



Division of Inspection
**MINISTRY OF EDUCATION,
CULTURE, YOUTH AND SPORT**



Education Inspectorate
Ministry of Education, Culture and Science

SINT MAARTEN EDUCATION REVIEW

**FINAL REPORT: OBSTACLES AND AVENUES TO IMPROVED
EDUCATION**

October 2022



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SUMMARY

Obstacles and avenues to improved education

The Sint Maarten Country Reform Package describes a combination of short-term measures and longer-term structural reforms that are necessary to make Sint Maarten financially, economically, and administratively resilient. For many of the reforms mentioned in the Country Reform Package, the current situation is first mapped out to gain a clear focus on the desired approach.

For the theme 'education and care', the Country Reform Package was regarded as a first step which also implied a review of the education system. As a next step, recommendations were to be made on improving the basic quality of education, the connection between education and the labor market, and the flow between education systems, for instance between Sint Maarten and the Netherlands.

In April 2021, based on the agreements in the Country Reform Package, the Sint Maarten and Dutch inspections (hereinafter: 'the working group') began screening the education sector on Sint Maarten. For this purpose, central research questions were formulated that relate to the core functions of education: qualification, socialization and allocation, and the conditions to enable these core functions. The working group conducted desk research, held discussions (on location) with stakeholders and policy makers, visited schools, met with school boards, teachers and pupils/students, and observed lessons. The interim report *Sint Maarten Education Review – Obstacles and Avenues to Improved Education*¹ was completed in March 2022 and made available by the Sint Maarten government to the public in late August 2022. The current report concerns the final report. In this report we (i) have incorporated written feedback on the interim report and (ii) describe the results of on-site thematic round table discussions with stakeholders in a further operationalization of a number of key recommendations (see Part III).

The primary tasks of the working group were to conduct research and problem analysis, to formulate recommendations, and to initiate action plans for the implementation of the recommendations. However, the actual implementation is beyond the remit of the working group.

The Sint Maarten and Dutch education inspectorates worked together closely to prepare this report. In doing so, we are building on a tradition of joint inspections involving Sint Maarten, Curaçao, Aruba and the Netherlands. For several years we have been helping and learning from each other, sharing knowledge and insights. This collaboration is a key aspect of the quality culture for which we strive.

Strengths of the Sint Maarten education system

The teachers are a strength of the Sint Maarten education system. We have spoken to many teachers who make a sustained and concerted effort to give the students a good education and who have the desire to invest in the further development of their own professionalism.

There have been several initiatives to improve the Sint Maarten education system, often resulting in reports with advice on how to improve the education system. These reports contain starting points for improvement.



Educational institutions in the country use either English or Dutch as a language of instruction. In theory, this opens the opportunity for students to prepare for different types of education beyond secondary education and for a diverse range of jobs.

Challenges

At the same time, the system faces many challenges, starting with the lack of adequate information to enable the relevant professionals to set priorities and steer a course towards improvements in education. If reliable indicators on the performance of education are lacking, this can soon become a process of 'steering in the fog': the assessment and monitoring of necessary improvements is compromised.

Secondly, it was noticeable (within our limited observations) that the educational process at several schools on Sint Maarten falls short in several ways. These include a lack of basic conditions to support students with extra educational needs, little focus on and support for a result-oriented approach or educational leadership, and little structural attention to the competence development of teachers and instructors.

Another challenge is presented by several barriers to a continuous educational path. Childcare has no legally defined role in preparing children for primary education and the entry requirements of one school or sector do not always correspond to the outflow criteria of the 'delivering' school or sector. The transition from secondary to tertiary education is often difficult. In many cases, students are insufficiently prepared, for example in terms of the skills they need to successfully complete a study program in higher education on Sint Maarten or abroad (e.g., in the Netherlands).

Furthermore, the education sector's connection to the labor market at home and abroad is problematic. Vocational schools have difficulty finding enough internships. Employers on Sint Maarten observe that many of the apprentices they work with are insufficiently equipped to enter the labor market.

Finally, we have identified structural omissions in the system within which educational institutions operate. There is a lack of adequate, relevant and up-to-date legislation for schools. The same applies to the regulations by which the Inspectorate of Education operates. There are also several shortcomings related to governance within the education system and the financial and budgetary aspects in this field. Lastly, there is a significant lack of conditional resources, such as well-equipped school buildings and sufficient available staff.

Recommendations

Our recommendations, described in detail in Part II of this report, concern improvements in the areas discussed above: better and reliable key figures, the improvement of education and strengthening of the system within which education operates.

Developing a data registration system

1. Establish a reliable and sustainable data registration system for key figures.



Improving education

2. Improve the educational process.
 - A recommendation for the short term is to provide direct support to teachers, for example by appointing additional remedial teachers.
3. Provide a continuous learning path.
 - Develop a support structure for students with special educational needs.
 - Take into account the variation in native languages of students when developing school language policies.
 - Improve the vocational track of the education system by emphasizing vocational value and by ensuring that the curriculum meets current labor market requirements.
 - Systematically track students and monitor alumni success.
 - Prepare students more effectively for tertiary education.
4. Enhance the connection between education and the labor market.
 - Improve the connection between (developments in) the labor market and educational programs in tertiary education.
 - Give special attention to teacher training.
 - Establish a system in which companies are recognized as training companies according to clear criteria and in which professional practical supervisors are trained and certified.
 - Increase the number of internships.
 - Organize permanent consultation for each sector between representatives from the professional field and the vocational education institutions.

Strengthening the education system

5. Develop a mature governance structure.
 - Implement a system that gives school boards sufficient control over finance and educational management and ensure that they fulfil their role adequately.
 - Organize a structure in which supervisory boards support school boards and correct them where necessary.
 - Formalize the establishment of a joint participation council in which teachers, parents and students are represented and give it legal status.
6. Ensure up-to-date and adequate legislation.
 - This applies to each education sector and to the Inspectorate of Education. Develop and deploy a supervisory framework in addition to valid research instruments and ensure sufficient numbers of trained staff to allow the Inspectorate to systematically assess the quality of the educational process.
7. Organize an efficient and transparent budgetary system.
 - Gain insights into whether the adjustments to the lump sum subsidy system are adequate (especially for school boards with secondary schools).
 - Design a procurement system to facilitate public schools until the transfer of the organization of public education into a public body has been finalized.
 - Draw up multiannual budgets and update them annually.



8. Strengthen financial accountability.
 - Enforce what is regulated in the National Ordinance regarding accountability.
 - Facilitate the role of the inspectorate as prescribed by law; provide adequate financial resources and staffing.
 - Build a culture of trust, making the enforcement of legal and other requirements a standard part of the budgetary process.
9. Guarantee the basic conditions for good education.
 - This concerns a wide range of conditions including maintenance of buildings, up-to-date teaching materials and ICT facilities, and sufficient qualified staff.
10. Analyze inefficiencies in the education system.
 - Carry out an analysis of inefficiencies in the education system and channel any resulting savings into realizing the necessary improvements to education on Sint Maarten.

From plan to action

Some of these recommendations are not new and have received attention in previous reports. However, these reports stopped short of presenting a coherent approach. With this in mind, the current working group wants to go a step further: perhaps more important than the 'what' question (listing and defining recommendations) is the question of 'how' these improvements can be realized in the specific context of Sint Maarten.

Part III of this report makes an initial attempt to answer the 'how' question for two core topics: (i) the alignment between education and the labor market, and (ii) the system within which education operates. Note that this elaboration covers only a selection of the broader set of recommendations from Part II. Notwithstanding the urgency of the other recommendations, the working group considers this selection as core recommendations to be implemented. Additionally, Sint Maarten can make use of the insights derived from this exercise for the further operationalization of the other recommendations listed. For each recommendation, essential next steps include mandating the appropriate parties or individuals, ensuring that those given responsibility take charge, and making comprehensive project plans.

Improving the alignment between education and labor market

In part III, we first elaborate on how to improve the alignment between vocational training and the professional field both qualitatively and quantitatively. We specifically focus on hospitality training and on teacher training for primary education. Employers in the hospitality sector indicated that graduates often lack a good professional attitude and sometimes have insufficient English language skills. Hospitality training representatives, in turn, indicated that they are bound by a (partly outdated) inflexible curriculum and that for many students the hospitality sector has a poor image with mostly low-paid, unattractive jobs. A key observation from the round table discussion was that pressing topics currently are not discussed *structurally* between the training field and the working field. The working group recommends the Sint Maarten government initiating the organization of such structural dialogue addressing current and desired attainment levels, learning objectives, and the attractiveness and future development of the sector.



Likewise, we recommend starting a structural dialogue between schools, teacher training and the Ministry of Education. School representatives indicated that graduates often have limited skills related to classroom management, didactics for students for whom English is the Second Language (ESL), differentiation and the use of innovative, activating teaching methods. The teacher training program did not recognize this picture well. Both parties were in favor of starting a structural consultation between the government, teacher training and the school field. The working group advocates starting such consultation and underlines the importance of addressing differentiation skills given the typical diversity of students in classes.

Strengthening the system within which education operates

We have identified structural omissions in the system within which educational institutions operate. It is essential that the conditions under which education can best thrive are optimized. To take the recommendations related to the education system a step further, we have included further operationalizations for the following topics: the budgetary system (including financial accountability), governance, legislation, and school repairs. Part III reports the current state of affairs per topic.

Phasing and feasibility of recommendations

The listed recommendations are diverse in nature and, as indicated above, partly require translation into implementation agendas. At the same time, some recommendations can be implemented (or partly implemented) relatively quickly and help alleviate the pressure on the education system. Two examples of recommendations that can be realized with a compact plan of action and targeted financing in the short term are:

1. Supporting teachers by appointing (extra) support coordinators (*interne begeleiders*) and remedial teachers (part of recommendations 2 & 3).
2. Fixing roofs and making other overdue repairs to damage caused by hurricane Irma (part of recommendation 10).

The availability of sufficient personnel and adequate competences to implement these recommendations deserves special attention. There are however limitations concerning the expertise to hand. This has effect on implementing recommendations that require sufficient qualified personnel, skills for good governance and supervision, and specialist knowledge to modernize legislation.

A first way to deal with this scarcity is to apply a phased approach to implement the recommendations. In addition to phasing, it should be considered worthwhile to explore opportunities to cooperate and share expertise, both in the region and between the countries of the kingdom. Kibrahacha – ‘Partnerschap Samen Opleiden Caribisch Gebied’ – is an example of such cooperation. Twinning institutions in the region and within the kingdom can also yield worthwhile results. The working group has already seen encouraging examples of this in its current investigation.

Financial consequences of recommendations

Financial consequences of recommendations have not yet been specified in the present document. Nevertheless, a number of conclusions can already be drawn about the financial effects of the measures it proposes.

Firstly, not every improvement costs money. The recommendation to achieve a two-tier governance system with strong boards, good internal supervision and mature participation is a case in point. Decisions in areas such as monitoring and limiting the overhead at schools, the need to invest in the training and supervision of teachers and building maintenance are best made by a strong board that operates in



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close cooperation with its schools. If implemented correctly with proper checks and balances, this will enable money to be spent much more efficiently, which would be a huge step forward for education on Sint Maarten.

Secondly, it is important that any available surplus of funds from the Country Reform Package should at least partly be channeled into making the necessary investments in education. However, this is only a good idea if the improvements proposed in this report are effectively implemented. Merely increasing funds towards the education budget will not lead to the desired results.

Finally, it is important to foresee and calculate the financial effects of demographic and educational developments (e.g., a drop in the number of students). This relates to recommendation 10 regarding the effect on the number of schools and required square meters. Furthermore, the funding – which is based on the number of students (q) and the amount of money per student (p) in the multiannual estimates – can be kept stable. A decrease in the number of students will then result in higher expenditure per student. Again, this will only prove effective if the improvements proposed in this report are implemented at the same time. In this regard, not only demographic developments are relevant, but also educational developments such as changes in types of students (vocational vs. academic) and educational level need to be considered.



PART I: Starting points for the research and a description of the education system

In Part I, we will first elaborate briefly on the scope of this study and the research method used. Next, we will discuss several characteristics of the Sint Maarten education system. This discussion is descriptive in nature and lays the foundation for the problem analyses and recommendations in Part II, as well as for the follow-up proposals in Part III.

1 Starting points for the research

1.1 Background

The present investigation stems from the mutual arrangement between Sint Maarten and the Netherlands for the implementation of the Sint Maarten Country Reform Package, signed on December 22, 2020. The Country Reform Package contains eight measures, focusing on the following themes: financial management; cost and effectiveness of the public sector; taxes; the financial sector; the economy; healthcare; education; and strengthening the rule of law. In combination, these measures are designed to spur a broad palette of reforms and investments that contribute to the resilience and robustness of the economy and society, thus promoting the well-being of the people of Sint Maarten. The current study, conducted jointly by the Sint Maarten and Dutch Inspectorates of Education, covers the theme of education, for which the Country Reform Package formulates three goals:

- to set a basic standard for education;
- to establish a positive correlation between education and labor market;
- to implement logical and achievable educational paths (be it in the Netherlands or elsewhere).

