

# SCHOOL LEADERSHIP IN URBAN EDUCATION

THE OSLO-AMSTERDAM EXCHANGE PROGRAMME  
FIRST REPORT — NOVEMBER 2018



**NSO-CNA**  
LEIDERSCHAPSACADEMIE

## PREFACE

‘Yes, this is really something different’ they all agree. Working as school leaders in a Big City is challenging. School leaders from Oslo and Amsterdam discuss and contrast their personal-professional and school issues in both their worlds. They share work experiences and their curiosity about how colleagues in other national educational systems and urban settings lead and improve schools. They are puzzled for instance by issues of school climate and their effects on learning outcome. Questions how to deal with school culture and street culture and how they can better capitalize on all the opportunities the Big City has to offer their students.

How to work across school boundaries and with diverse school and multi-party teams are topics that are raised. Notwithstanding all these pressing questions the focus is on what can be expected of school leaders in dealing with them in this urban context. How their work can be further informed and developed in an international Community of Practice of peers. It shows that urban school leaders in different European countries have a lot in common.

Please find here the first report in the **Oslo-Amsterdam Programme**. It sums up the findings of the visit to Oslo in November 2018 and serves as a building block and reference for the development of the domain of School Leadership in Urban Education. We hope this report is an inspiration for other school leaders as well, to take an interest in this new ways of mutual learning and crafting new school leader practice.

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## CONTENTS

1	Introduction	5
2	Improving the learning outcome of all	7
2.1	Expectations	7
2.2	Observations	8
2.3	Similarities and differences in school practices	9
2.4	Results & Recommendations	10
3	Dealing with the dynamics of diversity	11
3.1	Expectations	11
3.2	Observations	11
3.3	Similarities and differences in school practices	13
3.4	Results & Recommendations	14
4	Developing work relations outside school	15
4.1	Expectations	15
4.2	Observations	16
4.3	Similarities and differences in school practices	21
4.4	Results & Recommendations	22
5	Holding a supportive school climate	23
5.1	Expectations	23
5.2	Observations	24
5.3	Similarities and differences in school practices	26
5.4	Results & Recommendations	27
6	Conclusion	28
7	References	35
<b>Appendix - Blog of two school visits</b>		
I	Visit at Apalløkka Skole	37
II	Visit at Haugerud Skole	41



Self-portrait of a student at Haugerud skole, Oslo

## 1 INTRODUCTION

School leaders from the Amsterdam School Boards and the City of Oslo Education Agency join a four year (2018–2022) programme on ‘school leadership in big city schools’. An international community of practice of school leaders who have their work in a rapidly changing metropolitan context. The focus of the exchange is both on professional and school development of the involved school leaders and their schools. In November 2018 our first group of Amsterdam school leaders shared knowledge and experiences in Oslo about creating good schools for students with a great diversity in cultures, languages, levels, talents, and motivation. Each of us have prepared questions for learning about a challenge at our own school in Amsterdam and compare and contrast these with the practice in Oslo. We also prepare a welcoming visit of the Oslo school leaders to Amsterdam in March 2019. The involved 14 Oslo school leaders are from the schools: Apalløkka, Bjørnholt, Ellingsrud, Frydenberg, Granstangen, Haugerud, Hauketo, Holmlia, Jordal, Lofsrud, Skullerud, Sofienberg, Stasjonsfjellet and Tokerud. They are 14 schools out of the 22 schools from the Oslo U22 school improvement programme.



Model for assessment of school leadership in Urban Education  
(F. Grobbee & K. Buijtelaar 2018)

In this report, we present our findings. We structured our findings into four chapters according to the model we use both in Amsterdam and Oslo for the assessment and practitioner exchange of school leadership in Urban Education:

- Improving the learning outcome of all
- Dealing with the dynamics of diversity
- Developing work relations outside school
- Holding a supportive school climate

For each of these four topics we present our expectations, observations, similarities and differences and the results & recommendations of our visit. In chapter six we sum up our conclusion.

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**NSO-CNA School Leadership Academy** organizes (as part of the Master of Educational Management) the **Amsterdam-Oslo Programme** in close collaboration with the **City of Oslo Education Agency** and the **City and School Boards of Amsterdam**. The development of Communities of Practice for school leaders to support peer-review and learning is relevant for school leadership in urban school settings. This new practice can be inspired by comparing and contrasting school leaders professional roles in different societal and educational contexts.

## 2 IMPROVING THE LEARNING OUTCOME OF ALL

SCHOOL LEADERS AIM TO IMPROVE THE LEARNING OUTCOME OF ALL STUDENTS AND STUDENT GROUPS AT THEIR DIVERSE SCHOOLS.

### 2.1 Expectations

Before starting our journey to Oslo, we compared scores on the Pisa ranking list from 2018 as a way of getting an idea of differences or similarities in both systems.<sup>1</sup> For Oslo as well as Amsterdam we have the hypothesis that the outcome in both capitals is slightly lower than the national average due to the urban surroundings and pupils from different cultural backgrounds. Both countries stress the importance of Mathematics, English and national language. Both score internationally relatively high (see table 1). We expected to see a systematic approach to improving the results on these three subjects in all Oslo lower secondary schools.

Average	Mathematics	Science	Reading
<b># 1</b> Singapore 551,7	<b># 1</b> Singapore 564	<b># 1</b> Singapore 556	<b># 1</b> Singapore 535
<b># 14</b> The Netherlands 508	<b># 11</b> The Netherlands 512	<b># 15</b> The Netherlands 509	<b># 9</b> Norway 513
<b># 18</b> Norway 504,3	<b># 19</b> Norway 502	<b># 24</b> Norway 498	<b># 16</b> The Netherlands 503

Table 1: data from Pisa Ranking List 2018

## 2.2 Observations

In Norway, there is a national curriculum which doesn't give schools any freedom on what they want to teach and on how many lessons are spent on each subject. Because all students with different academic levels stay together until the age of 16, knowledge of each student capabilities is essential for teachers to give each student the right support to reach the next level.

Since all Oslo schools are run by one board, they all use the same system to present and analyze their data. This makes it easy for parents and stakeholders to compare schools on learning outcome, well-being, etc. It's easy to see the development of the results over time or compared to the average student in Oslo or Norway. The focus is primarily on the well-being of the students.

For the principal, these data are the starting point for plans for improvement for the coming period or to measure what has been achieved over the last year: f.i. The reading skills of 50% of the new pupils starting year 8 in one school were between 1 or 2, at the end of year 8 only 18% scored between 1 and 2. A direct result of the emphasis placed on reading: 'through manga books, students are lured into reading'.

