

## Sweden

### Auspices

Auspices for young children 7 years are unified in Sweden. Responsibility for central policy, for the goals, guidelines and financial framework of ECEC lies solely with the Swedish Ministry of Education and Science. Distinctions between day-care and kindergarten were removed by the 1998 School Act, which defines all services for young children from 1-6 as “pre-school” and from 5/6-7 years as “pre-school class”. Compulsory schooling begins at 7 years. Like the shifting of responsibility for the sector toward the Ministry of Education some years earlier, this Act signals – and reinforces – a major shift of understanding in Sweden with regard to early childhood services. The School Act also devolves major responsibilities to municipalities. Municipalities have the duty to provide sufficient numbers of pre-school and leisure-time centres and places, of monitoring the quality of ECEC services and of providing sufficient resources. The National Agency for Education is responsible for overall evaluation, data collection, development and supervision of ECEC at central and regional levels.

### Developments

Several far-reaching developments have taken place in ECEC in Sweden over the last years. In addition to moving the sector into the sphere of education, the system has been much expanded and reformed. The right of every child to a place “within reasonable limit” (defined as not more than 3 months) has now been achieved in almost all municipalities. A government bill to make pre-school universal and free for 5-year olds has been drafted and, if a draft law before Parliament passes, will be extended to all 4-year olds. For children from bilingual backgrounds, a free three-hour session every morning is available from the age of 3. Fee variability across municipalities, which sometimes hindered low-income parents from using services, has also been countered in the draft law, which will introduce a low flat, parental fee for services. The municipalities will be compensated for loss of revenue by central government. Much effort has been invested also into improving quality, particularly for the older children. A *Curriculum for Pre-school* was elaborated in 1997-98, linking into the curricula for primary and secondary schools, and providing a common view of knowledge, development and learning. From the point of view of the Swedish State, it sets out the foundation values for the pre-school, and the tasks, goals and guidelines for pre-school activities. The means by which those goals should be attained are not prescribed. Co-operation between the pre-school class, the school and the after school care centre is emphasised. A new proposal would extend the pre-service training of *pedagogues*, the lead personnel in the pre-schools, by another six months (totalling three-and-a-half years) to allow a common psycho-pedagogical training with teachers and leisure time pedagogues.

### Context

*Expenditure on ISCED Level 0 institutions as a percentage of GDP:* 0.6%. The Swedish background report provides a figure of 2% of GDP for expenditure on ECEC.

*Labour force rates:* in 1999, 81.5% of women aged 25-34 years participated in the labour force. 32.1% worked part-time.

*Parental leave:* 360 days paid 80% of earnings for a year and 60 SEK daily for 90 days. There is great flexibility about taking this leave full or part-time. A further pregnancy benefit of 80 % of earnings is paid for expectant mothers with employment who are unable to go on working from 60 to 11 days before birth. Fathers are allowed a 30 days non-transferable paternity leave, as well as ten days temporary parental benefit in connection with the birth of his child.

*Attention to children with special educational need before they enter compulsory education:* a) *Children with disabilities:* children with disabilities or psycho-social problems have a priority right to services and are well integrated; b) *Children from low-income families:* the child poverty rate after redistribution is 2.4%, the lowest in OECD countries; c) *Ethnic and bilin-*

*gual children:* Sweden has a growing immigrant population. An estimated 18 % of the population are first or second generation immigrants, e.g. 40 000 refugee children between 1-6 years were given asylum from 1990-95. Government has made funds available to provide daily, a free three-hour session of day-care for bilingual children from the age of 3.

## Provision

By law, all children 1-12 years have a right to childcare, as long as both parents work or study. Most pre-school provision is provided directly by municipalities in day-care centres, but municipal provision in family day-care covers 12% of children, especially in rural areas. Private day-care provision by parent and personnel co-operatives, churches, corporations and other providers, also exists for 13% of children. Except for parental fees, private provision is funded by the municipalities and contractually, is expected to meet the basic standards of public childcare, although without the obligation to follow the *Pre-school Curriculum*. Currently, parents may pay between 2% and 20% of income for childcare, depending on their income and municipality fees. To reduce disparities between municipalities and provide greater support to families with young children, there is a proposal before Parliament to have free pre-school for all children from the age of 4 years. Further costs would be capped at 3%, 2% and 1% of income for the first, second and third child. Enrolment rates are as follows:

*0-1 year:* almost all children are looked after by a parent (generally, the mother) on parental leave at home. In general, children begin in day-care at about 15-18 months.