The purpose of the interim report published earlier, and the current final report is to arrive at concrete recommendations on how Sint Maarten can achieve these goals.

Role of inspectorates

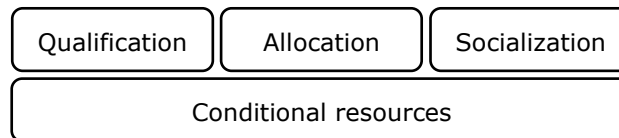
The Sint Maarten and Dutch inspectorates see it as their primary task to arrive at recommendations. In addition to conducting research and problem analysis, the working group initiates action plans for implementation of the recommendations. Many of the recommendations from previous studies faltered in the implementation phase, resulting in limited results. The working group therefore presents some of the recommendations in concrete terms in this final report. The actual implementation, however, lies beyond the working group's remit and role. After publication of the final report, the inspectorates will confine themselves to their usual supervisory role, and to aiding and supporting implementation where necessary (compliance assistance).

1.2 Theoretical framework

To obtain a clear picture of the quality of education on Sint Maarten and to structure both desk research and interviews with stakeholders, we have focused on the three core tasks of education, and their conditional resources (Figure 1). This is a common perspective that largely corresponds with the framework used by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) in its research on the quality of education systems.²

Figure 1

Core tasks of education



The first core task is **qualification**: education imparts knowledge, attitudes and skills that match the needs of society and the talents of students. The second core task is **allocation**, which includes selection and equal opportunities: students pursue an educational career that matches their abilities and talents, and the employment needs of society. The third core task is **socialization**: education contributes to the acquisition of the social and societal competences necessary to optimally participate in and contribute to society. Finally, we set out the conditions for realizing these core tasks: education should be equipped and organized in such a way as to provide continuity and facilitate the three core tasks.

1.3

Scope, research strategy and justification

This study covers the entire education system, from pre-school to higher education. In addition to board members, teachers and other representatives of schools and institutions, the stakeholders consulted included policy staff, a center of expertise, employers, and public and private education. Appendix A contains a list of interviewees.

Prior to conducting the study, we formulated three central research questions as a basis for structuring data collection during both desk research and on-site interviews:

- Central question 1: How is education organized in the country, in what demographic context is it embedded, and what structural and incidental contextual factors affect the quality of the core tasks of education and conditional resources?
- Central question 2: In relation to the core educational tasks of allocation, qualification, socialization, what is the quality of education and the conditional resources in the country, and what quality assurance measures apply?
- Central question 3: Does the country have sufficient insight into the core tasks of education and conditional resources to effectively manage the goals, visions, and ambitions it has set for the quality of education?

Where appropriate, the central questions were translated into specific sub-questions for each sector of education, focusing on factors that contribute to the realization of basic quality, a good fit between education and the labor market, and satisfactory educational paths. In the remainder of Part I we answer the first central research question regarding the Sint Maarten education system, based on desk research.

The second and third research questions will be addressed in the formulation and substantiation of recommendations, presented in Part II: Problem Analysis and Recommendations. To this end, we conducted both desk research (studying available data and previous research reports) and local interviews with stakeholders and observations during school visits. The main objective was to arrive at a situation description of education at the system level, focusing on opportunities and risks, strengths and weaknesses, and the formulation of subsequent recommendations. Assessing the quality of individual schools, programs or organizations was explicitly



not part of the assignment and research strategy. Because the available data on quality of education was time-barred, incomplete and partly internationally incomparable, we relied mainly on interviews with stakeholders and observations during school visits. This provided a global picture of the quality of education and its preconditions such as housing, furniture, teaching materials, ICT facilities and (training of) staff. Foremost, the information gathered revealed inefficiencies in various parts of the system within which education operates, governance, funding, and legislation. Hence, the focus of our recommendations is on fixing these inefficiencies.

Justification

To obtain an adequate picture of the Sint Maarten education system, we visited and spoke to a selected sample of schools, boards, and other stakeholders (see Appendix A). The sample of schools and boards was specifically chosen to represent a cross-section of the education system, e.g., taking into account the range of religious denominations. Where possible, we spoke with teachers and students in addition to school boards, and several lessons were observed. Findings of these interviews were evaluated with reference to the overview of the system provided by the Sint Maarten Inspectorate of Education. This enabled us to establish a shared view and create a solid basis for the descriptions and analyses in this report, not exclusive to the schools or boards visited. Of note, a comprehensive and systematic analysis of the quality of the educational process was beyond the scope of the current study. Such an analysis requires the existence of a valid supervisory framework (*toezichtkader*) that both addresses Sint Maarten's unique education system and provides a legal basis for educational supervision. We therefore advise that priority be given to establishing a clearly formulated mandate for the Sint Maarten Inspectorate of Education in the form of a supervisory framework, a legally anchored position, and sufficient resources to further empower educational supervision. To arrive at further operationalizations, i.e., brief plans of actions outlined in Part III of the current report, we conducted on-site thematic round table discussions with relevant stakeholders. Finally, imperfections in the interim report have been corrected in the current final report.



2 The Sint Maarten education system

2.1 The structure of the education system

The current education system and related education legislation

As a country, Sint Maarten has existed since 10 October 2010. Before this date, from 1954 to 2010, Sint Maarten formed part of the Netherlands Antilles. On 10 October 2010, the covenant of the Netherlands Antilles was revoked and both Sint Maarten and Curaçao became autonomous countries within Kingdom of the Netherlands. Sint Maarten shares an island with its French counterpart, Saint-Martin. Both are self-governing states without a physical border between them, which means that persons are free to move from one to the other.³ As an autonomous country, Sint Maarten has its own legislation and ministry governing the field of education. Foreign affairs and defense are policy areas where the country is dependent on the Netherlands. The King of the Netherlands is the Head of State and is represented by the Governor. Official languages in governmental, educational, and legal domains are Dutch and English.

Sint Maarten's (compulsory) education system is based on that of the European Netherlands, with American and Caribbean influences. All children receive the same primary education, whereas secondary education is tied to different academic levels. The placement process is monitored by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Youth and Sport (MECYS) and determines whether students receive a more academic form of secondary education (CXC, havo or vwo) or a vocational form (PSVE), the latter being subdivided according to placement criteria for several streams or programs, (VSBO/PSVE-TKL, or VSBO/PSVE-PBL/PKL).⁴ The country has an education system that encompasses pre-school, primary, secondary, special and tertiary education, along with government subsidized and private institutions.⁵

There are two instruments which guide the initial secondary school placement: the FBE Exit Exam taken in the final year of primary education, and the student's Educational Report. The Exit Exam is composed of four subjects: English, Dutch as a foreign language, Mathematics, and General Knowledge (Science and Social Studies). Its results provide an indication of the level of secondary education to which the child is most suited intellectually. The Education Report contains the averaged grades for Year 7 (age group 10-11) and considers the child's social context, socio-emotional development, and the school's advice and parents' wishes regarding placement.⁶

In addition to the Dutch examination model, it is also possible to follow the regional Caribbean Examination Council system for secondary education (CXC), in which the Government administers the Caribbean Certificate of Secondary Level Competence (CCSLC) and the Caribbean Secondary Education Certificate (CSEC). The CCSLC exams were held for the first time in 2016-2017 and were taken by 16 students.⁷

The education system on Sint Maarten offers a choice in the language of instruction, curriculum, and the testing standards that prepare students for further education in the regional CXC system, the Dutch system, the American and Canadian system. Parental preference for which system their children should follow is a strong determining factor (assuming that the pupil's test scores meet the entrance requirements), and, in some cases, religious affiliation can be a strong asset.⁸



Sint Maarten has a Ministry of Education, Culture, Youth and Sport, which is responsible for the country's regulations, policy, and vision on education. The Inspectorate of Education is part of this ministry. The Department of Education bears responsibility for amongst others, the development of policy, legislation, procedures, and the monitoring of the execution thereof. The Department is also responsible for executing required research and developing plans related to the Sector and advising regarding the allocation of resources.⁹

Sint Maarten has a Division of Examinations, charged with several tasks, including:

- Developing, legitimizing, and determining valid tests and exams for the benefit of education in the broadest sense;
- Developing, legitimizing, and determining reliable frameworks for quality control of education in (learning) performance;
- Researching and assessing specified tests, exams, and instruments of quality control;
- Reporting points of special interest for policy and legislation in education, from the perspective of quality control regarding conclusion and completion.¹⁰

Pre-primary education and childcare

On Sint Maarten, early childhood development is available for children under the age of four. The issuance of permits and the inspection of Early childhood falls under the Ministry of Public Health, Social Development and Labor. The quality of the curriculum and inspection of the curriculum of Early childhood falls under the Ministry of ECYS. Most ECD Center uses the HighScope Curriculum, seeing that this fits with the FBE Education of the primary schools. A comprehensive draft for Early Childhood Development policy has been in the making for several years.

A sustainable funding model for daycare centers is being investigated and developed with key stakeholders and professionals. The funding model aims to help strengthen the supply of existing daycare centers and increase access and equity to these services for more children.

According to the EU Council Recommendation on High Quality Early Childhood Education and Care Systems (12 June, 2019). Both policy makers and researchers recognize that it is in the early (6) years that children create the foundation and capacity to learn throughout life. Learning is an incremental process; building a strong foundation in the early years is a precondition for higher level competence development and educational success as much as it is essential for health and the well-being of children. Therefore, early childhood education and care needs to be regarded as the foundation of education and training systems and be an integral part of the education continuum.

The following Day Care Centers are presently operating on Sint Maarten: Alexander's Early Stimulation Center; Busy Body; Brighter Child; Blue Print Academy; Bright Star Early Stimulation; Care Bear; Children's World; Discovery Kidz; Excellence Learning Academy; Ebenezer Learning Center; EduCare Preschool; Fun 'n Learn Kids Pre-school; IDEAL Pre-school; Green Academy Kid's World United Daycare Center; Little Dreamers; Little Explorers; Little Goselings Lucia Learning Center Foundation; Ms. Ingrid Home Care; Pampers 2 Crayons; Tiny Tots Collage; Teddy Bear Playschool; Beginners Luck; 721 kids; Gribouille.



School boards

The following school boards are present on Sint Maarten:

- SVOBE: Stichting Voortgezet Onderwijs Bovenwindse Eilanden
- SKOS: Stichting Katholiek Onderwijs Sint Maarten
- MAC: Methodist Agogic Center
- CBAF: Charlotte Brookson Academy Foundation
- SPCOBE: Stichting Protestants Christelijk Onderwijs Bovenwindse Eilanden
- SDA: Sint Maarten Seventh-Day Adventist
- ACE: All Children's Education
- DPE: Division of Public Education Services (Openbaar Onderwijs)
- FAVE: Foundation for Academic and Vocational Education (Academic and PSVE sections/streams)
- NIPA: National Institute for Professional Advancement (AVE)
- LU: Learning Unlimited Preparatory School
- CIA: Caribbean International Academy (Ontario Secondary School Program)
- USM: University of St. Martin

The boards of subsidized schools are said to have a higher degree of flexibility and autonomy than their publicly-funded counterparts, since the latter are obliged to adhere more closely to rules and regulations within the government system. Subsidized schools also engage and involve parents more in school management through parent support groups. This not only gives parents a voice but fosters a level of involvement that can be financially beneficial to these schools when it comes to fundraising. This gives the schools greater scope to offer a more diverse education program, school trips and sports or debating competitions.¹¹

Although education is free at public and subsidized schools, the cost of books, uniforms and lunch can be a challenge for some families. Non-mandatory parental contributions are common and can be as high as USD 175 per child, per year. The government provides aid to low-income families and the subsidized schools assist a small number of families in need. Free school bus services for all children needing transportation to and from school is also provided by the government.¹²

Primary education

There are seventeen primary schools on Sint Maarten, some of which are public, while others are government subsidized. In addition, there are six private schools. The schools belong to a range of different denominations, including Catholic, Methodist, Protestant and Seventh Day Adventist. All schools, except for public schools, are administered by a school board. The language of instruction is English or Dutch: most funded schools teach in English. However, five primary schools (four Catholic, one Protestant) have Dutch as their language of instruction.¹³

In 2016, three primary schools – the two Hillside Christian Schools (Asha Stevens and Helmich Snijders) and the St. Dominic Primary School – joined a project in which Dutch is taught as a foreign language rather than a second language. The Dutch Ministry of Education decided to develop a package of primary school learning materials called *Nederlands onder de Zon* (English: Dutch under the Sun) to better represent Dutch in the Caribbean setting, where for many children it is a foreign language. Several other schools and school boards (MAC, DPE, St. Joseph school) also opted to purchase these materials and arrange the necessary training.¹⁴

Private schools on Sint Maarten are registered as businesses rather than educational institutes and do not fall under central education laws and policies.¹⁵



The primary system was reformed at the beginning of the 21st century, with the initialization of Foundation Based Education (FBE). The most notable change was the merging of kindergarten with primary school. In addition, Foundation Based Education centers on several key principles, such as:

- a child-centered approach that fits the curriculum to the child;
- an individual approach to learning, in which children are not compared to each other;
- the Caribbean region as the point of departure for learning;
- English as the language of instruction, with Dutch taught as a foreign language.¹⁶

To cater to the diverse needs of pupils, each classroom must feature centers for the different subjects, where pupils can learn and explore individually. The pupils are grouped according to broader year groups: cycle 1 (4 to 8 years old) and cycle 2 (8 to 12 years old). A National Framework for the FBE curriculum was written by the territories of the Netherlands Antilles in 2000. The curriculum is divided into eight Education Areas:

- 1 Language and Communication (A. Native Language and B. Foreign Language);
- 2 Mathematics;
- 3 Social Studies;
- 4 Philosophy of Life;
- 5 Social Emotional Development;
- 6 Cultural Artistic Development (A. Music, B. Dance, C. Drama, D. Visual Arts);
- 7 Science & Technology;
- 8 Health & Physical Education.¹⁷

Since the introduction of Foundation Based Education in primary schools, there has been a gradual increase in schools changing their language of instruction from Dutch to English. While seven primary schools had English as their language of instruction in 2008, by 2013 this number had risen to thirteen.¹⁸

Overview of primary school boards, schools, and students, 2021-2022¹⁹

Board	Primary school	Number of pupils	Language of instruction
DPE	Oranje School Marie G. de Weever Primary Dr. Martin L. King Jr. Primary Ruby Labega Primary Leonald Connor Primary Prins Willem Alexander School	241 272 167 129 213 53	English English & Dutch English English English English
SKOS	St. Dominic Primary St. Joseph Primary Sr. Magda Primary Sr. Borgia Primary Sr. Marie Laurence Primary Sr. Regina Primary	260 191 293 201 143 201	English English Dutch Dutch English Dutch
SPCOBE	Helmich Snijders Campus Asha Stevens Campus	222 400	Dutch English
MAC	Rev. John A. Gumbs Browlia F. Maillard	389 388	English English
SDA	St. Maarten Seventh-Day Adventist School	330	English
Private	St. Maarten Montessori School (primary)	40	English
Private	Caribbean International Academy (CIA) (primary)	53	English
Private	Learning Unlimited Preparatory School (LUPS) (primary)	251	English
Private	All Children Education (ACE) Foundation	Unknown	English
Private	Clay Montessori	Unknown	English
Private	Excellence Learning Academy	Unknown	English

Secondary education

Sint Maarten offers multiple types of education programs, some of which resemble the Dutch system, while others are closer to the Caribbean or American and Canadian systems:

- VSBO: Voorbereidend Secundair Beroeps Onderwijs
- TKL: Theoretisch Kadergerichte Leerweg
- VSBO TKL: Voorbereidend Secundair Beroeps Onderwijs Theoretisch Kadergerichte Leerweg (similar to vmbo-t/mavo)
- HAVO: Hoger Algemeen Vormend Onderwijs
- VWO: Voorbereidend Wetenschappelijk Onderwijs
- PBL: Praktisch basisgerichte leerweg
- PKL: Praktisch Kadergerichte Leerweg/praktisch vmbo
- PSVE: Preparatory Secondary Vocational Education
- IB: International Baccalaureate
- CSEC: Caribbean Secondary Examination
- CCSLC: Caribbean Certificate of Secondary Level Competence
- CAPE: Caribbean Advanced Preparatory Examination
- CIA: Ontario Secondary School Program
- LU: American High School Program²⁰

Overview of secondary school boards, schools, and students 2021-2022²¹

Board	Secondary school	Number of students	Language of instruction
FAVE	St. Maarten Academy Academic VSBO/PSVE	404 261	English English
CBAF	Charlotte Brookson Academy	123	English
SKOS	St. Dominic High School & IB	323	English
DPE	St. Maarten Vocational Training School	225	English
MAC	MAC Comprehensive Secondary Education	234	English
SVOBE	Sundial	257	English
	Milton Peters College	907	
	- VWO	57	Dutch
	- HAVO	222	Dutch
	- TKL	237	Dutch
	- CCSLC	175	English
	- PBL/PKL	216	English
Private	Caribbean International Academy (CIA) (secondary)	86	English
Private	Learning Unlimited Preparatory School (LUPS) (secondary)	unknown	English



Dutch exam programs

To ensure a smooth transition for students from Sint Maarten who wished to continue their studies in the Dutch tertiary education system, secondary education on Sint Maarten was initially completely modelled on the secondary school system in the Netherlands. In the past modifications in the Dutch school system in the Netherlands resulted in similar changes on Sint Maarten. The last such modification was the introduction of PSVE/VSBO in 2002, which consisted of a merger of vocational education (BVO) and lower academic education (formerly mavo).²² Preparatory Secondary Vocational Education (PSVE/VSBO) is a 4-year program which provides three different vocational streams.²³

VSBO consists of two years of basic education and a subsequent two years of upper secondary education in one of three different sectors. The student chooses between Technical Studies, Care & Welfare and Economics. The existing learning routes are *theoretisch kadergerichte leerweg* (TKL), *praktisch kadergerichte leerweg* (PKL), and *praktisch basisgerichte leerweg* (PBL). The student sits a final central examination in each subject. Education at VSBO level is designed to allow students to progress to SBO.

Milton Peters College is a secondary school based predominantly on the Dutch system, which offers havo and vwo. The school also offers a CCLSC/CSEC stream. Many of its students sit the standard Dutch school exams while others sit the CXC exams. Milton Peters is the only subsidized secondary school to have Dutch as its language of instruction.²⁴

The exam programs of the Caribbean Examination Council and other examination systems

The system on Sint Maarten has both Dutch language of instruction (havo and vwo) and English language of instruction general formative education. The English-speaking schools (St. Dominic, St. Maarten Academy, MAC-CSE and Charlotte Brookson Academy) prepare their students for the Caribbean Examination Council exams. Their Dutch-speaking counterpart, the Milton Peters College, also offers a CCLSC/CSEC stream. The Caribbean Examination Council exam (CXC) can be taken at various levels (general, technical, and basic) and leads to a Secondary Education Certificate. The level achieved by a student who passes the CXC exam in at least five subjects at 'general' level with grades 1, 2 or 3 (1 being the highest) can be best compared to a havo certificate in the Netherlands. CCLSC, CSEC and CAPE are all part of the CXC examination system.²⁵

St Maarten Vocational Training School was the first secondary school on the island to introduce the CCLSC program in 2013-2014. However, the program was discontinued because the level was considered too high for most of the students enrolled in the program.

In September 2014, a group of 27 students started CAPE at the St. Maarten Academy Academic Campus. The St. Maarten Academy has chosen to focus on preparing its CAPE students for three associate degree programs. The choice of these specific associate packages is based on the subject combinations the school offers at CSEC level, to allow a smooth transition from CSEC to CAPE.²⁶

In addition to Dutch and Caribbean exams, some students on Sint Maarten have the opportunity to participate in the International Baccalaureate, the American High School system or the Ontario Secondary School Program, each of which have their own examination system.



Special education

The Prins Willem Alexander School (PWAS) is the only public school for special primary education on Sint Maarten, mostly catering to pupils with learning difficulties. The pupils are divided into a Practical Stream (PO) and a Theoretical Stream (AO). Pupils are usually around 8 years old when they start at PWAS. The language of instruction is English.²⁷

The institution has had to deal with relocation issues and high rates of absenteeism among both teachers and pupils. Most of the teaching staff are not trained to work with special needs pupils. PWAS has a maximum capacity of only 84 pupils. In addition, the school board SKOS has launched a separate initiative: the Individual Education Program (IE). This consists of two multi-age groups of pupils with socio-emotional/behavioral issues from all of the Catholic schools on Sint Maarten. SKOS aims to extend this initiative beyond Catholic schools. Since 2015-2016 IEP has also been introduced in three other schools: Sr. Regina Primary School, St. Joseph School and Sr. Magda Primary School.²⁸

Home Schooling

The term 'homeschooling' applies to education provided in a home setting, either by a parent or (online) tutors. Parents can request the right to homeschool their child from the Minister of ECYS through the Inspectorate of Education. There were more requests and approvals of homeschooling requests in the school year 2016-2017 than in the previous four school years: 7 requests for primary or secondary education were submitted and 5 requests were granted. Post Hurricane Irma, the requests for homeschooling decreased to four with all four being approved.

Tertiary or higher education

Secundair Beroepsonderwijs (SBO) was introduced to Sint Maarten in 2004-2005. SBO has two learning routes: *werkend leren* (WL) and *lerend werken* (LW) and four levels of qualification: *assistent*, *beroepsbeoefenaar*, *vakfunctionaris* and *middenkader-functionaris*. Its educational programs range from 1 to 4 years. The qualification *middenkader-functionaris* level 4 can be compared with an mbo-4 certificate in the Netherlands. The other levels are comparable to Dutch mbo-1-3.²⁹

There are two universities on Sint Maarten. The first is the American University of the Caribbean, School of Medicine in Cupecoy. This is part of a Florida-based university and is therefore not subsidized by the state. Its only obligations are to update its accreditation and inform the Sint Maarten government of all developments and changes. The second is the University of St. Martin in Philipsburg, which is the Kingdom's first English-language teacher training institute. The University of the Virgin Islands has obtained an accreditation (not NVAO) and USM is offering accredited programs in partnership with this university.³⁰ USM provides two-year Associate of Arts degrees in the General Liberal Arts with specializations in Education, Math, Science, Business and Hospitality. To participate in these undergraduate degree programs, as they are called in the Anglo-American education system, the minimum requirement is *havo*, *vwo*, *CXC*, *CSEC*, or an American General Education Development (GED) diploma plus the taking of entrance and placement exams that may result in the need to place students in preparatory courses prior to beginning university-level (*hbo/wo*) degree programs. After acquiring the Associate Degree, some students continue their educational career at other institutions of higher education in the Netherlands, North America and the Caribbean. Furthermore, USM in partnership with the University of the Virgin Islands also offers a certificate in secondary teaching. USM offers teacher training in Caribbean Netherlands and is expanding its degree program offering in partnership with the University of the Virgin Islands.



Undocumented pupils and students

The issue of absorbing undocumented children into the school system was subject to discussion in the 2015 Millennium Development Goals Report, which stated that *"access to primary and secondary education in Sint Maarten is in theory at 100 percent. In practice though universal access is still to be achieved, for vulnerable groups, including undocumented migrant children and disabled or mentally challenged children."* In 2014, a total of 687 undocumented students were enrolled in public and subsidized schools.³¹

In the years 2015-2016 and 2016-2017, the percentage of undocumented children increased rapidly. The 2016-2017 primary and secondary school registration systems reported a total of 962 undocumented students. It is difficult for the government to form a complete picture of the total number of unregistered children. Not all schools routinely submit data, currently, private schools are not obligated to submit data. Children from the French territory of Saint-Martin attending school on the Dutch side of the island and vice versa are also classed as undocumented students, as they may not be registered in the Dutch Civil Registry system.³²

Transition of students

Individual schools keep track of the flow of their pupils and students within primary and secondary education and submit these data to the Inspectorate of Education on an annual basis. The data received by the Inspectorate refers to the transition of students at individual schools. There is no general overview of the entire system. The Inspection Division monitors the placement process annually and observed together with various schools that the guideline for placement in either a PBL/PKL program or the SMVTS was not clearly determined.³³

Repetition rates

Repetition rates (i.e. repeating a year of the curriculum) are quite high on Sint Maarten. Repetition and advancing students to the next year based solely on age is highest amongst boys.³⁴ The Inspectorate last published repetition rates in 2018. In the previous five years, repetition rates had varied between 16.1 and 21.1%. In most upper forms of schools, repetition rates are lower, the only exception being the havo stream at Milton Peters College.³⁵

Several secondary schools have high repetition rates. Low motivation is often a factor. Another major problem is that a high proportion of students are dealing with behavioral challenges or face problems at home, where they do not always receive the parental support they need. After a relatively low number of 77 suspensions in 2013-2014, the average number of suspensions in the next four years increased to 200 in primary and secondary education. Last but certainly not least, it is important to note that many students attending schools with Dutch as language of instruction, struggle with Dutch.³⁶

Schools will have to develop effective measures to prevent high repetition rates. However, the Ministry of Education has acknowledged that more extensive reform may be needed. A committee has started to review the PSVE system at national level, along with any practical alternative exam programs (especially CCSLC and CVQ). This review was supposed to have been finalized at the end of the 2016-2017 school year, but lack of time and capacity prevented this.³⁷ The status of review is unclear.