Although we didn't observe how these results were shared with the teachers or how they are the starting point for making improvements on the different subjects, we think data are systematically used by all teachers to measure and improve the result of their education.

Our visiting time was too short to get a good idea about the way testing is used to improve the learning outcome. The feedback we saw was primarily given as feedforward. The overall use of ICT made it possible to differentiate between all students needs.

The focus in class is on internal motivation. Apart from national tests in year 8 and 9, there are more summative tests. However, the overall outcome never is that pupils have to repeat a class for a year.

### **2.3 Similarities and differences in school practices**

#### **Testing**

Yearly national testing system versus entrance testing (age 12) and final exams (age 16, 17 or 18, depending on level). Both our countries have national tests but what is done with the outcome differs: in the Netherlands all pupils take at the end of the primary school (11–12 year) a test which is the 'entrance ticket' for the level of the secondary education they will follow. At the end of the secondary school (depending on the level after 4, 5 or 6 years) all take part in the final exams which can lead up to university. In Norway, there are more national tests, but the outcome has less important consequences for each student.

#### **Teacher-pupil ratio differs**

In Norway the ratio pupils/teachers are different: there are fewer pupils per teacher. The amount of lessons a teacher has to provide is also less. Both things make it easier to know what each pupil specifically needs to improve its learning. The Dutch system has the advantage that there are fewer differences in academic capabilities within one class, so there is less need for differentiation.

#### **Part-time/full-time**

In the Netherlands, most teachers work part time, in Norway hardly anybody works less than 1 FTE. Because of this, the way teachers can work together differs considerably. The solutions Oslo schools took are impossible in the Netherlands.

### **Lesson hours**

National curriculum and fixed hours per subject (Oslo) versus Amsterdam schools who can decide their curriculum and hours. Schools in the Netherlands are freer to achieve learning goals. Although there is a kind of national curriculum: after two or three years 53 goals have to be taught, it's far lost, and schools can decide for themselves how these goals are going to be reached: f.i. you can teach physics, chemistry, and biology or you can choose to combine them and teach science. It's up to each school how many lessons each subject will take. There is no national test to measure the achievement of these goals.

### **Focus on marks and passing or repeating a year**

In secondary school, each pupil has to receive a minimum average mark to pass on to the next year. If not they have to repeat the class for one year. A lot of student motivation is by this way external, compared to the focus on internal motivation in Oslo.

### **Use of data ([skloeporten.udir.no](http://skloeporten.udir.no) vs. [scholenopdekaart.nl](http://scholenopdekaart.nl))**

In both countries, data are presented to the outside world. In Oslo, the data are more detailed and specific. Measuring the development on certain topics is easy. The data are the starting point for next year's plans. The data in the Netherlands are presented more superficial to the outside world. The way they are used in schools differs quite a lot.

## **2.4 Results & Recommendations**

At face value, the differences between both school systems don't lead to significant differences in learning outcome in the PISA ranking. But that is just one way of looking at things. The way these results are achieved differs quite. Coming from the Netherlands, we are envious at the time each teacher has to prepare its lessons, to work together with colleagues and to spend on each student. The emphasis on student wellbeing with the help of social workers and the community is outstanding. When visiting Amsterdam our Oslo friends might become jealous at the curriculum which offers far more freedom,

school and classes with less academic differences, the waymarks externally can help to improve motivation of students.

### **3 DEALING WITH THE DYNAMICS OF DIVERSITY**

SCHOOL LEADERS AIM TO CAPITALIZE ON THE (CULTURAL)  
DIVERSITY IN THEIR SCHOOLS

#### **3.1 Expectations**

How do schools in Oslo deal with diversity? That, of course, is a fascinating and essential question for us because we need to find answers to that question ourselves in our city as well as our schools. The number of pupils with a migration background is high at most of our schools. We expected that the schools in Oslo would have a smaller challenge in coping with diversity than ourselves. In our perception, the population of Norwegian schools would be dominantly traditional Norwegian. We thought that not more than 25% of the students would have a migration background. This perception was not based on theoretical knowledge. It was merely an idea based on what we see on tv or read in the newspapers. When reading the introductions of the various participating Oslo schools, it became evident that our perception was not realistic. At all 14 participating Oslo schools the part of pupils with a migration background varied between 50 to more than 90%. Also, there are schools in which the diversity in social-economic backgrounds is significant, resulting in big academic differences. We expected the schools to be primarily interested in getting good learning results and maybe to a lesser extent in the development of social skills.

#### **3.2 Observations**

Already during our first meeting with our Norwegian colleagues on Monday morning, it was clear that the topic of Urban Education was just as real and alive in Oslo as it is in Amsterdam today. All the U-22 schools share the goal of giving the students, especially the ones with another background than Norwegian, a good start when they leave lower secondary school to provide them with a better chance later in life. We found

that the various schools deal with diversity mostly in the same manner. Of course, there were differences, but these differences were relatively small. Overall we can say that the policy to deal with diversity included the following trademarks:

### **‘We compensate’**

This is part of a sentence we heard several times when we were at Haugerud Skole. The pupils who didn't have the means to participate in the activities of the school could use the material of the school. The school thought that it is essential to include all the students in all activities. For that, they have organizations sponsoring the school.

### **‘We build character’**

At Granstangen Skole a big poster hangs at the door which said: We build Character. On that poster, seven words said what traits in character would help reaching your goals and thus being successful. Also at the other schools, it was evident that it was essential to pay attention to developing these kinds of skills especially for the pupils who don't get that kind of support from home.

This way an atmosphere is created in which pupils and staff work together in obtaining personal growth. It is an atmosphere in which pupils are seen and feel loved. It is only in a supportive atmosphere where pupils will learn.

### **‘We win the hearts of students, parents and the local community’**

Cooperation with the community is a vital part of establishing a learning climate. Therefore it is crucial to include the parents for instance in the activities at school. The Haugerud Skole made it a habit to text the parent's positive messages concerning the behavior of their children. Just by sharing positive news the attendance of parents went up from less than 50% to approximately 90%.

Also, the other schools put extra effort in maintaining good relationships with the community (f.i. social work and police). That way school becomes a more significant part in the lives of the pupils. And the cooperation between organizations makes the support more effective.

### **Special attention for language skills**

All schools realize that to be successful in Norwegian society, language skills are fundamental. Especially for the pupils who do not speak Norwegian as their mother tongue, it is essential to motivate them to read. That way they get to know more words and speaking and writing will improve. The schools we visited have libraries filled with books that might be interesting for the pupils. They are very welcome to attend the library, even during the breaks.

