

Outline advice: A Proposition

Platform Onderwijs2032¹ concerns itself with the future of education.

What knowledge and skills are necessary to prepare pupils in primary and secondary education for their future? This was the question asked by the State Secretary of Education, Sander Dekker, to launch a national debate about the future of primary and secondary education in the Netherlands in November, 2014. A new stage began in February 2015 after thousands of Tweets and ideas. The State Secretary conceptualized Platform Onderwijs2032, tasked to provide the government with advice about education. The Platform, guided by Paul Schnabel, deepened and expanded the social dialogue. Pupils, teachers, parents, board members, scientists, deputies of social and cultural organizations and business industries let their voices be heard and conferred together and with the Platform. The Platform received over 260 documents containing advice, whitepapers, surveys, messages, reports, public opinion polls and manifests. The members of the Platform lent their ears during inspiration sessions, days of education and festivals. The dialogue has resulted in a lot of valuable information, ranging from common to specific themes. It reveals that there is a divide in opinions of what is important for future-oriented education.

The Platform started sorting through all of the information received from the contributions to the dialogue, to work out an advice for the government. Not only has the Platform used the Dutch educational system to base this advice on, they have also used scientific insights and inspiring examples from other countries, such as Scotland, Finland, Norway and England to form a vision. The contours of the advice have since become tangible and are presented in this document.

The Platform Onderwijs2032 will present teachers, pupils, head teachers, parents, board members, employers and cultural and social organizations who embrace and support education, with the draft version of the vision in October. This invites everyone to respond to the outline and add their questions. The outline has been formulated to encompass both primary and secondary education. The Platform members are going to discuss the outline with the schools, special education and primary education as well as secondary and further education, to disclose what this signifies in practice. The Platform will further develop their advice after the consultations have been held at the schools. The intended result is a well thought-through and supported version of a future-oriented and inspiring content of primary and secondary education, which the Platform will then present to the State Secretary at the end of this year.

A structurally changing society: consequences for education

The (informative) technological revolution is changing society structurally and fundamentally. The informative revolution has soared and now determines a large part of teenagers' lives. Nowadays, information is accessible everywhere and for everyone at any moment. In a society where information is readily available and traditions, for instance religions, are becoming less influential, people are more inclined to look to themselves and others around them to base their values on.

Business life is changing and many jobs, not just the routine ones, will be disappearing due to technological developments. Artisan jobs, jobs that are based on selecting and processing information, and jobs that thrive on social interaction will remain, as well as work that requires less schooling.

¹ Platform Onderwijs2032 literally stands for Platform Education, a group of people, who visualize ideas about the future of education in the Netherlands. The 2032 refers to the future.

The aforementioned changes are already influencing the society in which the adolescents are growing up, but these changes are going to have a bigger impact on the society that the adolescents are going to be a part of as adults. It is mandatory to prepare the adolescents well. It happens at home, at school and other places they are learning at, such as day care, sports clubs, and cultural organizations.

The current level of education is high quality, but it will have to adapt to the drafted changes more strongly. Education puts emphasis on transferring knowledge and mostly appreciates cognitive achievements. The transference of knowledge will remain important in the future, however it will have to be balanced to the other two main goals of education: personal development and preparation of partaking in society. The Platform has been instructed to find a balance between the three main goals. Teachers are going to have to motivate and challenge their pupils to become flexible, responsible and social citizens. They will also have to prepare them for a life of constant learning. The changes in society request it.

The result of the social dialogue: characterizations of education in the future

The participants to the social dialogue roughly agreed on the outline of the characterizations of future-oriented education. The characterizations can be found in the renewals of education in for example Scotland, Finland, Norway and England. They also appear in scientific literature on education.

Education encourages creativity and curiosity, pupils are learning how to constantly develop themselves

The globalization of society raises questions about topics, such as migration and sustainability. These call for innovative solutions from different fields of expertise. It is important for citizens to know how they can gather information and apply it to various situations. It is crucial in a world with strong international competition. Schools teach pupils most skills needed to achieve this. Education intent on stimulating the pupils' creativity and curiosity will help future citizens to think and work within, and outside of, existing frames.