Student absenteeism

Education at Sint Maarten is compulsory between the ages of 4 and 18 and is regarded as the right of every child in terms of giving them the opportunity to live productive and successful lives. All schools need to have a clear policy in place for dealing with student absenteeism and to explain its consequences in the Student/Parent Handbook. Teachers are required to register the absence of their students. Most schools use a digital student tracking system to monitor attendance, while the public schools work with analog class registers.³⁸ The Inspectorate's truancy officers check on students' attendance and have the authority to take measures when students are in violation of the Compulsory Education Law.³⁹ Most primary schools report that student absenteeism is not a problem at their school.⁴⁰

Vocational schools do complain about elevated levels of truant behavior, either in the form of students staying away from school altogether or skipping certain classes. In 2014-2015 and 2015-2016, the number of students who dropped out was 67 and 85 respectively, while in the subsequent two years the figures were 19 and 17. All of these situations involved students in secondary education.⁴¹

Teacher absenteeism

In 2016-2017, the overall percentage of teacher absenteeism was 7.1%, the same as in 2015-2016. It was also comparable to the level of overall absenteeism in 2014-2015 (7%) and slightly lower than the 7.6% recorded in 2013-2014. In 2017-2018, teacher absenteeism increased slightly to 7.6%.⁴² A percentage of between 7 and 8% is quite high and causes problems for schools and school boards in terms of providing a coherent and consistent program of education.

Many schools do not have a written policy or Human Resources solution for how to curb teacher absenteeism. Most schools arrange a substitute when a teacher is absent. This is either the school head or another member of staff with a teaching degree. If managers and student care coordinators have to stand in for absent teachers on a regular basis, their own work suffers. In some cases, classes are split up and divided over other groups. Teacher absenteeism has a greater impact on smaller schools than on larger schools with more personnel.⁴³

Performance

There is a growing concern about the low marks that students achieve in Dutch. In the academic year 2016-2017, 48% of students recorded in the FBE Exit Exams a grade of 40% or lower in Dutch, slightly down on the previous year when 51% scored below 40%. Even in primary schools where Dutch is the language of instruction, only 14% scored 60% or higher. Performance in English, on the other hand, is consistently good with an average score of 70% in 2016-2017.⁴⁴

Waschke noted concerns about poor comprehension of Dutch back in 2015. He mentioned environmental factors such as low motivation, language background, lack of parental support and problems with learning materials as contributing to this problem. He also concluded that better teacher skills in terms of observation, differentiation, team teaching and enforcing practical learning strategies could lead to improvement.⁴⁵

This analysis feeds into the ongoing discussion about the language of instruction in schools. This is particularly relevant for Sint Maarten, where English is the language of day-to-day administration, of mass communication, and the first language of most of the population. The government of Sint Maarten uses Dutch when communicating with the Dutch government and continues to produce official documents in the Dutch language.⁴⁶

2.2 Policy vision and ambitions related to education

What ambitions have been formulated for education, where and by whom?

The general objective of the Inspection Division, as laid down in the Organizational Act Education, Culture, Youth and Sports (AB 2010, No 6), states:

"The efficient and effective supervision (control and inspection) bear on the implementation of laws and regulations of the policy in the field of education and the promotion of and to ensure that education on St. Maarten is carried out in accordance with internationally recognized standards and regulations."⁴⁷ In 2015 the Inspectorate added the following objective: "To make the Inspectorate a dynamic, effective and efficient organization that has the quality of education and customer service as its main priorities."

The Inspectorate also formulated a vision:

"To provide for all citizens and residents, quality strategic leadership in the process of preparing an individual to become an independent, thinking, productive, wholesome, useful and valued member of society through the provision of quality life-long education, training and cultural development, which will enable individuals to develop and achieve their full potential, so that they can make meaningful contributions to National Development of this country."

The mission of the Inspectorate is to execute the vision as described above by providing and ensuring the implementation of effective and efficient systems and policies which promote and secure equal opportunities and access to quality education [...] for all the people of Sint Maarten.⁴⁸

Neither the Inspectorate of Education nor the Department of Education can present a more recent overview of ambitions related to education, nor can they state how these ambitions are being safeguarded. Part of the ambitions and goals date from 2015-2016. MECYS devised a 2016-2020 strategic plan with the following priorities:

- I. Implement education legislation and policies, and finalize pending legislation e.g., ECD, tertiary education, policy on behavior, health, wellness and safety within the schools, extension of school hours and after-school programs.
- II. Improve the quality of primary and secondary schools, standardize, and subsidize the ECD curriculum and programs (0-3 years).
- III. Improve the quality and accessibility of education (provide more accessible special needs education, ensure continued upgrading of skills for teachers, managers, assistants and school board members).
- IV. Improve the quality of educators (ensure teachers meet the required standards and qualifications to function optimally in the classroom).
- V. Establish tertiary and professional education as a vital pillar for Sint Maarten's economy (expand the University of St. Martin campus and ensure accreditation of the degree programs it offers).
- VI. Stimulate life-long learning (adopt the UNESCO Global Network of Learning Cities approach).
- VII. Reduce repetitions and decrease dropout rates (evaluate and execute the social formation program (*sociale vormingsplicht*) to reduce the number of dropouts and invest in extra guidance programs with homework and tutoring sessions).

In addition, the ambitions for the education sector are detailed in the 2016–2026 Strategic Plan with the following priorities:

- I. Transform, monitor and evaluate the education system so that students leaving the formal education sector possess the required knowledge for continued education, employment or entrepreneurship
- II. Digitalize the education system in accordance with the changing technology in the world so that students can learn through big data, social media and digital teaching methods (e-learning)
- III. Ensure that teachers and staff have the competences to teach and coach in accordance with innovative and digital teaching methods
- IV. Provide support to students to assist them in achieving their full potential and develop the required knowledge and competences
- V. Provide the required infrastructure and resources to support the educational process and students in their learning process.

These ambitions have been further worked out in a multi annual framework for the Ministry and is operationalized in annual plans of each of the respective departments taking into account the Governing Program.

Since the launch of this plan, MECYS has made steady progress despite the pursuit of these outcomes being interrupted by the September 2017 hurricanes.⁴⁹

The ministry also stipulated the comprehensive Early Childhood Development (ECD) Policy Plan. Ensuring a great beginning through providing high-quality early childhood services for all Sint Maarten children from preconception to age six. This Policy Plan is linked with the Integrated Youth Policy and taken together they will enable Sint Maarten to support children and parents effectively from infancy to adulthood.

Not having requirements for enrolment and admission to the primary school, makes it easier to deprive children from equal access to primary education, which is against the Convention of the Rights of the Child.

2.3 Laws and regulations

Legislation

The legislative framework for education on Sint Maarten is based on the legislation of the former Netherlands Antilles. Each sector has its own rules and laws, known as National Ordinances (*Landsverordeningen*). The Minister is entrusted with the supervision of education, which is carried out on his behalf by the Inspectorate of Education.⁵⁰

Compulsory education exists on Sint Maarten for children from 4 to 18 years of age.⁵¹ The Inspectorate is permitted to grant an exemption from compulsory attendance at school.⁵² It also seeks to reduce absenteeism by holding consultations with schools. Pursuant to Section 6 of the law governing compulsory education, the Inspection Division does not have the legal basis to supervise compulsory education on behalf of the Minister.

There exists a *Landsverordening Speciaal Basisonderwijs* (SBO). The National Ordinance for Primary Education (*Landsverordening funderend onderwijs*) applies to primary education. This legislation states that every school needs to have a school development plan (*schoolontwikkelingsplan*). This document, which can be compared with a school plan (*schoolplan*) in the Netherlands, is required to set out the vision of the school, in addition to covering policy areas such as Human Resources, curriculum and teaching. A new plan must be drawn up every four years. A school guide, renewed on an annual basis, is another compulsory document.⁵³



There is also a National Ordinance for Secondary Education (*Landsverordening voortgezet onderwijs*), in which, for example, the duration and global content of vwo, havo and vsbo (in the Netherlands: vmbo) are described. Basic secondary education (*basisvorming*) covers a period of two years. The content of profiles and choice of subjects are also covered in this legislation.⁵⁴ Lessons should last 45 minutes and a maximum class size has been set by law: for havo and vwo it is 30 students, for vsbo-basis 16 and for vsbo-kader 24.⁵⁵

The financial management of the education subsidy provided by MECYS lies with the competent authority, the respective school boards, and is subject to the conditions anchored in the relevant ministerial decrees. By law, the school boards are obliged to submit an audited financial report at the end of the fiscal year, as stipulated in the National Decree on Education Funding (*Landsbesluit bekostiging onderwijs*).⁵⁶

Section 3 of the draft ordinance on the supervision of education (*LOT-Landsverordening Onderwijs Toezicht*) states that the Inspectorate is tasked with investigating a number of areas: the lawful acquisition of funding, the audit reports of the auditor appointed by the competent authority, the lawfulness of expenditure and the legality of the financial management. It is also tasked with the assessment and promotion of financial efficiency and the promotion of financial continuity of the educational establishments that receive funding.⁵⁷

Language and language of instruction

The National Ordinance for Primary Education (*Landsverordening funderend onderwijs*) states that it is up to the competent authority (*bevoegd gezag*) to determine which language or languages of instruction are used at a school in primary education: the supervisory board can only choose between Dutch and English.⁵⁸ In secondary education, the language of instruction depends on the system of examination adopted by the school.⁵⁹

Examinations

The country of Sint Maarten uses several types of examinations. Schools which have Dutch as their language of instruction use exams developed by the Netherlands-based *College voor Toetsen en Examens* (CvTE) for some subjects (e.g., the exact sciences, mathematics, English, French), and exams developed by the Curaçao-based *Expertisecentrum voor Toetsen en Examens* (ETE) for others (e.g., Dutch, geography, history).

Schools that have adopted English as their language of instruction use examinations developed by the Caribbean Examinations Council (CXC) for levels including CSEC and CAPE.⁶⁰ St. Dominic High School follows the Caribbean CXC education system and offers CSEC and IB.⁶¹

School fees and parental contribution

In funded primary education, parents are requested to pay a contribution of approximately 300 NAFL and in secondary education the amount of 850 NAFL. Families with more than one child at the same school pay a lower amount. Annual costs for participation in the IB program (International Baccalaureate) are around 2900 NAFL. The annual contribution charged by private schools differs per school.⁶²

Eight organizations received funding to facilitate after-school programs in 2017. After-school programs provide a safe learning environment after regular school hours for children aged 4 to 12, as well as offering homework guidance and supervision that would otherwise be limited at home. Eighty percent of these programs charged an attendance fee.⁶³

2.4 Demographic characteristics of society and school population

Social-economic factors

The economy of Sint Maarten depends heavily on tourism. Due to its small size and lack of diversification, Sint Maarten is vulnerable to uncontrollable external factors and economic developments, such as hurricanes, the COVID-19 pandemic and worldwide economic recession. In the aftermath of the September 2017 hurricanes, for example, damages and losses amounted to an estimated 260% of GDP while the country's economy contracted by about 12.5% compared to its 2016 level during the 2017-2018 period. The World Bank expected growth to rebound in 2019 and to reach pre-hurricane levels by 2025.⁶⁴

UNESCO data shows that in 2018 the GDP of Sint Maarten was 1,185 billion US dollars, a decline compared to previous years. The GDP declined by 5.8% in 2017 and by as much as 6.6% in 2018. In the period 2014-2016, the GDP showed an annual growth of between 0.5% and 1.6%. More recent data is not available.⁶⁵

The percentage of youth aged 15 to 24 who are not in employment, education or training is exceedingly high: 31%.⁶⁶ Around 30% of the population is not insured for health care, among them undocumented families with children who are not eligible for public health insurance. Not being insured prevents access to health care. Obesity is also an increasing problem, also among children. Fruit and vegetables became 2.5 times more expensive between 2006 and 2016 and food in general doubled in price over the same period. Most of the country's food is imported from abroad, which increases the price of food for the people.⁶⁷

Labor force

The labor force participation rate in 2017 was 55%, slightly down from 2013 (58%) and 2011 (57%). According to the Labor Force Survey conducted in March 2017, the sectors employing the highest number of workers are retail (1,913), hotels and restaurants (1,806), and public administration and defense (1,548). Prior to the hurricanes of 2017, unemployment rates were in decline, dropping from 12.6% in 2009 to 6.2% in 2017. However, the hurricanes caused the unemployment rate to rise to 9.9% in 2018.⁶⁸

In the field of education, 90% of primary school teachers were female in 2012. Figures from the same year show that almost 96% of the total number of teachers in primary education were qualified. In 2014 almost 58% of teachers in secondary education were female and approximately 93% of the total workforce was qualified. In tertiary education, exactly 50% of the teachers were female in 2015.⁶⁹ In 2016-2017, only 77% of teachers at tertiary level were qualified.⁷⁰

Demographics

UNESCO statistics provide some relevant data as regards demographic indicators. Life expectancy at birth was 78 years in 2016. According to figures from 2020, around 8000 children were aged 14 or younger, 6000 persons were aged between 15-24, 24,000 were aged between 25-64 and 4000 were 65 or older. For the years 2014-2016, annual population growth was around 3%. This growth rate fell to 1.5% in 2017, with further declines of 0.2% each year from 2018 to 2020. In 2020, Sint Maarten was home to a total population of approximately 43,000.⁷¹

The most recent data published on the UNESCO website give an impression of the demographics of Sint Maarten in relation to education. In September 2020, there were 3512 children registered in the age group for early childhood education, 3146 for primary education and 2453 for secondary education. The total population of



school-age children in 2020 was 7312.⁷² It should be added that the UNESCO web page does not include a lot of relevant data on education and demographics such as illiteracy rates, out-of-school children, government expenditure on education, and repetition rates.