### **Formative assessment**

Pupils with a migration background or who come from parents who have not had an education themselves can start at a lower level of academic skills than the pupils who were born in Norway with well-educated parents. For them, it can be very demotivating to work with perfect grades. For this reason, formative evaluation gets more and more important at the school we visited.

### **Ambition**

The schools want their pupils to do better at the national tests in Norwegian, English, and Mathematics. These results determine to what upper secondary schools they can be admitted. That way these results are relevant in determining their success in later life and in giving them an equal chance in life. The schools pay extra attention to these subjects, so they get the chance to improve their results.

## **3.3 Similarities and differences in school practices**

Compared to our Netherlands system the schools in Oslo are more focused on the pupil. Building relationships with the pupils, working at personal growth, are vital parts of daily school life. Although in our system we also

know that learning only starts when there is a safe and supportive atmosphere, it seems that this is more so stressed in Oslo.

In the Dutch system giving grades plays a more critical role than in the Oslo schools we visited. We do move towards a more formative setting as well, and we acknowledge the fact that insight in personal growth and giving feedback are essential parts of learning.

Involving parents and the community with the schools is something which is more done by the schools in Oslo than is the case at our schools. It seems that this involvement helps the pupils to feel part of Norwegian society.

### **3.4 Results & Recommendations**

In contrast to what we expected, we can conclude that the schools in Oslo do have to deal with diversity. They do that by creating an atmosphere of inclusion. Giving the pupils attention and offering support to them, make them feel at home and that strengthens the learning climate. It was good to see what initiatives are taken by the various schools to achieve this. It was interesting to see how the development of personal growth on the one hand and the attention for academic growth on the other hand both played an essential role in the school life in Oslo.

We like to conclude that our visit inspires us to take a closer look at our way of dealing with diversity.

## 4 DEVELOPING WORK RELATIONS OUTSIDE SCHOOL

SCHOOL LEADERS AIM TO DEVELOP WORK RELATIONS AND MOBILIZE RESOURCES OUTSIDE SCHOOL TO BE ABLE TO DEAL WITH MORE DIVERSITY INSIDE SCHOOL

### 4.1 Expectations

As a preparation for our trip, we looked for relevant data on the different themes of school leadership & Urban Education in Oslo. Unfortunately, there was no literature on this specific topic to be found. Consequently, it was impossible to have a clear picture of the work relations Oslo-schools have established with local communities, social – and other organizational partners. All we could do is evaluate our own practice and knowledge on this topic and try to look for corresponding examples in Oslo.

Research on Google, however, gave some – highly subjective and by no means scientific proven – glimpses of practices in schools in Norway that could be starting points of this investigation. The first category of ‘publications’ on Google were own observations of expats with children on schools in Norway. The best example of this kind of references on school practice by these relative outsiders is a piece by Rebecca Lowen, published in the Startribune with the heading: ‘What works for kids? In Norway, it’s a less-stressful classroom atmosphere.’<sup>2</sup>

In this article, the author praises the focus of the teachers on the ‘whole child’ and the excellent job that is done on literacy and numeracy. Besides this, there is also an emphasis on building camaraderie, as opposed to competition. The use of field trips in this light is a good example of how nature in the neighborhood is used as a learning environment for the pupils. As readers of this article, it gave us the first indication that our representation of schools in Oslo being mostly white and traditional Norwegian was false: “None of the children in my son’s class are native Norwegian speakers. At home, they speak, variously, Urdu, Russian, Icelandic, Polish, Chinese, English, and Spanish. This diversity is reflective of Oslo itself, where 30 percent of the population is composed of immigrants or

children born in Norway to immigrant parents”.

Nevertheless, nowhere in this article, the writer produced some evidence that the mentioned school is in one way or another connected with external partners, the neighborhood or the different communities of parents and there is no indication of practices related with so-called extended schools-programmes. Quite the reverse is stated as the author writes of the closing time of the school: one hour earlier as customary in the school the child attended in the U.S.A. Similar elusiveness on relations outside the schools is found in other work of this first category.

The second category of publications on Google is different. They are mostly written by reporters or commentators of newspapers and magazines.<sup>3,4</sup> These pieces give not only a completely different representation on what goes on in schools in Oslo, but they also can be considered as evidence of experiences of culture clashes in some schools. As we researched this aspect of school life in Norwegian schools, we were struck by the similarities of problems as experienced in there and our schools and the comparable ways the press reported these ‘clashes’. The suggestions in these articles is that things are out of control in some schools. With more than a neutral representation of the situation, journalists write about daily fighting, weapons in and around schools and threatening conditions for pupils and teachers. The usual partners of the schools mentioned are the police and social work, but no indication is given that local participants, concerned parents or anxious people from the neighborhood are involved in creating positive changes.

Another aspect of what we have called culture clashes is the reporting on cases where parents complain about the misinterpretation of their own culture or situations where their religion was left out of account. The best example of this last aspect was a piece in the Telegraph by Dean Nelson who spells out a situation in 2012 where social workers ‘took Sri Lankan children into care for overeating chocolate’.<sup>5</sup> These allegations were similar to previous cases of children of Indian descent who were taken in care.

As a result of these decisions, the foreign minister of India accused Norway of ignorance of Asian culture. At the least, you could interpret these signals as a gap between cultures and the question is if the Oslo schools did overcome this breach by building relations with their communities.

## **4.2 Observations**

The first observation we think is crucial to mention on this subject is the relatively small scale of the Oslo schools as we have met them. Building relations outside the school is much more complicated with larger schools as they are common in Amsterdam (500 up till 1000 and more students). This gives the Oslo schools in our view a good starting point for building a robust social network.

The second observation is also a unique opportunity: most schools we have visited are – as far as we have understood – schools who draw the pupils from their direct vicinity. That means that these schools can embed themselves relatively easy into the neighborhood they operate in and build multiple direct and indirect contacts with their pupils and the communities they belong to.

The school-climate touched us. We experienced this in most schools we visited. In retrospect, we understand much better the messages of the expats-literature we read before we arrived in Oslo. Our observations match with our expectation that we would find a praxis in Oslo schools which takes into consideration the 'whole' child. We believe that to be one of the strong points of the Oslo schools, which can also be used for opening up the surroundings of the school. More specific: a programme as 'winning the hearts' of the pupils lays a firm ground for the next step in this direction. By addressing the pupils in a loving, understanding way, it becomes possible to reach even further out into the world of these children.