Teaching pupils how to deal with freedom and responsibility and see across borders

Cultural diversity in society is increasing, as is individualization: citizens do not always derive their identity from their religion anymore. What values do they base their thoughts and actions on? Education of the future pays attention to both the values of the Dutch society and the continuation of the constitutional state. It teaches pupils social skills, as well as an understanding of different cultures. Education of the future has to put emphasis on learning how to participate in a democratic society and how to respect one another.

Pupils learn how to implement the digital world

Future-oriented education skills pupils digitally and makes them 'mediawijs'². This is necessary, because they are living in a world in which new technology and digital information are a big influence on personal and professional life. How can new technological services and products best be used? How can digital information be interpreted and processed? And how are digital media and images used properly? It is important to have pupils and teachers work collectively in search of these answers.

² Mediawijs literally stands for 'media wisdom'. It refers to the pupils' needs to be schooled in how to sensibly work with media.

Education offers customized work and is relevant

Education of the future stimulates pupils to ask themselves questions and broaden their horizons. Education has an important, emancipating role: school is the only place for a large portion of pupils where they can develop personal qualities needed to be a part of future society. Education of the future stimulates all pupils to not only use their capacities cognitively, but also creatively and physically. Teachers help pupils – in addition to what the pupils are already doing at home and in their spare time – discover what they are good at and what they enjoy. This enables pupils to discover how to use what they have learnt in a way that suits them.

Pupils would like authentic education that explains their surroundings and answers their current questions. It motivates them to discover more. It prepares them for further education or professions with varied demands that are compatible with their personal abilities and interests.

Skillful, valuable and favorable

The Platform Onderwijs2032 upholds these three values. Education needs to find a way to incorporate them in the Dutch system. However, to be able to do that, the current system will have to undergo changes. After these changes, the system is going to be able to guide pupils in their growth to autonomous adults who are skilled, valuable, and favorable towards themselves and their surroundings. The Platform pleads for a connected educational system in which pupils will receive a profound communal foundation, that can be enriched based on their personal skills and interests.

The complete analysis

Future-oriented education offers schools space to design their education to match their pupils and vision, their area and region, and to optimize what organizations and professionals near the school can offer. The Platform suggests education in which pupils in primary and secondary schools:

- work on their personal development,
- learn fundamental knowledge and skills,
- hone and enrich the knowledge and skills based on their own abilities and interests,
- cross course curricular learning, thinking and working

Personal development as a focal point for education

Personal qualities are becoming increasingly important, both in private and in business life. Platform sees the school of the future – in extension of what children and teenagers learn at home and outside of school – as a practice ground to develop such qualities. The school helps them discover who they are, what they stand for and how they keep themselves towards others. Pupils are taught to make their own choices while taking their environment into consideration. They become tenable, gain confidence and learn that it is favorable to reach conclusions together. The school stimulates their students' curiosity and creativity and teaches them how to become intrepid and flexible. The platform believes exercise and expression (read: music lessons, acting, drawing, arts and filming lessons) to be an attribute: they contribute to forming groups as well as autonomy and teach pupils to explore their own physical abilities. Physical activities boost health and brain functionality. Learning how to exercise remains an important skill. The Platform also feels it is very important to have pupils broaden their horizons. They will discover what they need to take good care of themselves. They are not just learning with their minds, but also with their hands.

The Platform suggests that personal development is personified in the curriculum. It can be in the form of subjects such as philosophy, ideology, sports, arts and culture, and career orientation. The pupils' personal development determines the curriculum within the schools. Primary and special education already have experience in that field. It is a delicate matter in secondary education due to the current curriculum.

The Platform is going to open the dialogue in the next few weeks to continue the discussion as to how personal development can be personified in the curricula of both primary and secondary education.