World Bank data on Sint Maarten's education system are somewhat fragmented and outdated. However, some data can be found which provide more information on the education system. In the years 2012 and 2014, between 11% and 13.2% of female pupils at primary schools were over-aged, while only 0.5% were under-aged (in 2012). For male pupils, the percentage of over-aged pupils was higher: between 15.5% and 17.3%, while only 0.3% were under-aged in 2012.⁷³ This could indicate being kept back a year or postponed participation in education, occurring more frequently among boys than girls.

According to the UNICEF report (2020), the number of unregistered people residing on Sint Maarten could be as high as 20% of the official population. Sint Maarten has approximately 10,000 children under the age of 18, one fifth of whom are aged 5 or under. Some estimates indicate that the country is home to an additional 20% of children (i.e. on top of the 10,000 total) who are not properly registered in the Civil Registry.⁷⁴ With regard to background, language and faith, Sint Maarten fits the sub-regional trend of heterogeneity. This speaks to the need for cultural sensitivity in designing programs for children and their families.⁷⁵

The Sint Maarten Public Expenditure Review shows that the country has one of the youngest populations in the Caribbean region, but also one of the most rapidly ageing. The size of the older age cohorts is increasing more rapidly than that of the working age cohorts, while net emigration among those in the 20-29 age range – mainly due to studying abroad – has led to a fall in the size of this cohort. These underlying demographic trends have potentially profound and long-term implications for social security, pension and public health systems.⁷⁶

Migration

UNESCO provides data on inbound and outbound student numbers. In 2014 there were 77 inbound students⁷⁷, while in 2015 (most recent data) 70 students came to Sint Maarten to study in tertiary education. In 2019, 154 registered students left the country to study abroad. In the years before 2019, on average approximately 120 students a year left the country.⁷⁸

Sint Maarten is a country characterized by its multicultural identity. It has a high immigrant population and for many of its non-native inhabitants the country offers opportunities for employment in the tourism and construction sectors, or the prospect of obtaining a Dutch passport and the chance to emigrate to Europe or the United States more easily. The available information from the Civil Registry of Sint Maarten indicates that the country is currently home to over 104 legally settled nationalities.⁷⁹

The country has a high percentage of undocumented migrants, just as the other Caribbean parts of the Kingdom. Undocumented residents are more difficult for the government to reach in terms of offering the information and support they may need to obtain health insurance, welfare benefits or to enroll their children in school. Undocumented children are vulnerable, as they do not have equal access to public services, despite government measures aimed at making such services, including education, available to undocumented children. Education is a universal right for every child.⁸⁰

Hurricanes Irma and Maria had a major impact on immigration and emigration. In September 2017 and the months that followed, emigration was much higher than it had been in previous years. Immigration dropped to almost zero in September 2017, and although there was a slight rise during the last three months of that year, levels remained far lower than before.⁸¹

2.5 Structural and incidental context factors affecting the quality of education

The State of Education report 2017-2018 makes reference to 'post Irma challenges' in education. There are still school buildings in need of repair and funding to repair such facilities remains an issue.⁸² The total damage caused by hurricane Irma was estimated at USD 1.38 billion. Government spending on education is relatively high and the Ministry of Education accounts for the highest percentage of total government expenditure: in 2017 spending on education, culture, youth and sports made up almost 28% of the government total.⁸³ Education spending represents 93% of the MECYS budget and about two-thirds of this spending takes the form of subsidies to non-profit schools. The country's public spending on education as a share of GDP is 5.7%, significantly higher than the average OECDS expenditure of 4.1%.⁸⁴

The funded educational system consists of two languages of instruction. Dutch programs are generally modeled after the Dutch Education system and English programs are generally modelled after the CXC qualifications with the exception of IB. This can make the system less efficient than it should be. The relatively high repetition rates also have an adverse effect on the system's efficiency. On Sint Maarten, early tracking at secondary level (around the age of 12) may come too soon for many children, especially in a system with more than one language of instruction.⁸⁵ Having more than one language of instruction can be beneficial to society and in terms of child development.

Since 10 October 2010, Sint Maarten has had ten consecutive governments⁸⁶ and this is clearly not conducive to stable and consistent policymaking. Scandals involving corruption among government ministers over the past decade have also distracted from proper policymaking.

The unexplained gaps in enrolment between primary and secondary education and the lack of clarity about the number of undocumented children attending school represent a considerable problem for Sint Maarten's education system and society as a whole. In the period 2012-2017, approximately 4700 children were registered in primary schools and around 3000 in secondary education. A similar problematic gap can be seen each year.⁸⁷ Structural and up-to-date data collection on educational indicators suffered a setback in the aftermath of the 2017 hurricanes and badly needs to be re-established.

In a related issue, some vital data is simply not available. For example, The State of Education report does not provide data on completion rates (based on longitudinal tracking of each cohort of students who start a particular cycle/program at the same time). Nor has Sint Maarten participated in any international assessments of learning, such as the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) or the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS). The fragmentation in secondary education (curricula, examinations) also makes it hard to compare and measure results. Furthermore, the FBE examination only tells us how Sint Maarten's sixth graders in different schools perform relative to each other. In other words,



MECYS does not know how its students are performing relative to the system's learning goals.⁸⁸

The UNICEF report states that 85% of adult interviewees mentioned violence as a major issue facing children, adolescents, and women on Sint Maarten, while 50% think child sexual abuse is a 'common' occurrence. Looking at the health of adolescents and issues specific to them, a 2013 survey on adolescent mental health reported alarmingly high rates of attempted suicide and suicidal thoughts: almost 30% of young people aged 13 to 19 had contemplated suicide and 13% had attempted suicide. In 2018, the Court of Guardianship received a total of 199 cases of neglect and 39 of abuse. Between 2015-2018, some improvements were made to strengthen the protection of children. In 2015, a protocol for reporting child abuse was approved and a Penal Code was drafted which contains a legal definition of child abuse. In 2018, an action plan and policy on preventing child abuse were drafted.⁸⁹ At present, it is unclear whether they have been approved by the government and parliament of Sint Maarten. The reopening of the Miss Lalie Centre in 2019, after a two-year closure caused by the hurricanes, means that juvenile offenders can once again receive support, a program of daytime activities and some sort of education.⁹⁰

As in the rest of the world, the COVID-19 pandemic caused major problems on Sint Maarten from early 2020. As an economy that is largely dependent on tourism, Sint Maarten's GDP suffered considerably, and it is expected to take several years for the economy to recover. This economic decline can also have implications for government expenditure on education and an adverse effect on the quality of the education system.

More generally, Sint Maarten suffers from the effects of a brain drain and an ageing population. Highly educated youngsters leaving the island can only have a detrimental effect, while an ageing population will necessitate higher expenditure on health care, something that has become even more difficult to fund in a post-COVID-19 and post-Irma economy.

In October 2020, the Child Resilience and Protection Project was approved. This 5 million USD project was funded by the Sint Maarten Recovery, Reconstruction and Resilience Trust Fund, financed by the Government of the Netherlands and managed by the World Bank. This project is aimed at the resilience of students and staff to the emotional and physical impacts of natural disasters, the child protection systems and services to improve preparation and response to natural disasters. Two other main projects financed by the Trust Fund are the Emergency Recovery Project 1, which focuses on school repairs, and the Fostering Resilient Learning Project, which is under preparation with the project development objectives to (1) restore access to a safe education, learning and cultural environment; and (2) improve the resilience of Sint Maarten's education system. These projects were developed under the leadership of the Ministry of Education, Culture, Youth and Sport (MECYS) and were implemented with the support of UNICEF Netherlands.⁹¹



PART II: Problem analysis and recommendations

The previous section presented the purpose of the review and related research questions, and provided a description of the Sint Maarten education system. From this starting point, the inspectorates went on to carry out desk research, visit several schools, observe lessons and conduct on-site interviews with school principals, teachers, students and other stakeholders. The findings of this research are described below in the form of substantiated recommendations, thematically grouped under the headings 'Developing a data registration system', 'Improving education' and 'Strengthening the education system'.

3 **Developing a data registration system**

Recommendation 1: Establish a reliable and sustainable data registration system

Effective policy requires a clear and complete view of the quality of the education system. For example, what are the figures for student admission, progress and graduation for each type of education? How do test and examination results develop over time? Is there enough qualified staff? And how does the country compare to other countries? Currently, this view is not complete and this limits policy makers, school boards and other stakeholders in their efforts to effectively manage quality promotion. We recommend that this problem be addressed by setting up a reliable and sustainable data registration system. To this end, we propose a list of key figures that may be incorporated to support the realization of this ambition. We further encourage the ongoing project by the Sint Maarten government to build a Ministry Management Information System and describe five conditional aspects for its continued development.

Problem analysis

The significance of data

Striving for better educational quality starts with establishing the current situation and determining the target situation. This requires a reliable and continuous source of data based on which comparisons can be made, for example over time or in relation to reference countries. As such, data is an essential tool for policy makers, school boards and other stakeholders. Data help not only in identifying deficits and setting priorities and goals, but also in measuring progress and evaluating chosen policies or interventions. Measurable and time-bound goals lend themselves to management, control and adjustment when necessary.

State of Education Reports

Since 2012, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Youth and Sport (MECYS) has produced a State of Education Report (SER) on an annual basis. This report is addressed to the Minister of Education but is not openly accessible to all stakeholders in the field: "A decision on publicizing the report has yet to be made" (2017-2018 SER). Data presented in this report are collated from several documents collected from each school on a regular basis. These documents include (1) the monthly statements (*maandstaten*) that keep track of the number of school days each month (or reasons for closure), student and teacher absenteeism and registration of students, and (2) the quarterly statements (*toestandsformulieren*) that provide teacher information (e.g., on qualification) and the spread of students across classes and years (i.e. student numbers), as well as an overview of student progress (*doorstroomformulier*), years repeated and placement in secondary schools at the end of the academic year. In addition, these reports draw on exam documentation, annual school reports and qualitative information (e.g., obtained through meetings with relevant stakeholders, interviews or surveys at schools, and observing lessons).

The latest SER reports on the 2017-2018 academic year and includes comparisons with 2016-2017 and 2015-2016. The data presented are broken down by type of education: primary education (PE), secondary education (SE), advanced secondary vocational education (ASVE). Specifically, the report provides an overview of school boards and schools, and communicates data on student count (PE, SE: per school



board and per school; ASVE: per program), student absenteeism (PE, SE, ASVE: percentage per school), promotion and retention rates (PE: per school and broken down by gender; SE: per school and broken down by type of education; ASVE: not included), output results (PE: FBE Exit Exam results per subject per school board; SE: proportion of students per exam program and 5-year pass rate per school and per program; ASVE: output numbers of students), advised flow from primary education (per school board) to secondary education (per program per school), flow from primary to secondary education (percentage per program, per school board and in total), teacher count (PE, SE, ASVE: proportion per school board and gender ratio), age of teachers (PE, SE, ASVE: proportion per age range; PE: per school and per school board), nationality of teachers (PE, SE, ASVE) teacher qualification (PE: type of qualification per school board; SE, ASVE: proportion of teachers qualified to teach vs. requested dispensation per school), teacher turnover per school board (PE, SE, ASVE) and teacher absenteeism (PE: per school; SE: per school board; ASVE: per month).

Furthermore, there is a section on private schools that shows the number of teachers and the number of students broken down into level of education, gender, age group, number graduated, and number promoted. The number of requests made and granted regarding the homeschooling of children are also presented over a 5-year period. Finally, there are sections on inspections regarding the safety and health requirements that school buildings have to meet, challenges in education due to Hurricane Irma in 2017 (status and damage repair), approved subsidy amounts per school board (over a 3-year period), and an overview of costs related to examination and school bus transportation. The report ends with a section on conclusions and recommendations.

Study Financing Division Reports

For 2013, 2014 and 2016, annual reports on study financing were published on an open access basis by the Study Financing Division to inform "the Ministry of Education, Culture, Youth and Sport Affairs and the general public". The report includes an overview of requests for study financing by destination country; the proportion of applicants attending high school/vocational/higher education and not in education (working); the proportion of positive and negative recommendations given by the study finance committee, including the main reasons for negative recommendations; the proportion of scholarships granted and denied as decided by the minister per destination country and per degree type (including a 7-year overview of percentages of approved requests); the number of decisions appealed by applicants; an overview of active (former) recipients per country, by year started, per area of study major, academic performance of (former) recipients; the number of warning letters issued due to students for not meeting academic performance requirements; the number of dropouts; the number of graduates; the number of requests for study change and the number of unauthorized study changes; the number of fraud cases; and an overview of all costs involved.