The strategic decision to work with daily positive messages to pupils and parents strengthen this development even more. According to KidsMatter, the evidence-based framework for cross-sectoral cooperation from Australia's National Mental Health Plan, building relations with families in an intercultural environment is crucial for the development of the child but can be only successful if there is a constant focus on building trust, setting up good communication and management of expectations.<sup>6</sup> We conclude that the first two topics are brilliantly implanted in the observed approach of pupils and parents, but we have doubts on the last one, and we couldn't find much evidence if there is enough awareness in the schools of the underlying principle of reciprocity that is involved in all these points.

Before we go further, we would like to point out that in the evaluation we did after our observations it became clear to us that the impact of the mentioned approach to the pupils, especially the combination of actions we saw (the greeting of the pupils in the morning, the strategic planning of free time of pupils, the consequent positive feedback in class and through text messages) is highly successful. We recommend that (if this isn't already the case) this praxis is recorded in a written standard for all schools and that the effectiveness of this approach could scientifically be researched.

In the management of expectations, we think that the observed schools can make a big step, but only if there is enough awareness in the staff that in the new setting – an intercultural – this 'management' applies to all and not just to pupils and parents. In our Amsterdam schools, we only recently became aware that managing the expectations of our staff is crucial for taking the next step in coping with the rapid changes of parentage, similar changes in the environment of the schools and consequently for building new work relations outside the school. This means that the staff should not only open their hearts for the pupils but manage their expectations of behavior and participation of pupils and parents and adapt themselves to this new environment they are working in.

This process of awareness and adaptation takes a specific type of school leader. Outcome of research on building work relations outside school is clear: 'highly successful school leaders in these challenging environments all chose the same approach, after practicing this with parents; 'the stance most of the school leaders took in the larger environment was to treat it as a source of opportunities, resources, and potentially helpful ideas rather than a site of roadblocks, unhelpful advice and unreachable requirements' (leadership for learning improvement in urban school – Wallace Foundation).<sup>7</sup> We think that we saw enough evidence in the way the school leaders in Oslo are operating that they can transform their schools to this new level and we saw some proof that they already try to experiment with some aspects of embracing new possibilities.

As an example, we not only mention here the way we saw how social workers are implanted in the school system but specifically make a note of the fact that some of these social workers came from the same communities as the pupils. In one case we met a former pupil, now employed in this role. This is in our view an excellent example of a community collaboration that can be the start of communal, reciprocal learning and cooperation. Not only can pupils learn from this role model to adapt to requirements in school and society, but the staff can also learn from the role model to breach cultural gaps they were not aware of. This way of working with role models can also apply for parents. The schools can use the knowledge of parents of their culture for a better understanding of the behavior of the pupils. Besides this, it is especially helpful to learn from the parents their thoughts on – and ways of – motivating the pupils to finish their education. It is then possible to answer together with the question of how parents can become the primary motivators for their children to continue their study.

If schools in this way are going to realize a profitable collaboration, “then [they] must look beyond the parents of the pupils and into the larger community. These are the community partners, the businesses where parents are employed, and other local entities can provide valuable linkages for involvement. These are the partners that can lend expertise to problems and be visible partners for education” (School-Parent-Community Partnership. Resource Book. Indiana Department of Education. 2001).<sup>8</sup> During our visit, we didn’t encounter examples of this kind of collaboration, but we did find some prerequisites for this relationship already in the schools. In most schools, there was talk or already displays of extra-curricular activities. It became apparent in our conversations during our visits that planning, organizing and funding these activities is problematic.

Exactly these issues which present themselves at first as problems in the school organization are often the first signs that the school is ready to position itself in the center of a network of parents and beyond. In general and comparative studies on community schools, this moment in expanding the scope and influence of the school is often described as the moment that schools stop being ‘crisis-orientated’ and become central in the stream of communication in their district. Again, we emphasize here the importance of a relatively small scale as school and a small area where the pupils live because otherwise, this communication is almost impossible to manage.

The tipping point for all schools in this stage of transformation was when in complete cooperation with already mentioned stakeholders of the communities (beginning with parents, but also with more unlikely partners as police, local shopkeepers, students, volunteers from local sports clubs, etc.) the multitude of activities was programmed, organized and executed. To conclude this report, we like to quote from the Extended schools Pathfinder Evaluation of 2004, because it gives a good oversight of activities that are proven effective and even maintained in most cases after initial funding for these activities stopped (by the support from the communities) and also because most of them are already in the scope of the U22 schools:

'Many activities were targeted at pupils and were focused directly or indirectly on learning. Overall, the commonest activities included breakfast clubs, after school and holiday activities for pupils, family learning, adult education, childcare and community use of school facilities. The "full-service" school in which community services are located on the school site was less common, though many schools were working towards this' (Cummings et al., 2004, p. 5).<sup>9</sup>

### **4.3 Similarities and differences in school practices**

Although the structures wherein schools in Oslo and Amsterdam are functioning are different – e.g. one Education Agency in Oslo versus many school boards in Amsterdam, a stricter national policy concerning curricula in Norway versus an open educational system in the Netherlands – we encounter the same problems. Possibly we are on the same track to tackle some of them. On the topic of developing work relations outside the school, we think that there is a difference of approach which tips the balance of success at this moment in favor of the Oslo programmes and schools. As mentioned, we observed that there was a systematic approach developed in the schools we visited for building trust and positive communication. In this aspect, the U22 schools already laid a much firmer foundation for further development and cooperation than most of the schools in Amsterdam. However, we saw an omission in the awareness of the underlying principle of reciprocity. Although this lack of awareness is also still visible in schools in Amsterdam, the situation is there rapidly changing, because of the accretion of the number of teachers from the same background as the pupils. These role models are questioning all kinds of preconceptions in schools and are catalytic in the process of a better understanding and a new level of cooperation with pupils, parents, and communities.

Apart from that, the position of the school leaders in Amsterdam differ from that of the school leaders in Oslo, and that makes it easier for Amsterdam' school leaders to negotiate with local and even national politicians and lobby for extra funding for development of community schools

or extra activities. The same is possibly true for building working relations with judicial authorities, police, etc. Probably interesting to further look into this issue.