*1-6 years:* 64 % of children attend a full-day pre-school, with a further 11% in family day-care.

*6-7 years:* 91% of children attend the pre-school class, with another 7% already in compulsory school.

*6-9 years:* 65 % of children from 6-9 years are enrolled in leisure-time centres. In addition, there are also open pre-schools that offer a service to children and families (often low-income, immigrant) for a few hours every day. In rural areas, some of these drop-in centres are being transformed into family resource centres. The National Agency for Education has formulated guidelines for the conduct of these centres and family day-care.

*Child-staff ratios:* national statutory requirements for child-staff ratios do not exist, but monitoring of the actual ratios practised is compulsory and ongoing. In pre-school centres, the present ratio is 5.6 children per adult. In the pre-school class, the average ratio practised is 13 children per adult.

## Staffing and training

98% of staff in Swedish pre-school centres are trained to work with children. Each centre must have a director, with a university teaching or pedagogue qualification. Educational pedagogues (pre-school teachers) make up 60% of the personnel in the pre-schools. Like leisure-time pedagogues, they require a three-year tertiary degree (soon to be extended to three-and-a-half years) from a higher level college or university. The pedagogues are assisted by child minders (38% of personnel) who currently, are given a senior secondary, three-year vocational formation in "Children and Leisure-time Activities". Some older staff have fewer formal qualifications, but the current career ladder has various points of entry for childminders to take up higher training leading to pedagogue status. Family day-care providers are not required to have a qualification, but 72% have either a child-minder certificate or have received 50-100 hours of mandatory training from their municipal employers. The National Agency for Education recommends that family day-carers should receive a training and certification equivalent to the child-minders in the pre-schools. Unlike many other countries, leisure-time staff in Sweden are also highly trained at university level. In-service training is well developed for centre-based day-carers and leisure-time staff, but less well for family day-carers. About 5% of pre-school personnel are men, 60% are pedagogues and 35% are certified child minders.

## OECD policy issues

Among the issues for policy attention identified by the OECD Review team for Sweden were:

*Access issues:* all children 1-12 years have a right to childcare, *as long as their parents work or study*. This means in effect that the children both of unemployed parents (oftentimes, of immigrant origin) and of parents on parental leave may not have access to services. In 1997, 59 000 such children were not enrolled. As a result, criticism of the conditions of access has grown, seeing them as limiting the child's right to early education and care, and discriminating against children and families who perhaps most need social and educational services. Several measures to address potential inequities of access have been taken at both national and municipal levels, such as the government bill to provide free and universal half-day access to all pre-school services for 5- and 4-year-old age groups. The flat-rate fee for services will also do much to improve access for the children of low-income parents.

*Quality issues:* because of the high level of decentralisation in Sweden, municipalities have full control over their spending on ECEC. Most municipal councils see childhood services as a priority, but some have chosen to maintain

the less demanding quality levels with respect to staffing, diversity of services, fee reductions to low-income families, etc. This was especially the case during the economic crisis of the early 90s, when, for example, child-staff ratios rose, in-service training for ECEC staff was diminished, and many drop-in and multi-functional family centres closed. In sum, the “non-essential” services, which are often frequented by the less-involved families, were cut back. The National Board of Education is currently developing consensus among the municipalities about national early childhood aims, and will publish guidelines for the services not covered by the national curriculum, viz. family day-care, open pre-schools and open leisure activities.

*Family day-care:* family day-care caters for fully 12% of Swedish children. Though unable to offer children the range and quality of provision that highly trained staff in an urban pre-school can develop, family day-care should not be seen as solely an emergency, back-up service. It often provides an essential service for more traditional urban families and for isolated families in rural areas. In sum, family day-care networks are an integral part of the system, and need to be provided with adequate investment, supports, monitoring and training. Even in municipalities that invest in the service, the monitoring of family day-care and the training offered has not always been consistent.

*Research issues:* Sweden has a long tradition in research on early childhood. The OECD review team recommended further research on a number of issues, and in particular the dissemination of research that could be of use to the international community. Research on the continuity between the pre-school class and schools may be particularly relevant, as might information pertaining to school transformation, the use of space, and the relationship between ratios and quality. The conceptualisation and method of ECEC data collection was also another aspect of the Swedish system that may merit international interest and dissemination.