young people not in education, employment or training. Young people that risk long-term exclusion if they do not get the right support and help. Statistics show that they often have parents with a low level of education and high level of unemployment. The parents' often lack resources to enable their child to be able to complete his or her upper secondary school studies.

Female, aged 20:

“There was so much shit that happened at home during a period that I tried to go to class, but in the end I chose to drop-out. I couldn't concentrate in the classes and was super stressed-out when I got so behind with everything that it felt hopeless and impossible to ever catch up.”

Male, aged 20:

“My mother was feeling really bad and I had to help out and take care of my little brother. I tried to come to school but in the end it was impossible. Now, most things are OK and I am taking one subject at a time to catch up. Mother has gotten help and feels better.”







# 9. Dream school

## 9.1.1 Dream school according to young people

One of the questions we posed was what a school should be like so that no one would drop-out. Below is a vision that is based on the young people's responses but formulated by us. There is no difference between the responses of males and females.

Adults should care about us and not give up so quickly. They should ask how students are doing and be supportive – not just let go. In school, students should get help so that they can keep up with all subjects. There should be small groups and preferably an individually-adapted schedule where the students, together with teachers, agree on reasonable subjects and goals, but also the possibility to adapt school hours. We learn best at different hours of the day and in different ways. Some people acquire knowledge better by doing things and not by reading. Varying theory and practical work elements depending on what a student is capable of at the moment would be optimal. The school should have an anti-bullying programme and adults shall be able to provide the right support directly when they see that a student is not feeling well. The school environment is important. It is impossible to concentrate when it is loud and chaotic and the teachers should respond to us in a positive way.

## 9.1.2 A good school in accordance with previous surveys and experiences

We have identified success factors in ESF projects that work with young people; these are methods and attitudes that could also be used in schools to hinder early school leaving and give more young people the possibility to discover their strengths and abilities. Here is a list of success

factors from Theme Group Youth's earlier studies;<sup>6</sup>

- Compulsory school and upper secondary school are there so that students can develop cognitively and gain knowledge, and are also an important arena for social development.
- Teachers work with subject learning and are good at making the students enthusiastic and motivating them.
- All primary schools make major efforts to ensure that educational and vocational guidance and counselling functions well.
- School politicians and principals/the responsible organisation have realised how important it is to employ other professions in schools who can give students psychosocial support.
- Multi-competent personnel with a joint set of values who are genuinely interested in working with young people.
- It is possible to provide students individual support in smaller groups so that they can achieve the educational goals according to their own ability.
- Everyone who works in schools has high expectations on the students; they have received education on how to deal with each other in a respectful way, both adults and young people.
- There is awareness, knowledge and a desire to deal with mental health issues, bullying and harassments and the goal is zero tolerance. Everyone in the school knows what is applicable if anyone were to be subjected to harassment, bullying, violence or discrimination.
- School management and personnel see parents as a resource and inform them quickly about a student's absence.
- The working environment is a prioritised area and the students have influence on the entire operation.

<sup>6</sup> 2008, Fokus 08 – an analysis of young people feeling excluded, National Board for Youth Affairs  
2010, Fokus 10 – an analysis of young people feeling excluded, National Board for Youth Affairs  
2012, Fokus 12 – living conditions for young people with functional impairments, National Board for Youth Affairs



- The school has good contacts with commercial businesses in the region and work-based training is mandatory for grades 7 through 9 in compulsory school as well as during all upper secondary school years.
- Schools cooperate with NGO's and young people know what paths and opportunities exist.
- For unmotivated students it is possible to carry out work place training or work and come back later to complete their education.
- The municipalities have alternative educational possibilities for young people who feel more secure in small groups and need more teachers support.

- School attendance is not only a question for schools and there is cooperation with other sectors in the municipality and county council as well as with other actors.