#### **4.4 Results & Recommendations**

Most recommendations are already given. Instead of repetition, we like to return here to one of the remarks of Rebecca Lowen, which article we used as an example of expats-publications we found via Google. She specifically mentioned the use of field trips, and it became clear to us during our visits that there is a unique possibility in the direct vicinity of the U22 schools we lack as schools, and that is an abundance of raw nature. Also, we found evidence that the so-called Udeskole-tradition is a potential possibility of empowerment of pupils. There is also in this approach of education the change of making the Udeskole the 'playing field' for interaction with all kind of local stakeholders. 'Udeskole can take place in both natural and cultural settings, i.e., forests, parks, local communities, factories, farms, galleries, theaters, etc. Teachers may draw on the history and development of the local community to create a closer link between schools, community, and local places.' (P. Bentsen, *The New Nature Movement*, 2013).<sup>10</sup>

As a last recommendation, we suggest that the U22-schools take advantage of the structure they have to work in and try to establish via the Educational Agency a good connection with policymakers for extra funding for their community activities.

## 5 HOLDING A SUPPORTIVE SCHOOL CLIMATE

SCHOOL LEADERS AIM TO HOLD AND NURTURE A SAFE AND SUPPORTIVE SCHOOL CLIMATE AS A PREREQUISITE FOR ALL LEARNING AND SOCIALIZING.

### 5.1 Expectations

In the Netherlands, we have a certain image and story of a 'perfect Scandinavian education system.' In this utopia, the profession of teacher is highly regarded by society and teachers aren't considered as performers only. They teach by far fewer hours, and at the same time, they have a higher income. It's also very spacious in this Scandinavian Walhalla, which creates more opportunities for schools. Learning communities are natural ways of working together (in and between different kinds of schools, kindergarten, and organizations for after-school activities) and, last but not least, innovation is a continuously ongoing process. When Dutch schools are planning a study visit abroad, still their destination is predominantly a Scandinavian country.

Of course, this is excessive stereotyping, and there's no such thing as THE Scandinavian education system. Scandinavian nations have their education system and policy and can't be lumped together. But the existence of this prejudice may have influenced our expectations before we started to inform ourselves about the Norwegian education system. Also, this was before we traveled to Oslo and before we started to inform ourselves seriously.

From this perspective, we assumed that out of our four School Leadership domains 'Holding a supportive school climate' wouldn't be a huge issue in Norway. But when we read about the U22 programme in Oslo, we changed our view. 'Holding a supportive school climate' could take more efforts in some schools than we first expected. We started to believe that the challenges Norwegian school leaders in and around these U22 schools are facing, could be compared with our situation and that their knowledge and good practices would add valuable insights to our exchange.

To summarize, our increasing specific knowledge about Norway, Oslo, and the U22 schools changed our 'expectations' (or: assumptions) into curiosity. A good thing in working on professional exchange.

## 5.2 Observations

The positive attitude of all staff members is visible in the entire school. During our visits, we had conversations with different kinds of staff members: teachers, management team and social workers. All of them seemed to believe and communicate the vision that the way to inclusion is supporting positive behavior and working on a warm relationship. We observed this particularly in their positive attitude towards pupils and the way they talked to and about the pupils. Some examples are:

- Welcoming the pupils every morning when they enter the school (wearing a yellow vest);
- Questions instead of judgments: teachers will ask the pupils for the reason they're too late at school instead of punishing them immediately;
- Pupils aren't expelled from school in case of unacceptable behavior. Instead, these pupils are being questioned by social workers in the school about their behavior and well-being;
- Social workers are part of the staff. They are in and around the school five days a week and are responsible for a specific group of pupils. If there's trouble in the classroom and it's impossible for the teacher to solve the problem himself, the social workers will talk with the pupils outside the classroom. An important detail is that pupils will always get a second chance and are welcome to come back and follow the lesson. Every morning the social workers are calling the pupils who don't show up;
- Pay attention choosing the right words. For example, schools are using the concept of presence instead of absence.

### **Huge variety in activities offered during break time and after school**

During break time the schools organize an array of activities. A school with an indoor sports hall gives pupils the opportunity to play sports. Another school facilitates a room where pupils can play board games, and also the libraries are opened during break time. We also visited a school where pupils were allowed to stay in their classroom. This was possible because the classroom was 'given' to them, which caused a sense of responsibility. These activities take place under the supervision of teachers and the team of social workers, but not in a controlling manner. The staff uses this time to invest in the relationship by chatting and playing games together with the pupils where needed and desired. Some schools also offer after-school activities organized by the social team to prevent their pupils from hanging around in the streets.

### **Each group its classroom versus every hour another classroom**

Many schools we visited let pupils 'own' their classrooms. As a result of this choice, the pupils felt more responsible for their environment and took care for it by decorating and painting walls, handling the furniture carefully and cleaning up. Whenever possible, lessons are given to them in their classrooms. Fewer changes during the day lead to a calmer atmosphere in the schools. However, it is inevitable that teachers do change classrooms.

### **Role models**

In several conversations, the importance of role models was emphasized. Both sports heroes and former students were used to influencing positive behavior.

### **Dialogic teaching**

Holding a supportive school climate is not only the issue of a school leader. It demands a community in which every participant plays an active role. This means pupils also have to master specific competencies and skills. A programme from England called Dialogic teaching is therefore used in some schools.<sup>11</sup>

### **5.3 Similarities and differences in school practices**

To write something in common about the similarities and differences between schools in Oslo and Amsterdam requires accuracy. During every school visit, all school leaders consciously or unconsciously compared the school climate with theirs. Honestly, we would have done the same if we had visited each other in Amsterdam and probably noticed as many differences as we did during our visits to Oslo. So we need to focus on the 'typical' Amsterdam vs. Oslo similarities and differences and try to avoid the pitfall of generalization.

#### **Size of the school**

Most lower secondary schools participating in the U22 programme, consist out of 200 – 400 pupils. Compared to the participating schools from Amsterdam (500 – 1100 pupils), these schools are significantly smaller. Holding a supportive school climate in a school that counts 200 pupils might require something different compared with a school that consists out of 1100 pupils. We need to keep in mind that solutions and ideas we found cannot always be applied entirely on a one-to-one basis in other schools. On the other hand, sometimes size doesn't matter. For example, the basic idea of building a relationship and community can be applied everywhere; it's only the way you organize it as a school leader that differs.

#### **The population of the school**

The majority of the pupils of the schools in Oslo are living in the direct neighborhood. In Amsterdam, the schools attract pupils from all over Amsterdam and even beyond. This makes it more challenging to build a community with one vision of positive behavior, and it takes more effort to keep the lines between school, neighborhood and parents short.