A core curriculum for every pupil, limited to the basics

Every pupil needs a foundation of certain knowledge and skills to participate in society. This foundation gives them the much needed knowledge of the world. (The Dutch) language, calculus, and mathematics will remain most important in the education of the future. The Platform feels that English and digital skills have to be added to the curriculum. 'Burgerschap'³ will also get a more prominent role if Platform can help it.

Language and calculus skills

Teaching languages and calculus (including mathematics) will remain as important as it is now according to the Platform. Schools will have to dedicate more time to the practical applications of these skills. Pupils will, for instance, be taught how to write application letters, how to handle money, and how to understand charts. They have to consider the following practical applications for language skills; creative writing, presentation skills and reading for fun. Calculus and mathematics offer pupils a chance to learn how to think logically and how to handle numbers, ratios and basic statistics.

English is mandatory to gain access to the world. The Platform feels that pupils should be taught English in the first year of primary school. Four or five year-olds learn foreign languages more easily. Furthermore, their overall language skills will improve because of it. Primary schools that have already started teaching English in their lower years have gathered positive results. The Platform thinks it is very important to have the content of English in primary schools match that of English taught in secondary schools. Therefore, it is important to document what primary school pupils have to be acquainted with at the end of 'groep 8'⁴. The Platform agrees that English belongs in education and that a second foreign language; such as French, German or Spanish should not be obligatory for everyone. Learning a second (and third) foreign language can be a valuable asset, provided the pupils dedicate their time to it; it is not supposed to be an orientation.

Digital skills

Pupils are growing up in a digital age and use new (social) media easily. That does not mean, however, that they know how to sort and gather the information that they find online. Most of the time they are unable to spot dangers of marketing techniques within the online world.

³ Burgerschap literally means 'citizenship'. Pupils have to learn what it means to be a citizen and partake in society.

⁴ Groep 8 is the eighth year of primary school. Pupils are about 11 years old and will go on to secondary education after this 'group'.

The Platform considers it in the pupils' best interest to know about new technology and how to put it to good use. That is why digital skills should be in the curriculum.

These concern media usage and finding, processing, and creating digital information (text and image), but also being able to apply technology to answer questions (so called computational thinking). There are some schools in primary and secondary education that teach their pupils digital skills, but it is important to hone these skills more.

Social skills

Citizenship should have a more prominent position in the curriculum according to the Platform. This translates to more attention to social skills, especially showing respect to others. Besides that, education should offer pupils more knowledge of the constitutional state, democratic values, and human rights. They will get insight in the way society works in their constituency, region, country, and in the world. They will also be taught how to contribute to this. It is important for education to pay more attention to it because they live in a culturally diverse society, within which the importance of traditional links has decreased.

Schools in the Netherlands do relatively little to teach children about citizenship, compared to schools in other countries, at the moment. It is mandatory to pay attention to the subject, but it proves more difficult to teach it well in practice. The Platform believes it is important that the government describes an outline of the core curriculum. This gives the schools some footing to conform to. As a result this enables the schools to fill in a program that suits their vision of education.

Knowledge of the world: less is more

As per the Platform's vision, the school of the future is going to present pupils with essential knowledge and skills that they can use to understand the world around them and help build it. That basis is needed to learn how they can absorb new information and apply it in a responsible manner. Future-oriented education presents pupils with a set core curriculum of essential knowledge spread out over three, so called, domains: Natuur & Technologie⁵, Mens & Maatschappij⁶, and Taal & Cultuur⁷. These domains are – besides the aforementioned knowledge and skills – the starting point of what pupils have to learn. It is fundamental for the pupils' learning abilities that they are taught about these domains thoroughly: not a little snippet of everything but more of less.

The communal core curriculum of the domains has to have a clear set of boundaries and guidelines. This establishes that pupils, teachers and parents have a general gist of what is going to be discussed at their school. It presents schools with the opportunity to enrich the core curriculum to meet their pupils' requirements.

The Platform considers a few things when determining the core curriculum; on the one hand they incorporate 'culture bearing' knowledge, through which Dutch history and identity are passed on from one generation to the next. On the other hand they want to encompass knowledge that centers around the future: pupils will not just learn something because it grew to be so historically, but because it is deemed important for the future. As a result, this could lead to omitting elements that are conventional in current school books. Consider the geographical, historical, and scientific facts pupils currently have to learn by heart.