Data analysis by the Division of Examinations (MECYS)

The Division of Examinations is primarily charged with developing, determining and distributing valid tests and exams. Another of its core tasks is researching and assessing specified tests, exams and instruments of quality control. For example, the FBE Exit Exam results are published on an open access basis, presented per class, per school, per board and on a national level, including comparisons with previous years. Furthermore, item analyses are performed on these data, aimed at determining whether the level of questions is appropriate and whether items discriminate adequately between high and low performing students. If required, exams are adjusted accordingly. Additional analyses focus on matters such as the

relation between exam duration and level of performance, and the relation between FBE Exit Exam results and subsequent education success: are students allocated adequately, are they promoted to the next grade, and do they complete their studies within the prescribed duration (i.e. without an additional year). With regard to secondary education, central exam and school exam data are collected and communicated, for example to the Inspectorate of Education.

Current situation

The above analysis shows that while some relevant information is documented, very little is made accessible to the public. Notably, there is often a time lag of several school years in the data made publicly available, which limits stakeholders in their opportunities to benefit from its publication. Ostensibly undocumented information relates for the most part to allocation (admission, progress and graduation of pupils/students) and leaves key questions unanswered. For example, what proportion of students entering a general vocational program or preparatory secondary vocational education (PSVE) progress to advanced secondary vocational education (ASVE)? What proportion drop out, enter the work force or transfer from PSVE to havo? What proportion of students entering havo, vwo, or CSEC end up progressing to higher professional education or university? What proportion of students entering higher professional education come from ASVE or havo or vwo? The lack of such data impedes a clear analysis of school careers, study success and matching problems. It further impedes an analysis of how the system is performing, both relative to its own standards and relative to other countries, as highlighted in the Sint Maarten Public Expenditure Review.⁹² Data on qualification (e.g., weighted average exam results) and socialization (e.g., social competence results) are also lacking at present. Furthermore, although the 2017-2018 State of Education Report does include financial data on approved school subsidies and some expenses (e.g., exam costs), it does recognize that a thorough understanding of the impact of educational spending is missing: "It continues to be a challenge to get the school boards to give proper accountability of the subsidy received." (p.100)a. This information gap was recognized in the Sint Maarten Public Expenditure Review⁹³ and the Situation Analysis on Children and Adolescents on Sint Maarten, conducted by UNICEF in 2020.⁹⁴

Several stakeholders expressed their need for data and a central registration system (e.g., schools indicating a need for insight into the continued success of their students). Of particular importance in this regard are the current efforts being made by the Sint Maarten government. As part of a program to build back the country following the devastation caused by hurricane Irma (2017), the National Recovery and Program Bureau (NRPB) has started (through the Fostering Resilient Learning Project) to invest in educational needs. One of the pillars of this project is an initiative to design and build a Ministry Management Information System (MMIS). The stated aim of this data registration system is ultimately to "strengthen MECYS's management capacities"^b. Specifically, the system is set up to meet the need for monitoring the implementation of MYCES policies and for collecting educational data for reports.

An interview with the NRPB in September 2022 learned that the development of the MMIS is still in its early stages. A consultant had mapped out what the data information system should entail in terms of functional design and was currently working on a stakeholders analysis. A final report with recommendations by this consultant, including a timeline for actual software development, is due October

a According to the Department of Education, as per 2021, seven of nine subsidized entities provided audited financial reports to the Ministry of ECYS.

b [Fostering Resilient Learning – National Recovery Program Bureau \(nrbpsxm.org\)](https://nrbpsxm.org/)

2022. Next stages of the project include i) preparing educational performance indicators (by another consultant) according to the World Bank's key performance indicators, which allows future international or interregional benchmarking, ii) building, i.e. programming, of the actual data registration system (by another party consulted), and iii) establishing a monitoring and evaluation unit that will be trained in data collection, analysis and reporting, which will subsequently coach and teach stakeholders in data collection.

Recommendation

In line with the MMIS initiative, the working group emphasizes the importance of establishing a reliable and sustainable data registration system for key figures. We recommend taking into account the wishes of schools and school boards, e.g., with regard to tracking their own developments over time and being able to locally benchmark their educational achievements. We further emphasize the need to make these data openly accessible to all relevant stakeholders (e.g., through open access publishing). Data only becomes meaningful when stakeholders can take note of it. Appendix B elaborates on the type of data that may be considered to be incorporated to support the realization of this ambition. The working group further advocates securing five conditional aspects in the (continued) development the data registration system: *effectiveness, validity, reliability, timeliness and sustainability.*

1. Effectiveness

The system is effective when formulated technical requirements and features are met and when it provides end users with the right data. There is agreement among the stakeholders (end users) involved on the type of data considered essential for a comprehensive situation assessment and problem analysis. The levels of aggregation at which data are made available match the needs of end users. The system is sufficiently flexible to quickly meet changing end user needs.

2. Validity

There are shared and widely supported definitions of key figures. The data collected and made available match these definitions.

3. Reliability

Data entry, processing and analysis are set up in such a way that there is minimal room for making mistakes. For example, data entry takes place via an application that is simple and easily accessible, e.g., with a fixed entry format. A communication and implementation plan describes how schools and institutions will be made familiar with this application.

4. Timeliness

Data entry, processing and analysis are set up in such a way that end users have timely access to data reports at the desired aggregation level. An example at the system level is that policy departments have access to recent data and are able to monitor the effect of policy based on current data. An example at the school level is that transparent and efficient school budgeting based on student numbers benefits from access to up-to-date student enrollment data. For instance, in the event that a school budget must be made based on estimates and actual enrollment data is provided a-posteriori, there is a risk that data remain incomplete and that the overpayment will not (or in part) be recovered.



5. Sustainability

Ensuring sustainability of the system requires support and commitment both at the ministry and school board levels, clear communication about goals and interests, continuity in application management and/or ICT expertise (e.g., focused on the security of the system) and adequate availability of funding.

4 Improving education

This chapter contains a series of recommendations concerning the improvement of education, subdivided into improving (i) the educational process, (ii) the transition between educational levels and (iii) the fit between education and the labor market. The recommendations are tentative and contain suggestions for further research.

Recommendation 2: Improve the educational process

Good education is characterized by effective lessons in which students are enabled to use their capacities optimally in a safe learning environment. This starts with organizing the 'basic' conditions such as adequate school buildings and accurate methods. This further requires a shared vision of effective pedagogical-didactical practices appropriate to the target group(s), effective and sustainable implementation of improvement measures, structural attention to competence development of teachers and instructors, and explicit educational leadership. In the context of our limited observations, it was noticeable that the educational process at several schools on Sint Maarten falls short in a number of these areas. The working group considers the development of a good system of quality assurance and the promotion of a good quality culture to be of great importance.

Problem analysis

In the section below, we tentatively address a range of factors directly associated with the quality of the educational process, related to both primary and secondary education. Note that basic conditions such as housing and the quality of teachers and materials are given equal prominence. They are discussed in more detail under the recommendations for strengthening the education system.

1. A safe learning environment

The lack of basic resources in the support for students with extra educational needs (as further elaborated under Recommendation 3) can be felt in the climate at some schools. When students with social problems receive insufficient support, this can have consequences for the safe learning environment at a school. Many primary schools organize breakfast for their pupils to ensure a good start to the day. Also, many schools find themselves dealing with issues relating to poverty or the socio-emotional background of students and pupils on an ongoing basis. For one or two schools that we visited at the lowest level - AGO(LOE), drug and gang-related problems mean the school has insufficient means to ensure security and offer students appropriate support and care. Some schools high fences and camera surveillance to ensure safety. Occasionally, social problems are therefore having a serious impact on the school climate. Teachers are committed to creating a calm and safe environment, and this sometimes comes at the expense of their ability to apply effective teaching strategies and implement educational innovations.

2. The educational process in the classroom

During the limited number of observations, it carried out, the working group found large differences in the quality of the lessons within and between schools. We certainly saw examples of good teaching practices, but in some cases, lessons were insufficiently effective. In some lessons, we observed students learning to work together, learning an inquiry-based attitude, and learning to present and collaborate in projects. However, in the majority of schools that we visited the instruction given was clear but not always tailored to the students' needs, knowledge and skills. We sometimes observed teachers presenting information without truly conveying their message to their students. In those cases, there was little functional interaction

between teacher and student to increase motivation levels. Teachers sometimes applied 'whole-class teaching' without checking whether all of the students understood the information given and without sufficiently investigating the problems that students were experiencing.

Some teachers said they were aware that some students (e.g., due to behavioral or language problems) had not fully understood their explanation, but did not always see an opportunity to do something about it. They sometimes found the different levels among the students in a class too large and the needs of students too specific, while lacking the material that might meet the students' needs. Some believed that even this would not be of much help. These schools lack an overall approach (and sufficient personnel) to identify and tackle learning disadvantages. It should be noted that this observation is not exemplary for all school levels and all school types necessarily.

3. A quality assurance system

A quality assurance system that gives the school management insights into the quality of the educational process and a concerted effort to use such insights to implement and evaluate improvement measures were rarely observed. Some school managers gained an insight into the quality of lessons through class visits, through team discussions about innovations or problems, by discussing the plans for the coming year or by using incidents – sometimes with input from the care team – as the basis for a broader discussion about the pedagogical approach. Within the classroom, an adequate system for teachers to monitor the cognitive development and socio-emotional well-being of their students and to attune teaching to the needs of these students was often lacking. Outside the classroom, we did not observe a standard cycle of appraisal interviews and performance reviews geared towards discussing the development of teachers and giving them the opportunity to formulate development objectives in line with the school's ambitions.

4. Quality culture

A culture in which teachers work to improve education based on a shared idea of educational quality was only partially developed at some of the schools we visited. There was little focus on (or support for) such a result-oriented approach or educational leadership. A plan for the professionalization of teachers was often lacking. Even though little structural attention was paid to the development of teachers and their training opportunities, the dedication, effort and motivation we observed among teachers to educate their students under these circumstances was impressive. For example, some teachers made their own teaching materials or purchased new educational materials out of their own pockets if official channels took too long, illustrating their desire to give their students high quality material.

5. Scope and budget for capacity building and increasing expertise

Schools deal with students who have various extra educational needs and socio-economic backgrounds. To effectively cater for the needs of the students, in-service training of teachers is needed and this in turn requires sufficient resources. The working group encountered some good practices in this regard. For instance, one school had created a separate class with a specially trained teacher who accommodated and taught students of different ages who were experiencing learning or behavioral difficulties in the regular classes. Because it was only a small class, the teacher was able to give each student the individual attention they needed. Some students improved so much as a result of this method that they were able to stream back into their regular class at a higher level.

Sub-recommendations

For the short term, the working group recommends providing direct support to teachers, for example by appointing additional remedial teachers and support coordinators (*interne begeleiders*). This will quickly produce a number of beneficial effects. First, it will enable schools to provide appropriate assistance to pupils with learning disabilities or behavioral disorders, giving them a better chance to use their talents and participate in their current school, with better prospects of moving on to a suitable level of further education. Second, it reduces the flow of pupils to schools for special education, which are usually under-resourced in any case. Third, it enables teachers to focus on other educational tasks. For the long term, the working group recommends to identify and solve possible inefficiencies in the education system. For instance inefficiencies related to staffing at schools and professional development of personnel (see also recommendation 10, Analyze inefficiencies in the education system).

Recommendation 3: Provide a continuous learning path

Effective education in which students are challenged to develop their talents requires a smooth transition between several types of education. The transfer between the schools on Sint Maarten needs extra attention. Schools could benefit from starting a structural dialogue about the match between what is being learned at one school and what students need to successfully progress to the next school. At the same time, schools should monitor the success of their students in further education or in the labor market. This type of information can be used to prepare students for their next step in education or working life and can result in schools receiving valuable feedback as to its success in preparing students for the work force.

Problem analysis and sub-recommendations

At several points in the learning path of a child and student, we have identified a number of factors that are a threat to continuity. We discuss some of these factors below and formulate sub-recommendations to provide a continuous learning path.

1. Pupils and students with special educational needs do not always get the support they need

Children with special needs who are not yet in the school system have challenges receiving assistance and placement into schools. Parents struggle to find placement into schools and often end up seeking placement into private institutions/schools other than public and subsidized schools. Once in education, when pupils have serious special educational needs and are not under external care by a psychologist or the Mental Health Foundation (MHF), public and subsidized schools on Sint Maarten can consult the MECYS Student Support Services Division (SSSD) for psychological testing. Sometimes the SSSD remarks broader social problems and tries – if necessary – to help the family of the pupil to organize support from relevant social or medical services. The SSSD can advise school teachers on how to help the pupil. In some cases the school can use the test of the SSSD to advise the pupil continuing education at a school for special education. Furthermore, the SSSD provides support and offers training for teachers. A lot of the schools we spoke with were positive about the quality of the services of SSSD, but they also found that SSSD often could not help them as fast and as thoroughly as desired. Their analysis was that the SSSD is overloaded and hence cannot guarantee advice and assistance for each child in the short term. In schools, the working group encountered some good practices, for example care teams that are readily accessible to students and advise teachers. However, according to most schools we spoke with, the existing in-house care teams are too small to accommodate all pupils who need help. There is often a lack of both knowledge and professionals to support teachers and pupils. As a result, schools are less inclusive than what is desirable.