#### **Teacher-pupil ratio & amount of lessons differ**

In Norway, there are less pupils per teacher and the amount of lessons teachers have to provide is lower, as written above. Both these things not only make it easier to meet the pupil's needs concerning learning but also regarding special needs. There's more time available to pay atten-

tion to the pupils individual and social well-being and development. For example: to know the pupils so well that teachers can tell whether they had eaten breakfast or not.

### **Care structure**

In the Netherlands, several schools have implemented an approach called 'Positive Behavior Support' (PBS).<sup>12</sup> This approach focuses on desirable behavior and at the same time on preventing problem behavior. The idea is that a positive, social and safe environment encourages learning. There are similarities between this programme and the things we saw in schools in Oslo.

The social workers as part of the team in the schools are different from the way we organized the care structure in Amsterdam. In our schools, we have the tutors as the first contact person for pupils. Pupils with special needs exceeding the support a tutor can provide, are referred to a care coordinator in the school. This person connects the pupil with appropriate care inside or outside the school. The duty of social care is less integrated into the school.

## **5.4 Results & Recommendations**

The social team as part of the school system may work in some schools in Amsterdam as well and can be kept in mind as an answer to problems some of our schools are facing. Also, the idea of community building by working on relationships between school, pupils, parents and other external partners (depending on the context of the school) is useful in our schools.

Holding a supportive school climate will be visible in Amsterdam in the choices made in the diverse curricula. We don't have a fixed curriculum so that we can focus on the specific needs of our pupils.

## 6 CONCLUSION

Writing a conclusion in our report of findings of the November visit to some of the U22-schools in Oslo is a tough job. Not only differ the schools we visited, but the Dutch school leaders themselves are also members of different school-boards in Amsterdam and their school function in unique environments in our city. To come up with a general finding of the U22 schools or an overall conclusion is risky to do. Research in the past decennia shows that standpoint perspectives are – more than ever assumed – foundational for the outcome of observations. Moreover: knowledge building itself is at the same time helped and hindered by perspective and ontological conventions. Since this text is a report of findings from our Amsterdam school leaders perspective, it is essential to bear in mind the expectations we have in common but also the variances we have in our thinking.

Both aspects of this 'background' became, for instance, apparent in our conclusion that the topology of the student population in Oslo-schools is not what we expected. Multiple times is displayed in our report that Oslo-schools are much more cultural-diverse than we anticipated. Still the actual impact on the different participants in our group differ in how this was felt. This outcome corresponds with similar astonished reactions in the Netherlands when for the first-time school leaders in urban environments began to speak out about their specific problems in their rapidly changing schools and what followed. Only in recent years a small group of these 'urban school leaders' in Amsterdam, Rotterdam, and Utrecht work together in their attempts to get attention for the specifics of Urban Education in academic teacher training and local & national politics. For this group of school leaders it became clear that in the discussions about the effects of these changes it was not hard to find common ground with teacher trainers, politicians, and other school leaders, but that it took a long time before common awareness was reached on the possible outcome of practical methods that could halt declining performances and negative school climate in these schools.

In a way, our own group of Dutch school leaders represents this spectrum of dialogue in the Netherlands, and interestingly enough this became only visible in contrast to the consistent approach in the U22-schools towards some problems. For instance, there was no discord in the way we wanted to represent the way the U22-schools coped with the distance they felt between pupils, their environments and their backgrounds. All Dutch school leaders evaluated the positive approach of the U22-staff as useful in these circumstances, but two Dutch school leaders had reservations of the usefulness of this method in other conditions. They questioned the tenability of the tactic of positivism when the behavior of pupils was not only for a large part ordained by cultural background or the lack of context but became dictated mainly by rules and codes of conduct of street gangs. This interpretation was rooted in the experiences of the last six years of encountering street-gangs violence in the direct neighborhood of this individual school.

It is in this light of different experiences of the Dutch school leaders that the collective outcome of this observation of our visit didn't always led to precisely the same understanding of observed phenomena and the connection between these singularities. Although this is a little speculative, we, for instance, think that we can assert that it is not possible to genuine recognize the impact of language delay in a school when a vast amount of the pupils is affected by this delay, if you didn't experience these yourselves. Therefore, it was in retrospect that we as a group discovered that we had failed to ask more concrete questions about the way data on reading-, writing- and arithmetic skills was received and converted in praxis in the schools. We would like to invite the U22 school leaders in their return-visit to investigate our data-driven practice and compare them with their own and evaluate them alongside.

In no possible way, we had the time during our visit to Oslo to try to conjoin solutions of problems in the four topics of Urban Education we found in the U22-schools. But because our model of these four elements of school leadership in Urban Education has proven itself to be workable for obser-

vations in this field, it is in this conclusion of our report possible to look for connections between the exemplified solutions in the U22-schools. We do this by rephrasing our four research domains in related questions. These questions are for schools in an urban environment consecutively how they can:

1. Build a more supportive school climate?
2. Further improve the learning outcome for all?
3. Develop more work relations outside the school?
4. Better deal with the dynamics of diversity?

By using these four questions for a breakdown of the observations it is possible to stop cataloging the differences and similarities between schools and school-systems and start looking for organization of change in the observed U22-schools; to subtract winning strategies or/and become aware of operational strain in this process. We will give here, in conclusion, the central attitudes that are found by us which give somehow a solution to the questions. All are intertwined and are -besides the first – as far as we could determine without an order of rank.

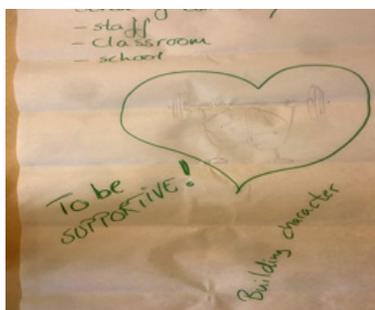
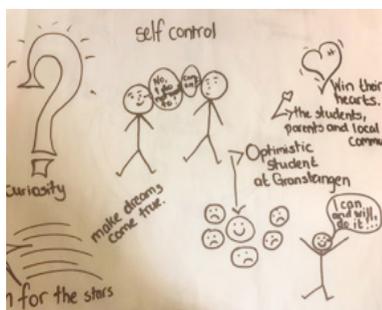
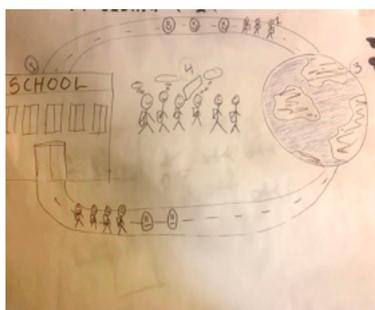
It is first necessary to conclude that all the different approaches are – as far as we could observe – in a given time and place initiated by the behavior and actions of the school leaders of the U22-schools. It became clear to us during our visit that the **actions of the principals were determining the progress and the success of the schools**. Because of this central role in change we applaud the decision of the board of the Oslo Educational Agency to **pair principals with trusted deputy-headmasters** in their collaborative work to transform schools in peril.