# 10. What could have prevented dropping-out

These are the areas that young people name where efforts possibly could have made them continue with their education:

- Teachers and other adults who care and don't ignore problems that arise
- Pedagogical support in the school
- Pedagogical support in the school when students have been absent for a long time (due to illness or addiction)
- Individual and adapted study plans with flexible hours and schedules

Female, aged 18:

"If I had had the opportunity, together with teachers, to formulate my own education, with subjects that I was really interested in. A plan that takes into consideration that we are different and we can handle pressure and stress to different levels. Imagine if you could have more flexible hours in school."

Theme Group Youth collects methods and working procedures that are developed in ESF projects that work with young people. Many participants in the projects have dropped out of upper secondary education and have poor self-esteem. Therefore the projects must invest a lot of time in motivational work so that the participants will start to believe in their own abilities.

We also know that many ESF projects offer alternative types of education. The participants get a lot of teacher support, they often have a lot of influence in the formulation of the curriculum and schedule, they get access to special teachers and many projects have a built-in flexibility and adapt efforts according to the individual's capacity and needs.

The young participants point out that what is positive with the operation in the project is the good and respectful treatment and that get attention. When they have answered the question regarding the perfect school in a perfect world, it is clear that they mainly describe the support they get in the projects. It is possible that another group of young people would give different answers to this question.

## 10.1 There is knowledge and methodology development

The Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions (SALAR) describes, in *Motverka skolavbrott (Counteracting dropping-out 2012)*, how upper secondary schools, through conscious supervision, can provide for students' individual needs so that more students can complete their education. The upper secondary schools' success factors are well in line with the factors SALAR found when they studied municipalities that achieve good results in compulsory school:

- Good treatment is vital for how students feel and how they can profit from the education. This factor is heavily emphasised among the schools SALAR contacted. Good treatment is about believing in students' abilities and viewing them as unique and equally valuable individuals.
- Clear goals and an emphasis on results gives results. It is important that schools measure and analyse absenteeism and work to ensure that so many students as possible complete their education.
- Being in the right educational programme is a significant reason why students feel motivated in their upper secondary school studies. A flexible range of classes, a good introduction and access to qualified educational





and vocational counselling helps students to find the right study path.

- Quality through cooperation and participation is a consistent success factor regardless of in which context it occurs. Personnel describe how they learn from each other, how they involve students in the development work and give examples of well-developed cooperation with the labour market.
- The ability to discover and provide for students' needs is central in the systematic quality work carried out by successful schools. Practice and procedures ensure a thorough follow-up of students' results, and at the same time the competence of the student health care personnel is utilised efficiently.

In the above mentioned report, SALAR has investigated those students who were beginners in October 2005–2007 and the result shows that a little over 31 percent of the students do not achieve a complete upper secondary school education within three years (table 1). One additional year contributes to more students completing their education (24 percent do not), which likely includes students who have changed programme, but as much as 23 percent do not complete their education in five years. The figures show a weighted median value from all municipalities.

**Table 1 Percentage of students that have not completed secondary school after 3 to 5 years. New students for 2005, median value as a percentage**

	All	Perparatory	Vocational
3 years	31	21	28
4 years	24	15	23
5 years	23	14	23

Source: SKL 2012 p 33.

Approximately every third student needs either a longer time than three years to complete their education or interrupts their upper secondary education completely. A clear

pattern is that young men leave upper secondary school to a higher degree than young women, that students in vocational programmes quit to a higher degree than students at preparatory programmes, and that the majority of drop-outs occur in the final year of upper secondary education (SALAR, 2012, p. 8–9).

The results differ between municipalities. In the municipalities with the lowest percentage of students that complete their education within three years the percentage is 43 percent, and in municipalities with the highest percentage, the result is 88 percent.

The guide, *Vända frånvaro till närvaro* (Turn absence into attendance), which discusses success factors for systematic school attendance work, emphasises clear practices and procedures and that schools should cooperate with municipalities and county councils (SALAR 2013). A condition that is emphasised is that students must be allowed to speak out and that they are listened to. Other important factors are good relations, good treatment, a focus on knowledge (everyone shall have the possibility to achieve the knowledge goals based on individual conditions), clear leadership, everyone's commitment, systematic improvement, cooperation with guardians and technical prerequisites. In the National Agency for Education's general guidelines, *Work to promote attendance and to recognise, investigate and take action against absences in the school* (allmänna råd Arbetet med att främja närvaro och att uppmärksamma, utreda och åtgärda frånvaro i skolan), there are concrete recommendations for how all actors involved can work to reduce unapproved absence (National Agency for Education 2012).