The Prins Willem Alexander School (PWAS) is the only public school on Sint Maarten for special (primary) education, predominantly catering for pupils with wide-ranging learning problems. Due to the very diverse student population, teachers at PWAS unfortunately fail to provide children with all the help they need. This often results in parents placing their children with special needs into private institutions that incur costly monthly fees that they struggle to afford. It is therefore advisable to find ways to provide greater differentiation in education, to distinguish between children with varying degrees and types of learning difficulties.

Our sub-recommendation is to strengthen the structure for pupils and students with special educational needs. This includes addressing the urgent need for secondary education for students with special needs, once they complete PWAS, as the current solution of only placing these students in the St. Maarten Vocational Training school could be improved.

2. Mismatch between native and language of instruction in schools

Increase in share of students with a foreign language. In education on Sint Maarten, English is the dominant language of instruction. This corresponds with the native language of most pupils and proficiency in English is usually sufficient to benefit from education. However, some schools mentioned that before corona the number of English as a second language (ESL) students on their school was increasing. This group includes undocumented refugees and pupils, many of whom hardly speak any English.

When these undocumented pupils enter primary education, they typically attend a public school, as subsidized schools require legal residency documents and a detailed registration form from the Civil Registry before a pupil can be admitted. There are also fewer places available at subsidized schools, while public schools often have space. Due to the legal requirements of compulsory education, public schools are not permitted to deny entry to any child as long as there is space. In addition, public schools do not charge a parental contribution and do not require entrance tests.

Teachers at these schools feel insufficiently equipped to meet the educational needs of pupils who are not proficient in English. As a result, these pupils benefit too little from education. Not understanding the language of instruction can lead to educational deficiencies in a wide range of subjects and to problems with social interaction. Most schools do not have a language policy or specific approach for dealing with these pupils. Teachers in various schools use different approaches: translating instructions themselves, having pupils solve problems together in another language, or just speaking English in the hope that the pupil will gradually pick up the language and understand at least some of what is being taught. When these pupils move on to secondary education, the language problem shifts from the primary school to the secondary school. These pupils are often placed in an inappropriate stream of secondary education based on their language barrier rather than their academic capabilities.

Mismatch between native language and Dutch-language education. Although most schools on Sint Maarten have English as the language of instruction, there are some schools where the language of instruction is Dutch. This can give rise to another mismatch between native language and language of instruction in schools. According to these schools, they have a high enrollment of students who do not speak Dutch at home but who opt for a Dutch education because the school has a good reputation, because their parents want to prepare them for further education

in the Netherlands, or simply because the child has a Dutch passport. The influx of students whose mother tongue is not Dutch, however, can cause specific problems. Students may not understand enough of the instruction in Dutch and fall behind in their learning, while parents may be unable to help their children with schoolwork because they do not speak Dutch themselves. Due to the language barrier, parents may also feel less of a connection with the school in general.

Schools' own choice for Dutch as the language of instruction. Apart from the variety of reasons relating to enrollment, schools may have various reasons for using Dutch as their language of instruction. Schools often mentioned a lack of an adequate language policy and for some a lack of space and classrooms means that they cannot offer students the chance to switch back to the English track if their command of Dutch turns out to be insufficient. Both the St Maarten Public Expenditure Review⁹⁵ and the UNICEF Situation Analysis St Maarten 2020⁹⁶ noted that the co-existence of two languages of instruction on Sint Maarten leads to a number of matching problems. According to these reports, not all teachers have adequate (Dutch) language skills and many students in secondary education – although exact numbers are lacking – have difficulties coping in the Dutch language.^{97, 98}

Our sub-recommendation is to take into account the variation in native languages of pupils and students when developing school language policies, by at least taking the following points into consideration:

- a) Meet the needs of the increasing number of students being taught in a language that is not their mother tongue. To realize equal opportunities and a strong start for these students, we recommend developing an appropriate structure for those who have not yet mastered the English language, for example in the form of a bridging year for non-natives. Furthermore, we recommend that all schools should have a policy for dealing with students with a foreign native language.
- b) Improve the process for parents choosing either the Dutch or English stream for their child by providing better information about the consequences and requirements.
- c) Create commitment and the necessary facilities when demanding that schools provide Dutch streams as part of a national language policy. This deserves extra attention when a Dutch stream becomes mandatory for certain schools. For the stream to be successful, the facilities (classroom and class size) should be able to accommodate students who need to change streams during the year.

3. The vocational track often lacks vocational orientation and adequate allocation of students

Vocational value and allocation of students. Many students that attend VSBO and later SBO are motivated by vocational ambitions. However, some students enter vocational training due to a lack of other options. They often cannot enroll elsewhere because they do not meet the academic requirements or have specific educational needs or learning disadvantages. As pointed out in the Situation Analysis conducted by UNICEF in 2020⁹⁹ there is a lack of alternatives for these students, resulting in a diverse and low-motivated student population, and contributing to unfavorable attitudes (of parents) towards vocational education. The working group was able to verify this image with the SMVTS and intends to verify this image more broadly – i.e., with other schools providing (V)SBO – towards the final report.

Given that interests and needs of children at VSBO and SBO varies, it proves challenging to make the curriculum sufficiently oriented towards up to date vocational skills. The working group encountered that some schools have to improvise because of the lack of facilities to simulate the professional environment

in its practical classrooms. Sometimes the number of available internships does not match the number of students. As a result, students who are motivated to work in professional practice do not get the most out of their education.

Our sub-recommendation is to improve the vocational track by:

- a) Emphasizing vocational value: This can be done by putting an educational emphasis on learning a trade as something a student should be proud of. If practical subjects are less broad and more craft-based, this may increase motivation. A more motivated student population also increases the attractiveness of vocational education for potential students.
- b) Emphasize and develop the elements in the curriculum that meet current labor market requirements: This can be done in terms of content, internships, and by simulating the professional environment.

4. Systematic tracking of alumni and a structural dialogue between schools about what is learned at one school and what is necessary to progress to the next school are lacking.

At present, educational institutions do not systematically keep track of their alumni's progress in further education or whether they have found suitable employment, directly after graduation or after a few more years. Systematically monitoring alumni enables institutions to adjust the curriculum to facilitate the transition to further education. What educational skills are needed to ensure a good start at the next level and how are these incorporated in the curriculum of the supplying school? A structural dialogue between schools about these matters can provide valuable information about the current curriculum.

Our sub-recommendation is therefore to systematically track students and monitor alumni. This gives the opportunity to adapt the curriculum to facilitate the transition to further education.

5. Students are not well prepared for tertiary education

Students in Sint Maarten who want to follow a program in higher education can go to the University of St Martin or The American University of the Caribbean School of Medicine, a private institution of higher education. Instead of higher education at Sint Maarten, sometimes students choose to continue their educational career abroad, for example at Aruba, the United States or in Europe. In discussions with institutions, it was indicated that some students go abroad to broaden their horizons, while others choose to do so due to a lack of choice on the island itself. The scale of Sint Maarten limits a wide range of study programs.

Preparation We asked secondary schools and the University of St Martin how successful student in higher education are. The University of St Martin was reasonably satisfied with the success rates of their students. However, they also indicated that the match between secondary and higher education is open for improvement, amongst other things with respect to mastery of 21st-century skills. Additionally, schools in Sint Maarten generally do not systematically track the success of their students abroad. Also the recently published research by ResearchNed on the success of Caribbean students in the Netherlands, only includes a limited number of students and institutions from St. Maarten and European Netherlands. Nevertheless, we saw some of the problems identified in this research reflected during our visit to Sint Maarten. For example, we discussed the study attitude of Caribbean students with schools and students in Sint Maarten. Apart from some positive exceptions, in several schools an appropriate study attitude for higher education receives limited attention. In many schools we visited, a classroom approach is common, with relatively little practice in working independently, in

learning to plan and organize, and in digital skills. Students confirmed that such aspects were given little attention in education, sometimes also due to a lack of digital resources. The University of St Martin also indicated that it needs to pay a lot of attention to the study attitude of beginning students, as this is not sufficiently developed in secondary education. The university also mentioned that the knowledge of the Dutch language often leads to problems in study programs at their institution. According to the university, the Dutch language that students receive in secondary education does not connect well with contemporary language use. Outdated teaching materials in secondary education may be the cause of this.

Information and motivation. Many students we spoke to indicated that friends and family were the main source of information when it came to choosing a higher education program. On top of that, their motivation to study outside Sint Maarten had less to do with the choice for a specific study program and more to do with a desire to leave the island and seek their future elsewhere. Any off-island study program therefore appeared to be the right vehicle for achieving this goal, irrespective of content. Students who pursue higher education on Sint Maarten itself are sometimes highly motivated but sometimes make their choice on financial grounds; a study abroad is more expensive than in Sint Maarten. Students who go to European Netherlands can get a scholarship or loan, to study in the United States and Canada parents may have to supplement study financing to cover total costs.

Our sub-recommendation is to better prepare students for tertiary education. For the short term, we see some immediate opportunities to start improving preparation so that future cohorts will have better tertiary education prospects. We therefore recommend starting with:

- An increased focus by secondary schools and NIPA on personal development, 21st century skills (such as technology and social skills), orientation and preparation for higher education. These competencies should be integrated into their curriculum.

The development of an active alumni policy to ensure that students' experiences and tips are shared in previous education. An active alumni policy also provides data for improving information and making potential curriculum adjustments.

Recommendation 4: Enhance the connection between education and the labor market

Effective education also requires a good match between the curriculum and the labor market. A structural dialogue between the labor market, the Ministry of Labor, the Ministry of Education and education institutions (including vocational training) is necessary to ensure effective alignment between the education sector and the labor market. To make this future proof, a long-term vision is needed.

Problem analysis

The relationship between the education sector (including teacher training) and the labor market is often limited and incoherent. With the exception of internship contracts, it is frequently characterized by a lack of structural consultation between vocational education and the business community regarding final attainment levels and course curricula. Topics that could be put on the agenda for such a consultation include the availability of traineeships, the guidance of trainees, and the alignment between final attainment levels and developments in the professional field.

Qualitative match. The match between education and the labor market on Sint Maarten is far from ideal at present. The working group was given several examples of shortcomings in professional preparation. For instance, the Department of



Tourism and two hotels indicated that in many cases both preparatory and advanced institutions of secondary vocational education currently do not cater for the needs of the tourism sector. More specifically, they stressed that there is no curriculum that prepares students for jobs at higher levels (e.g., digital marketing skills) or that provides hospitality training. This problem is said to be compounded by a shortage of additional in-house training. Similarly, according to some hotels, students graduating from University of St. Martin (USM) also lack practical professional experience. As a second example, it was mentioned during several interviews that there are not enough trainee positions in the care sector. Furthermore, several schools mentioned the lack of communication between schools and teacher training about the quality of new teachers.

Quantitative match. The quantitative match between education and the labor market also requires attention. High schools have to recruit staff from abroad because there are not enough trained or available professionals in the country. At the same time, interviewees mentioned that the opportunities for young people to study on Sint Maarten are limited. At the time of writing, there is no independent body on Sint Maarten that keeps track of developments in the labor market and makes forecasts for the benefit of education. However, a *Raad Onderwijs Arbeidsmarkt* (ROA) is in its final stages of establishment and there are good examples such as medical professions being consistently featured on the priority list of studies and students being awarded Study Financing to pursue such career. As already stated in the PER, vocational programs could improve tracking labor market demands on a structural basis or seeking advice from employers' organizations.¹⁰⁰ Currently, USM offers only part-time programs. USM explains this by a lack of university funding and a lack of financial support for potential full-time students. In exploration of the desired or expected developments of the labor market and appropriate vocational training, the need for full-time programs may be considered.

Sub-recommendations

In online meetings with Economic Affairs, the Labor Department, and the Department of Education, the working group discussed the needs of the labor market and how these needs are met by the education sector. Based on our observations and these meetings, we recognized the same needs with respect to the relation between the Sint Maarten labor market and education as there is in Aruba. We therefore formulated the same sub-recommendations to improve the relationship between education and the labor market as we did for Aruba. We also suggest that Sint Maarten and Aruba exchange experiences and successes in implementing the recommendations.

- a) Improve the alignment between (developments in) the labor market and programs in tertiary education;
- b) Give special attention to teacher training;
- c) Establish a system in which companies are recognized as training companies according to clear criteria, and in which professional practical supervisors are trained and certified;
- d) Increase the number of trainee positions;
- e) Organize permanent consultation for each sector between representatives from the professional field and the vocational education institutions.

5 Strengthening the education system

The recommendations mentioned above relate to improving the performance of the schools on Sint Maarten on the three perspectives relevant to education: qualification, allocation and socialization. In addition, it is essential that the conditions under which education can best thrive should be optimized. This concerns both the legal context – is it clear what requirements schools are required to meet and has the government established proper rules for the education system? – and matters related to governance within the education system and the relevant financial and budgetary aspects.