⁵ Literally nature and technology

⁶ Literally people and society

⁷ Literally languages and culture

The Platform feels strongly that pupils have to be able to complete their knowledge and skills on different levels. Differentiation and customization are key elements in education of the future. The Platform is exploring the impact this will have on special, primary, and secondary education.

It is of the utmost importance to put clear guidelines on the core curriculum. That, however, is easier said than done. The Platform would like to confer about the following questions: How do you decide on a core curriculum in education? How much teaching time should be spent on the core? Do we have to differentiate between primary and secondary education?

Conjoined offer: Knowledge and skills break boundaries between subjects

The Platform believes it to be important to offer knowledge in a more interdisciplinary manner than is currently done in both primary and secondary education. They wish to link this to teaching skills cross curricular. This is a way to teach pupils how to use facts from different subjects and translate them to solve problems they come across. It will also teach them to absorb new information, make something, research, work together, and communicate. The classical divide in subjects is no longer a focal point according to the Platform. They feel that communal themes and the pupils' development and questions should form the starting point, although some components will have to be introduced separately.

The three domains of essential knowledge – nature and technology, people and society, and languages and culture – will be comprised of interdisciplinary themes that cross the lines of the existing subjects. The themes are recognizable for pupils, which will increase their motivation and involvement. A few examples are 'a sustainable world' (people and culture), 'health and illnesses' (nature and technology), and 'communicating in a democratic society' (languages and culture). The themes will guarantee a coherent curriculum with a pliant connection of primary onto secondary education.

The themes represent skills and information from the different subjects that are taught in schools at the moment. It will encourage pupils to break through the limits of subjects. Future-oriented education will drive pupils to use their knowledge to conceive of creative solutions to issues together. The teacher will stimulate critical consideration of the information the pupils gather and how they can enrich their learning and apply it. This can take shape in different ways; sometimes in the classic subjects and, more often than is done now, in an offer of themes and projects that blur the lines between different subjects. Primary education has already started working with correlated subjects and domains. A select assortment of schools in secondary education has benefitted from it.

Example

The combination of the courses: Nature, Life and Technology (NLT) (Havo.Vwo⁸) uses insights from geography, biology, physics, science and mathematics to create a complete program. Pupils are taught about cleaning water and producing food. The coherency is important: pupils learn to find a connection between what they learn at school and what happens in the world around them. The nature of the course NLT asks for a variety of ways in which to test knowledge.

The Platform would like to open the discussion on how to draw up a coherent curriculum. What themes should be focused on in the domains? What is less important? The Platform is definitely open to hearing from schools who have succeeded in producing cross core curricular projects.

⁸ See attachment. It explains the Dutch school system and translations.

Space for ambitious enriching per school and per pupil

The aforementioned core curriculum of knowledge and skills includes the essence of that which pupils should know and can do to be able to function in society. Schools and pupils will get more room for enrichment because the core curriculum is coherent and has boundaries. This should give the impulse for the commitment and motivation of pupils: their questions, curiosity, capacities, and interests will form an important directive while learning. Pupils who need more time to make the core curriculum of knowledge and skills their own will also receive this. Those who need less time, will be able to move on quicker and will have extra space for enrichment and broadening. This flexibility enhances the chances of pupils getting a better education to prepare them for their future.

In education of the future schools are to enable their pupils to choose from certain specifications; vocational courses, foreign languages, or computer science. They can support their pupils to become a part of society. For instance, they can set up projects that focus on practice in cooperation with vocational education or colleges to provide authentic education. These links have already been used in Vmbo schools and are interesting for Havo and Vwo⁹. The upper levels of the pupils' education should enable them to focus on what skills and knowledge they need for their further education, so that the transition runs smoother. This can be done by selecting specific enrichment from a core curriculum and cross core curriculum, for instance from the earlier presented example of the course Nature, Life and Technology.