In The National Agency for Educations follow up (2012) only 87.5 percent were entitled to attend a national programme in upper secondary school. In other words, 12.5 percent of Sweden's students lacked credentials and were thereby excluded from studies in a national programme





at an upper secondary school. This meant that they were referred to an introduction programme, other kinds of support from the municipalities or were left to themselves.

## 10.2 [www.plugininnovation.se](http://www.plugininnovation.se)

SALAR manages Sweden's largest cooperative project with the purpose of reducing drop-outs from upper secondary school, Plug In. The efforts are directed towards young people who risk leaving school early or who have already dropped-out of and is partly financed by the European Social Fund. SALAR are working in cooperation with the Gothenburg Region's municipal association, Region Jämtland, the Regional associations in Kalmar county and southern Småland, Region Västerbotten and Region Östsmåland. Around fifty municipalities in these regions participate in the project where new methods are tried in order to get young people to complete upper secondary school. Plugininnovation is a national platform where all knowledge from the project is compiled as a foundation for new ways of working with drop-outs. The focus for Plugininnovation is What works? and what could possibly work?

The methods tested in Plug In are being evaluated and undergo an in-depth analysis. Plugininnovation will point out important factors for the work against early school leaving. This can involve methods, work practices and procedures and organisation.

Plugininnovation will contain descriptions of the Plug In projects workshops, methods used and current research. Within the framework for Plugininnovation a prototype for a statistical tool that can provide real time information about a student's absenteeism or dropping-out are developed describe as truly committed. She has worked for many years as a teacher in upper secondary school and in adult education. Today, she is coordinator and pedagogue for an ESF-financed project.<sup>7</sup>

Aside from how they are treated, young people believe that the best and most important thing about ESF projects is how fantastic it is with adults who seem to care about them "for real". Project manager, Eva, represents one of those that the young people:

"All my participants and students have dropped-out from school and the number is increasing. I know that what makes the difference is when there is at least one special pedagogue, as well as special teachers employed in the school, that give the principal and other teachers support in the daily work. One of our most important tasks in the school is to acknowledge the students.

– Where are students' rights to influence their education? By making students involved in their curriculum, they are assisted in choosing the right path. In many schools this is a major development area. Many students do not get the help they are entitled to. Reading and writing difficulties, dyslexia and other diagnoses are not discovered in time. Unfortunately, there are many who have been subjected to bullying without the school taking action. Today, people often diminish a complex story in the words "tired of school" when students are unable to meet the goals and drop-out instead. But things are not that simple."

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<sup>7</sup>The Pedagogue project, See the possibilities, started in May 2012 and is financed by petence and labour market administration in the municipality of Falköping. Participants have been contacted via authority cooperation from the financial cooperation association, Finsam.





# 11. Concluding discussion

It is a serious problem that bullying is still so common. In a report in 2005, the Swedish National Board for Youth Affairs wrote that young people's experiences with bullying in school leads to poor mental health and a more difficult transition into the labour market, and that these difficulties are long-term (National Board for Youth Affairs 2005).

Knowledge about the importance of preventive work in schools is not new. We know that investments in children and young people pay off (Theme Group Youth 2011:2), and we know that it is expensive for individuals and taxpayers if we do not invest in time (Theme Group Youth 2010:3). Several of those factors that are pointed out in "School learning and mental health" (2010) include early and quick help with reading and writing difficulties during the first years of compulsory school. Children, young people and adults want to belong and feel that they are not excluded. During the teenage years, positive relationships with friends and teachers are especially important and these relationships are strongly connected to mental health. We have seen that good results in school have a positive effect on self-perception and that young people that make major efforts without them leading to results can be affected by depression. Competence and performance in school are related to students' mental health.