Secondly, we can say that much what is done in the schools is built on the notion that the attention that is needed for the education of every pupil should not be exclusively set in an individual approach, but that this attention should be organized in a team perspective. For this purpose, the U22-school leaders rebuild their teams around the child, as they told us. As

the principal of Apalløkka Skole said: **‘Teachers work collaboratively to improve the quality of teaching and ultimately the student’s outcomes.’**

The winning of the Queen Sonja’s prize by this school is a clear sign that this approach is working well.

The strength of this insight also became visible when the U22-school leaders were asked as a closing exercise during their summit to draw an ultimate dream for their schools. Almost all school leaders started by drawing a representation of the pupils of the school, central in the picture and grouped images of the team, the school and the neighborhood around this pupil-symbol.



Drawings of the ‘ultimate dreams’

This consistent behavior of a group school leaders who haven't worked long in the relative new setting of the U22-group is exceptional. **Their conduct is only possible if the school leaders have indeed established a common ground based on similar experiences in the past, but most important have reached somehow an agreement that this approach is the only proper way to organize their schools for a better learning outcome and school climate.** We presume that the latter is a result of the structure and efforts of the Oslo Educational Agency. As mentioned, it took Dutch school leaders years to reach this kind of collective understanding of useful praxis in schools. Conclusively we can say that it is not only the goal of the individual principal of a U22-school to unify their teachers and other staff in a specific educational approach for the pupils but that also **as principals they work in the U22-team in the same cooperative way to maximize their efforts.**

Thirdly, we observed **a common position the schools take when asked about their educational ways of dealing with Urban Environment in what can be described as a 'whole child approach'.** Like many schools in changing environments, the U22-schools are under pressure to show – through improved test scores -that they are providing every pupil with a thorough and efficient education. But – like the Dutch counterparts – they have to overcome years of failure to educate many of our inner-city and minority children. Moreover: some critics maintain that a goal of 100% score of these pupils proficient in reading and math is unattainable and straight unproductive. This ambition could lead in the critics understanding to an overdependence on standardized tests, to motivationally undesirable methods (threats & punishments) and demoralizing effects and in the end to corrupting influences on administrators, teachers, and pupils.

Although these threats are real – and were experienced for decades in the Dutch schools with the same challenges as the U22-schools – these are during our visit not overwhelming felt in the U22-schools. On the contrary: there were indications that some of the schools were way beyond evaluating only the progress of pupils in the narrow perspective of summative

tests. On, e.g. Granstangen Skole the principal was looking for ways to introduce or strengthen formative assessment to recognize where pupils are struggling and to address problems immediately.

It is in the light of 'the whole child approach' significant that the principals of the mentioned school and others in the U22-group told us 'that the team was dedicated to ensuring students safety and happiness.' The Ethic of Care-model that is primary for this approach speaks of the obligation to do something right and a sense that we must do something right when others address us. Nel Noddings, one of the key advocates of this model calls for a broadening in our thinking on education: 'to remind us to ask why we have chosen certain curriculums, pedagogical methods, classroom arrangements, and learning objectives. They remind us, too, that students are whole persons – not mere collections of attributes, some to be addressed in one place and others to be addressed elsewhere'. The big question is yet what it means to educate the whole child!

Although we, unfortunately, have no ready-made answers for this question, we do know that we will not find the solution to problems of violence, alienation, ignorance, and unhappiness in increasing the security apparatus, imposing more tests or punishing schools for their failure to produce 100 percent proficiency. In our observations, we already identified a lot of practice in the U22-schools that will work positively in the education of the pupils of the schools. This reality leads nonetheless to additional questions which must be answered shortly; some of them already raised in our observations. It will be interesting to look into them with our Oslo counterparts during the next visit in Amsterdam and the future years of our collaboration.

All we can say for now is that in taking the challenge to go as a Dutch school leader to Oslo to be part – just for a brief moment – of a thrilling attempt to reshape the Oslo-school, especially the U22-group, we were inspired by what we saw and it gave us a lot to think about for our own work in the Amsterdam schools. Beside this component of learning it is

also good to appreciate the opportunity of meeting colleagues from Oslo as well as Amsterdam in different settings and to be able to conclude that we have so much in common. We share, e.g. the love for our students, the focus on how to learn, the ways we try to adjust our schools to new environments.

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## APPENDIX 1 BLOG OF TWO SCHOOL VISITS

### I Visit at Apalløkka Skole



As part of our educational exchange with Oslo, we visited school leaders and teachers from Apalløkka Skole. A junior school (13–15 years) with 400 students, 35 teachers, and four school leaders. The pupil population has a significant cultural and socio-economic diversity. It is appar-

ent in student outcomes and particularly in their basic skills when they start at our school, and there is, therefore, a relatively large gap between the student abilities when we meet them for the first time. The school's primary goal is to close that gap and increase the student's performances and results. To be able to do that we focus on further developing our professional learning communities, where teachers work collaboratively to improve the quality of teaching and ultimately the student's outcomes. The school's motto is The team around the students.

Reading and calculating basic skills are not in order when they start in this school. There is a big gap between the levels of the pupils. Three years ago the school was in poor condition and there was much discussion about the direction of the school. Since a change in school management, things are getting better. The school won the Queen Sonja Award for inclusion and equality this year.

Marcus and Winta, students from group 9 (2nd class lower secondary education, 14 years) lead us around. What strikes – just like in the other U22 schools – is the small scale of the school. A quiet and friendly atmosphere. During lunchtime students play in the gym, some classrooms with games and the library are open. The class size is about 25. Pupils are welcomed every morning by teachers and school leaders (in yellow vests).

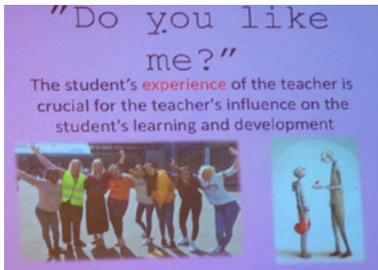
An essential goal of the school is to improve the learning results. For this, the school develops professional learning communities. Teachers work together intensively to improve the quality of education. The school management is also working on improving the feedback given by teachers to students.