One of the questions that the Platform would like to see answered in the next few weeks is, how the quality of the enrichment can be safeguarded, so that the connection to further education runs more smoothly. The Platform is going to discuss this with colleges and universities.

The Platform believes schools will have freer choices as to how they would like to offer their enrichment programs. It is adamant that schools work together structurally, with different parties in a society where pupils do not solely learn everything at school anymore. Examples are communal and cultural organizations, business life and sports clubs. If schools work together with them, it will create a more stimulating learning environment for pupils. It supports teachers as well, as they can use the expertise and possibilities of their surroundings. Schools should also collaborate amongst themselves better to establish a more interesting curriculum, according to the Platform.

The school of the future optimizes the growing possibilities of technology, not as a purpose but as a means. This enables varied, customized education. New technologies offer pupils possibilities to develop their own portfolio in their personally set pace and level, and learn outside of school. This gives them a better insight into their learning curves and motivates them to keep learning.

The ownership of schools grow

The Platform deems it important to grant schools and teachers flexibility to make choices that match their profiles and vision. It is important that they take responsibility to provide interesting and enriched curricula to their pupils. A lot of schools have started doing this, but if others are to follow their lead, a lot will have to be done.

⁹ Vmbo, Havo and Vwo are levels of the Dutch school system. See attachment for further explanations.

Schools experience a lot of pressure because of the amount of course material, tests and examinations. This determines what schools do with their limited free space. Schools do not use the freedom to find collaboration with different fields of expertise, take their own contextual choices, nor offer pupils personal enrichment. The Platform seeks to clarify what is mandatory course work and what is not, to break through this rut.

Testing what is measurable as well as what is ‘noticeable’

If the balance of the main goals is going to change in education, the way of testing and examining should be updated too, according to the Platform. They feel that tests and exams should measure up to the qualifications of future education. Some forms of central examination will remain important because pupils have to meet the standards of further education. However, sometimes skills are noticeable instead of measurable; pupils’ experiences, involvement, responsibility they have shown, and the confidence that they have gained. Such qualities should be appreciated and judged as well in regards to education. The Platform values a balance between central examinations and school examinations and is looking into the possibilities of personal completion.

The Platform will go over how to form testing and will discuss this with the organizations responsible for designing the tests and exams. The Platform is curious to see if any schools have experience in showing pupils what they have learnt at school, also in regards to the noticeable.

Prerequisites to make future-oriented education possible

The Platform agrees that teachers have to have a firm role in the development of the proposed vision. They will, together with the school board, be responsible for their curriculum and work it out in teams. The government will present them with clear frames within which they can develop their education. The Platform believes more is needed to make this proposition a reality. It is not just about different accents in tests and supervision, but also about time and facilities for the professionalization of teachers. A vision that takes curiosity and the pupils’ studiousness as a starting point requires teachers and schools that are eager to learn. Teams of teachers have to be able to develop so called curricular leadership. This asks for professional contacts outside of school. Besides that, the education policy has to be defined in an interrelated system. This vision forms the starting point for policy developers and agreements between everyone involved in molding education: teachers, board members, politicians and policy makers, publishers, test developers, and the inspection.

The proposal is ready. How to continue?

This document contains the main goal that Platform Onderwijs2032 has envisioned. The Platform wants to offer an inspiring perspective with their proposal. This is a proposal on national level. Using existing and new ingredients, schools can translate this to match their own vision and plans. It enables a way to create a coherent and suitable curriculum to suit their own needs. For some schools this will mean that they are stimulated to continue on an already taken path. For others it incites a motion of change.

The Platform will start conversing with schools, teachers, parents, and pupils about their main goal in October. Others who are involved, such as communal and cultural organizations and employers, are also invited to respond. The italicized questions in the blue parts have an important role to play. The Platform is planning on speaking with parties who are going to play a role in creating the necessary boundaries, especially the areas of tests and examinations, supervision, educating, and course material.

The Platform will continue to expand the main goal based on previously received comments and new responses. The Platform will set up a definitive advice based on all contributions and is presenting this to the government at the end of this year.