Young people who have answered our questions emphasise the value of good teachers and adults that care about them. Teachers should have high expectations, focus on the positive aspects and ensure that everyone can develop according to their abilities. Research shows that it is important to have teachers who care about their relationships with students. Principals, teachers and other staff in school should invest time and thought into how students are treated so that everyone feels included, seen and heard (Hattie, 2009).

Today there is greater access to technical support in schools, which can make things easier for many students. Knowledge about what technology exists must be distributed to all types of schools and professions that meet children and young people (Swedish Institute of Assistive Technology, 2013).

The two foremost causes for dropping-out are bullying and insufficient pedagogical support, but young people also mention the work environment and insufficient support after extended absences. Everyone knows that the working environment is important to learning; young people have described a chaotic, boisterous and loud environment where it is impossible to concentrate. Teachers' leadership qualities have great significance for the working environment and group relations in the classroom.

When young people talk about the school as a work environment they often speak about the school as a social arena, about the "classroom climate". They speak to a very small extent about the physical environment. But there is research that shows the connection between the school's architecture and learning. How a school is designed has consequences for the social climate, what individuals do and don't do. In addition, the architecture contributes to the atmosphere and a feeling of, for example, curiosity or calm (Kirkeby, I-M, 2007). But in Sweden there is no one who has responsibility for how schools are designed, for example, whether or not they have playgrounds. On the contrary, many questions can be raised, especially in regard to the design of older schools, with hard to clean toilets and changing rooms outside the view of teachers who are on duty during breaks.

One success factor that has been identified through research and experience is that when different professions cooperate and do what they are good at based on mutual





values and respect this has positive effects on the work environment. Rectors and teachers in schools in socio-economically deprived urban areas, have been forced to think outside of the box, due to the mix of students in their schools (National Board for Youth Affairs 2008). One school had a major problem with unapproved absences and the rector employed two people who were on duty during breaks who lived in the area the school was located in. They were given the task of calling all students who did not come to school, and if the students did not come, go home to check up on them. After some months everyone at the school knew what was applicable and absence was no longer a big issue.

According to the National Agency for Education's report (2011) on good examples to counteract bullying, functioning work is being created through what is referred to as an "all-school-effort". This means that all personnel and all students are aware of how to react to offensive behaviour or bullying, that all are involved, that what-to-do and-how-to-do are communicated and agreed upon in the entire personnel group as well as amongst students and parents. Research shows clear connections between unapproved short-term and long-term absence with failure in achieving the educational goals (Strand, A-S 2012).

It is also important to develop the work with students that refuse to come to school; students with school-refusal behaviour. Inspiration and established advice can be found in the book, *Tillbaka till skolan* (Back to school, Gladh & Sjödin 2013). Amongst young people in this report, the majority have dropped-out of a vocational programme or an introductory programme. It is mainly young men who point out that they chose the wrong programme where there was more theoretical study than what they were prepared for. Others say that they dropped-out after the workplace training period when they realised they had chosen the wrong programme.

Some had the impression that it would be "easier" to attend a vocational programme.

This indicates that students need high-quality educational and vocational guidance when they are choosing programmes. Many times, vocational programmes can be more demanding than theoretical programmes. Students at a vocational programme shall be able to adapt to adults in a workplace as well as to school and peers and much more. It is unclear why vocational programmes have a larger percentage of students that drop-out and research is lacking regarding this. However, we do know that there are similar patterns in Norway, Denmark and Germany (OECD 2012).

Young people's responses that form the basis for our report indicate that a defined strategy or action is lacking at schools for students who come back to school after long-term absences due to illness, addiction, pregnancy or other circumstances. If we want to convey the importance of lifelong learning for future generations it is important that young people and adults have positive memories and experiences from school, that they feel that it is interesting to learn and develop. Lifelong learning shall also include alternative educational opportunities and a flexibility that does not exclude young people if their lives take a new turn that means that they temporarily need to leave school and after a while resume their studies.