### **‘An overview of the curriculum.’**

The school management sees the mutual transparency of the curriculum as a condition for improvement. Insight into learning objectives, lesson content, activities, and assessment. Most teachers make their programme accessible with different digital platforms. We discuss with two teachers the application of Notablock (OneNote), Its Learning and SharePoint. Since this year the school uses iPads as an additional learning tool. With the Classroom app, the teacher sees what students do. The school management notes that it is not easy to get all teachers at the primary level concerning ICT. In this sense, there is also a great diversity in levels within the team of teachers. Despite the national curriculum, the U22 schools share not that many materials. The reason is that there is no systematic way of sharing yet.

### **‘Catch the student in doing something good!’**

We talked about the vision of school leadership. What are the success factors for actually seeing the goals of the school in the classroom? Just like yesterday, the story of the school management and the teachers is about positivity and trust or as the school management says: ‘Catch the student in doing something good!’ The school management believes that everyone can learn and that it is essential to learn a lifetime. This school also uses SMS for positive messages to pupils and parents. Negative behavior (stealing, bullying, drugs) is dealt with immediately. The teachers and social workers have an important signaling function. Students are not ‘sent out of the classroom and go to the school leader.’ If a teacher and a student come into conflict, it happens that the school management takes over the class to give the teacher and pupil the space to solve it. The small scale – the school management knows every student – helps enormously.



Impressions from the visit at Apalløkka Skole

The school management talks about the balance between the 'knowledgeable' and the 'caring' side of teachers. Most teachers have questions about 'caring,' but a number also exaggerates. It is an essential topic for discussion during study days and training sessions.

### **'What is education quality and why?'**

Other success factors are the collective agreements on educational quality and its interpretation. The school management spends much time in the professional learning communities. They indicate that consistent agreements and commitment of the team are significant. The school management emphasizes that it is essential to have high expectations about the learning outcomes and how to reach them together (and not each from their subject). Naming each other's success and asking for comments is a fundamental attitude towards a professional culture. The school management and teachers challenge each other to tell each other what they are doing and why (evidence-based knowledge).

**‘Time to meet each other’**

Another success factor is time to meet each other. The professional timetable and the consultation time (per department and mentors) is in the timetable. The dialogue between school management and teachers is about balancing support and justification. The school tries to involve pupils, parents and the local community in school development. Staff meetings are on a regular base. It is not (only) about informing but especially about participating.

**‘Not just sunshine...’**

The school management emphasizes that despite the successes in the past two years and a fantastic prize it is not just sunshine. It is hard work every day and holding up to the agreements is not easy. The challenge, for now, is to improve the quality of education – the structure surrounding meeting and professional communities. Now the school continues with the dialogue about the learning outcomes. The school management indicates that many conversations between teachers are mainly about learning activities instead of goals and results. The question is always: at what level did a student start and what progress did he make?

## II Visit at Haugerud Skole Winning the hearts of students!



### Positivity and trust

We visited the school and the school leaders of the Haugerud Skole, a school for 13-15-year-olds in the north-

east of Oslo. We experienced it as a memorable visit because the two enthusiastic school leaders spoke openly about the many issues they had tackled in recent years, the emotional rollercoaster of this kind of work and what they and their team did to achieve improvements. The school experienced issues with their building, the curriculum, the staff, the student number and the behavior of pupils.

From 2010 onwards they have radically changed their approach and started a consistent change in all layers of the school. Keywords: positivity and trust. On this basis, the school formulated a new vision: 'we will win the hearts of the students.'

### 530,000 positive messages for the students.

After eight years of hard work, the approach seems effective. The school has a positive atmosphere. The learning outcomes have improved enormously. The Haugerud school is characterized by the enormous investment in establishing good relationships between pupils and teachers. We could feel that during our visit.

One of the ways to reach the students is by sending positive messages about the behavior to the students and parents via SMS. The feedback concerns personal, social and academic matters. Negative behavior is also addressed through conversations and talks/training with social workers. According to the school leaders, a positive learning environment is crucial for learning.

The school leaders also shared their experiences about the importance of always welcoming the student again: in the morning and at the start of the lesson. Also, a lot of time is spent on conversations with students. Teachers conduct interviews from 'the five F's' (see picture).

Student interview: the Five Fs

	Questions you might ask
Framtid - <b>FUTURE</b>	What are your dreams? What kind of job would you like? What inspires you?
Fortid - <b>PAST</b>	What was elementary school like? What was your favourite subject?
Fag - <b>SUBJECTS</b>	What are your favourite subjects? Why? Are there any subjects you don't like? Why? How are you doing in ...? Teachers? Class mates?
Familie - <b>FAMILY</b>	Do you have brothers/sisters? What does your parents do? Do you talk to your parent about school? About things you find difficult? Tell me about your family!
Fritid - <b>SPARE TIME</b>	Do you have any hobbies? Friends?

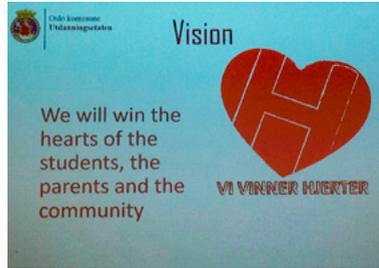


**Remember:**

- Show that you care!
- Show that you are truly interested!
- Let the student be part of the solution!



The five F's



## Positive Text Messages

- Teachers will look for the best in every student
- Students feel that teachers see them
- It provides increased job satisfaction, working ability and motivation
- Parents and children can talk about positive issues related to school at home
- Cooperation between school and home is characterized by openness and trust - even in difficult cases

Osloskolen

## Examples of Positive Text Messages

- Thanks for the great effort last week. You have shown that you are the right man for the job and you will make a big difference for many Haugerud students. Have a great weekend, next week will be hectic. Regards Terje
- Hi! Moizza participated actively in the summary of the science class today. During the science class she was able to infer important chemical contexts. She worked well with her learning partner. Greeting Sverre
- Hey, Ezra! You are simply a sunbeam. You work so incredibly well in every lesson. You are very conscientious. I notice that you are precise to school every day and that you always do your homework. Siham =>
- Hi Felicia! You worked very well in physical education class today! You show that you have good knowledge of first aid and you worked well with your classmates. Good work! :) Regards practice student Anders

Osloskolen

Impressions from the visit at Haugerud Skole



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WETEN OVER DE INTERNATIONALE  
SCHOLLEIDERS-UITWISSELINGEN  
VAN DE KOMENDE JAREN? AARZEL DAN  
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