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# Appendix 1 Survey from Theme Group Youth in Working Life

We are taking an in-depth look at the problem of upper secondary school drop-outs and need your help. Many young participants in ESF projects have not completed upper secondary school.

We want to focus on the perspective of young people and that is why we are turning to you.

We have formulated three open questions to young people in your project that have not completed their upper secondary education.

They can remain anonymous. The only information we would like to have is gender and age. The best option is if coaches/supervisors can ask the questions to the young people during an interview and write down their answers so that the participants can speak freely. It is desirable that you ask as many young people as possible. The responses can be submitted in the fall, but not later than 30 November (30 April).

Hi!

I work as an investigator in a Theme Group Youth that is focusing on young people getting established in the labour market. For us it is very important to focus on the perspective of young people in everything we write.

We are going to write a report on why young people drop-out of upper secondary school, and in this regard, your experiences are of the utmost importance.

It would be fantastic if you could answer the following questions:

Are you:

- Female
- Male
- Do not want to define myself

Age:

Previous programme:

1. In your opinion, what would a perfect upper secondary school where nearly all students would want to complete their studies?
2. Why did you leave your school prematurely?
3. What could have prevented the decision from your side to leave?

Please write the most detailed answers possible!

Thank you in advance! Your responses are very important to us!

Kind regards, Lidija

Theme Group Youth collects and disseminates knowledge and experiences from ESF projects, which target young people and has been carried out between 2007-2013 with resources from the European Social Fund.

[www.temaunga.se](http://www.temaunga.se)





# Appendix 2 What the law states

The school act regulates what is approved absence and what is not approved and clarifies how absences are in relation to mandatory school attendance. As a complement to the school act, there is the National Agency for Education's general recommendation, The work with promoting, focusing on, investigating and rectifying absences in the school, and the National Agency for Education's legal guidelines (Mer om... frånvaro och ledighet (More about ... Absence and leave) 2012), which further clarifies how the school act should be interpreted.

## Promoting school attendance

The general recommendations and comments to these are intended to be a support resource for the school attendance work of schools and municipalities. The responsibilities of the responsible authority, home municipality and principal are focused on. Student health care in the school attendance work is discussed, as is the importance of the school cooperating with other welfare functions and experts. In the general recommendations, promotion efforts are emphasised, that the school works comprehensively and in a preventive manner to increase student attendance. This involves creating a good learning environment, that the teaching is adapted to the individual student's needs and promotes motivation to participate in the education.

A good school climate characterised by security, calm and good relations is significant. The responsible authority should give the principal support in the work with promoting attendance at the school unit. This may involve, together with the principal, developing procedures that are

mutual for the responsible authority's school units. From the general recommendations it is shown that principals shall ensure that students and guardians are informed about compulsory attendance in compulsory school and the obligation to attend upper secondary school. It is also the principal's responsibility to ensure that work is carried out at school to promote attendance and that the students participate in the work.

## Primary school

The question of school attendance in compulsory school and equivalent types of schools (compulsory schools for the intellectually disabled, Sámi schools and Special schools) is connected to compulsory attendance. It involves ensuring that all students get their right to an education fulfilled. Compulsory school attendance and the student's right to education are addressed in chapter 7 in the school act. The most central paragraphs in regard to school attendance are sections 17–19 (Participation in the education) and sections 20–23 (Responsibility to ensure that compulsory school attendance is enforced). In sections 18–19, free time as well as exemption are addressed. In chapter 7, section 17 of the school act, it is stated that a student in compulsory school and equivalent types of schools shall participate in the operation that is arranged to provide them with the intended education unless the student has valid grounds for exemption. The principal shall make sure that the student's guardian is informed if the student is absent from mandatory classes. This may mean that the school needs to contact the guardian as soon as possible depending on the student's age, maturity level and other circumstances. As a main rule, the guardi-





ans shall be informed the same day. Only in the event of special circumstances can the information be withheld. Such reasons may be, for example, that absence refers to the student's last class prior to the end of the school day (see prop. 2009/10:165 page 706). (Mer om...Frånvaro och ledighet (More about... Absence and leave) National Agency of Education 2012).

In chapter 7, sections 20–22, it is clarified what responsibility the guardian, home municipality and responsible authority has. In section 20, it is stated that the student's guardian is the person responsible for ensuring that the child adheres to compulsory attendance. The guardian has supervisory responsibility for the child until the school day begins, but there can still be reasons for the school to act depending on the student's age, maturity level and circumstances in general if the child does not come to school at the start of the school day. The school, together with the guardian, has an obligation to ensure that the student receives the prescribed education. (Mer om ... Frånvaro och ledighet (More about... Absence and leave) National Agency of Education 2012).

The general guidelines clarify that the home municipality and the responsible authority need procedures to ensure that compulsory school attendance is adhered to. The responsible authority should also have a collective view of the student's absences. This involves the principal creating procedures for continuous absence reporting, that the information is made available to the guardian the same day, that the reason for absence is investigated in a timely manner and that concrete measures are taken. In the general recommendations, it is stated that procedures are needed for cooperation with student health, and if needed, with other welfare functions. Student health care must have a clear and developed role in the work with school attendance, both in the promotion and remedial work. Named among the welfare functions and external

competences that the school should cooperate with are Social Services, Primary Care, Children and Youth Psychiatric Clinics and the Police.

## Home municipality's responsibility

In chapter 7, section 21, it is stated that the home municipality shall ensure that children who attend schools with another responsible authority adhere to compulsory school attendance. Consequently, the home municipality has a more far-reaching responsibility than independent school authorities. In chapter 7, section 22, it is stated that the municipality shall ensure that students in its own compulsory school and compulsory schools for the intellectually disabled complete their school education. In regard to Special schools and Sámi schools, the government is the responsible authority and the authority that shall ensure that students in these types of schools complete their education. In chapter 7, section 22, second paragraph, it is stated that a responsible authority for an independent school shall inform the home municipality when a compulsory student begins or finishes school, or without a valid reason, is absent from obligatory elements of the education to a significant extent. This is conditional on developed communication between the municipality and the independent schools. The general recommendations clarify that municipalities, as a part of the municipality's procedures for compulsory school monitoring, shall carry out continuous follow-ups on students that adhere to compulsory attendance with other responsible authorities and in independent schools. An individual responsible authority also needs procedures for how reports are to be made to the student's home municipality if the student, without a valid reason, is absent for a substantial time. In chapter 7, section 23, it is prescribed that the home municipality has the possibility to order a guardian to complete his obligations of ensuring that the student completes his





school education. In regard to Special schools and Sámi schools, it is the responsible authority for these types of schools that must order the student's guardian to fulfil his or her obligations. An order may, in accordance with a decision, be accompanied by a fine.

## Upper secondary schools

In chapter 15, section 16 of the school act, attendance in upper secondary school is discussed and in chapter 18, section 16 of the school act, attendance in secondary school for the intellectually disabled is discussed. Upper secondary schools and upper secondary schools for the intellectually disabled are optional types of schools, but a student shall still participate in the operation that is arranged within the framework for the education unless the student has valid reasons for exemption. Like in compulsory school, the guardian shall be informed on the same day if the student has been absent without a valid reason. Contact the same day applies unless special circumstances exist. In chapter 12, section 3, of the upper secondary school ordinance (also applies to upper secondary schools

for the intellectually disabled) it is stated that a student that does not attend classes that he or she has been accepted into, and does not report a valid reasons for this within three days after the term has started, is considered to have terminated the education. In accordance with chapter 12, section 4 in the upper secondary school ordinance, a student, who after starting an educational programme has been absent for more than one consecutive month without a valid reason (illness or granted leave) is considered to have terminated the education. In chapter 15, section 15 of the school act, it is stated that the home municipality shall immediately be notified if a student starts or terminates upper secondary school with another responsible authority. This is a prerequisite for the home municipality to have knowledge about whom of the young people that are studying and where.