Recommendation 5: Develop a mature governance structure

Good education requires sound educational institutions where teachers, school managers and school boards work together effectively. Good governance includes internal and external supervision, accountability and participation. Currently, there are shortcomings in the governance structure of the education system on Sint Maarten. For instance, public schools do not have a fully independent school board and some school boards lack an independent and established supervisory board. We therefore recommend developing a mature governance structure in which school boards have sufficient control, in which supervisory boards support school boards and correct them where necessary, and in which employee and student participation has a full-fledged position.

Problem analysis

The education system on Sint Maarten includes government-owned public schools, government-subsidized schools and private schools. All public schools and subsidized schools have a legally recognized competent authority.

In accordance with the National Ordinances¹⁰¹, subsidized schools are under the management of a foundation, association or institution whose purpose is to provide education without making a profit. The competent authority of the subsidized school is the school board. The organization of subsidized schools includes one or more directors and a form of internal supervision. The requirements for this supervision are very limited.

At present, the operational side of public education is organized as an executing agency known as the Division Public Education. It forms part of MECYS and has no specific legal form. The competent authority with regard to public education is the Minister of Education. The supervisory task is therefore formally reserved for parliament. In 2017, the government decided to start drafting an action plan to transfer the organization of public education into a public body. The process is still ongoing and a date for completing the process has yet to be set.¹⁰²

Small-scale society

The small-scale society has multiple effects on the delivery of education in Sint Maarten. One of them relevant with regard to the governance is the way the small-scale society affects the dynamics between educational professionals. Due to the small scale of the country, people who work together in a formal and professional context are likely to know each other informally from social contexts unrelated to work. Family ties and professional roles are very much interwoven. Intentionally or unintentionally, this can lead to conflicts of personal and professional interests. The advantages of a small-scale context (e.g., short lines of communication) can also be

a disadvantage in terms of fulfilling an independent role on a purely professional basis. The knowledge that a decision may affect individuals in your own network of friends or relations may consciously or unconsciously delay or influence the nature of the decision, perhaps creating the impression of bias if other interests are taken into account.

Public education

As indicated above, the operational side of public education is currently organized as an executive agency within MECYS. The national decree on the subdivision of MECYS states that it is the Ministry's task to *act on behalf of the government as a school board, aimed at establishing and maintaining a quantitatively and qualitatively optimal system of public education*.¹⁰³ The executing agency within the Ministry is the Division Public Education. The national decree on the subdivision of MECYS (Section 18a) lists the specific tasks of the Division:

- Planning and management of public education;
- Central coordination of student registration and administration;
- Implementing personnel policy and personnel management in public education;
- Central provision and management of conditional resources in public education;
- Supporting the school managers of publicly funded schools;
- Registration and reporting of key data on public education.

In some areas, the responsibilities of the school manager are at odds with the responsibilities of the Division Public Education. Furthermore, because the Minister of Education is the competent authority for public education, the minister currently fulfils a double role: as the 'school board' for public education and as the person responsible for the quality and funding of education. These issues have also been noted by SOAB in its report on the financial, organizational and operational management of public education.¹⁰⁴

As a result, there is a risk that the Minister could inappropriately use discretionary powers to favor public education. This risk is increased by the fact that the minister's discretionary powers are subject to relatively few restrictions. It is therefore undesirable that political and managerial responsibilities are carried out by the same person. Another risk is that public schools lack a powerful school board that is able to function as an independent counterweight to the government, motivated solely by the need to secure and strengthen the continuity and vital functions of public education on Sint Maarten. Because the Division Public Education is a public service, it is not required to publish a separate annual report to account for its use of funds for the purpose of education.

In the past, the government has tried to corporatize public education but failed to gain sufficient political support for this strategy. One objection raised concerned the legal position of education personnel.

Responsibility and control

It is important that school managers and school boards have the freedom to decide for themselves how they implement 'what' the government expects of them. As long as the 'school board' of the public schools takes the form of a public service that falls directly under the authority of the minister, the school managers and the school board can only exercise limited responsibility and control. Several public schools indicated that they sometimes have to wait a very long time for even simple issues to be addressed. Several school managers also indicated that they had little to no



influence on the hiring of new teachers: they are sometimes invited to sit in on interviews with candidates but have no real say in the final decision.

Within subsidized schools, it is also important that school managers and school boards have proper responsibilities and control. The school board should determine who has the authority to make spending decisions, such as determining the kind of expenditure that comes under the remit of the school manager. This can be formalized in a management statute.

Currently, the prioritization of expenditure is not always appropriate and effective. The working group identified several situations where school management was unable to make spending decisions, resulting in inefficiencies. For example, in one case there was no budget for workbooks but funds were available for a smartboard, even though teachers did not have the necessary expertise to use it. The purchase of expensive learning materials makes little sense if they cannot be put to good use due to insufficient classroom space.

Independent internal supervision

Internal supervision is not regulated by law. No specific legislation or regulations have been established regarding the organization of internal supervision for school boards. The National Ordinances¹⁰⁵ state that a school board must ensure proper management but do not regulate what constitutes proper management or which conditions have to be met. This means that some school boards have a functioning supervisory board, while others have no regulated form of internal supervision or supervision which is insufficiently effective or insufficiently independent.

In addition to internal supervision, there are no formalized participation councils at educational institutions. Parental involvement is present when it comes to issues that directly affect the parents' own child, such as grades and disputes, but not with regard to school policies. There is no law which states that teachers, parents and students should be represented in determining school policies.

Sub-recommendations

- Separate the administrative responsibilities of the Minister from the political responsibilities. Create a clear legal framework for any specific intervention by the Minister in the form of a clearly formulated discretionary power.
- Transfer the organization of public education to a public body that can function as an independent counterweight to the government and that has an independent supervisory board. A public body will be able to focus more on educational processes and less on governmental processes. An action plan to this effect has already been drafted by the government but has met with resistance, partly due to its implications for the legal position of education personnel.
- Set up a system which regulates critical, independent, and expert supervision of the day-to-day management of schools by both an internal and external supervisor and provide the necessary legal guarantees.
- Formalize the competencies of both the independent (internal) supervisor and the school board, enforcing principles of good governance/supervision. Design a Governance Code for Education that sets out what may be expected of an adequately functioning school board.
- Formalize the establishment of a joint participation council in which teachers, parents and students are represented and give it legal status.

Recommendation 6: Ensure up-to-date and adequate legislation

It is important to have adequate laws and regulations on education, as they provide proper guidelines and rules for the education system. The education system on Sint Maarten is embedded in various National Ordinances and corresponding National Decrees. At present, the laws and regulations governing education are sometimes lacking or outdated. The same applies to regulations that enable the Inspectorate of Education on Sint Maarten to carry out supervision, which is one of the prerequisites for a systematic and comprehensive analysis of the educational process.

Problem analysis

The basis for education on Sint Maarten is enshrined in various education laws and regulations. On Sint Maarten a law is known as a National Ordinance (*landsverordening*) and contains binding regulations. National Decrees (*landsbesluiten*) encompass general measures and ministerial regulations and also contain binding regulations. Legislation on education is currently laid down in the following National Ordinances and National Decrees:

- Landsverordening funderend onderwijs (AB 2013, GT no. 796)
- Landsverordening basisonderwijs (AB 2013, GT no. 735)
- Landsverordening voortgezet onderwijs (AB 2013, GT no. 794)
- Landsverordening secundair beroepsonderwijs en educatie (AB 2013, GT no. 795)
- Leerplichtlandsverordening (AB 2013, GT no. 590)
- Bezoldigingslandsbesluit onderwijs (AB 2016, GT no. 19)
- Landsbesluit bekostiging onderwijs (AB 2019, GT no. 20)

Some aspects of the above legislation are outdated. Most of these laws were already in place before the statutory reforms of 2010 and have barely been amended since. Legislation needs to reflect the changing needs of students and society over time. In addition to the general problem of outdated legislation, there are three further points we would like to emphasize.

The first point relates to higher education legislation. Sint Maarten has one government-subsidized higher education institution: the University of St. Martin. At present, however, the country has no specific legislation for higher education. Legislation relating to higher education is included in the National Ordinance on Secondary Education. A draft National Ordinance on Higher Education is being prepared but has yet to be finalized and implemented.

The second point relates to the legal position of the Inspectorate of Education. On Sint Maarten, there is currently only a draft version of the National Ordinance on Educational Supervision. Legislation on educational supervision is an important condition for the Inspectorate of Education to carry out its core tasks.

Third, many secondary school students on Sint Maarten are in the English secondary education system, namely sitting the CXC examinations, yet there is no up to date law regulating this.

Sub-recommendations

An important first recommendation is to evaluate the current laws and regulations governing education and to adapt them to the requirements of the present time. Attention must be paid to creating sufficient guarantees and independence for all parties involved (for instance, school boards and supervisory boards, the Inspectorate of Education, and the minister).

In addition, it is necessary to strengthen the legal framework for higher education. As there is already a draft in progress, we recommend finalizing the development and implementation of a law specifically for higher education.

Finally, it is important that the Inspectorate of Education has a clearly formulated mandate in the form of a supervisory framework (*toezichtkader*) and has a legally anchored position. Part of this consists of clear legal standards and conditions for carrying out supervision and imposing sanctions if necessary. It is important that the Inspectorate operates as an independent entity and does not depend on feedback from the Ministry (as the inspectorate falls directly under the Minister). In this context, it is important that the National Ordinance on Educational Supervision is formalized and implemented from the beginning of next year. Additionally, development of a supervisory framework and sufficient and trained staff are necessary to further reinforce the position of the Inspectorate of Education.

Recommendation 7: Organize an efficient and transparent budgetary system

An efficient and transparent budgetary system for education is important to guarantee the continuity of good education. Government subsidizes education through a system of lump-sum financing. The lump sum system has been evaluated and improvements have been made. However, there are still several bottlenecks regarding the current budgetary system.

Problem analysis

Before 2010, education funding on Sint Maarten was calculated by means of the Compensation and Accountability System (V&V system in Dutch). From 2010, the government decided to use the lump sum system for subsidizing education. In 2014, the subsidy system was evaluated by SOAB on behalf of the Minister of Education, Culture, Youth and Sport. SOAB also made recommendations for further improvements. The National Decree on Funding Education (*Landsbesluit bekostiging onderwijs*) was developed on the basis of this evaluation, and several adjustments to the funding system have been made.

In its present form, the lump sum system uses the number of students per education type as the basis for its calculations. The funding is split into two separate funds: one for staff expenses and one for operating expenses. The calculation of the funding is based on the following data:

- Level of education
- Type of education
- Number of students
- Standard for class sizes
- Standard for school sizes
- Number of schools maintained by a single legal person (school board).

The National Decree on Funding Education does not currently apply to public education. As indicated earlier, the process of transferring the organization of public education to a public body is still ongoing. For public education, there will be a transition period during which this part of the sector will be evaluated and restructured.

Although the lump sum system has been evaluated and improvements have been made, we have identified several bottlenecks in the existing budgetary system.

A first issue with the current lump sum system is that school boards which mainly focus on foundation based education (FBE schools) are sufficiently funded on the whole (except for public schools, see the following issue) but school boards which mainly focus on secondary education tend to be short on funding. The shortages in secondary education are in part due to more expensive learning materials and smaller class sizes. The number of students determines the amount of funding received and this proves problematic in secondary education, where teachers are expensive and classes are small. Funds are insufficient to cover all the expenses, as not all personnel expenses can be proportionally divided per student. SOAB also noted this issue in their report evaluating the lump sum system as used by the government of Sint Maarten.¹⁰⁶ Since then changes have been made. The norm for class sizes was adjusted based on the SOAB report and in consultation with the school boards.¹⁰⁷ This new system has not been evaluated yet. However, several school boards still indicate that they are experiencing shortages.

Another issue noted is the difference in funding between subsidized schools and public schools. In general, public schools experience a shortage of funding. As indicated under recommendation 5 above, the 'school board' for public schools takes the form of a public service that falls directly under the authority of the minister. The budget process for public schools is therefore identical to that of any department/division within the Ministry. This process is often very lengthy and sometimes the public school budget is cut or orders are delayed due to other priorities placed on funds by the Ministry of Finance.

The St Maarten Public Expenditure Review conducted by the World Bank in 2020 shows that public schools are less efficient than subsidized schools across several efficiency variables assessed (e.g., teacher absenteeism, repetition rates). Data published by MECYS¹⁰⁸ and highlighted in the recent St Maarten Public Expenditure Review¹⁰⁹ show that rates of repetition, social promotion (i.e. students progressing to the next year based on age and without having attained the required grades), and both student and teacher absenteeism are typically higher for public schools than for subsidized schools, while student performance in public schools is typically lower. In 2017-2018, repetition rates at public schools were at least double those at subsidized schools, both at primary level (8.6% v. 3.7%) and at secondary level (32.3% v. 13.4%). Social promotion rates showed a similar pattern. Teacher absenteeism in 2017-2018 was notably higher in public schools both at primary level (12.4% v. 5.0%) and at secondary level (23.8% v. 16.1%), with student absenteeism rates showing a similar pattern.¹¹⁰ The PER authors infer from these data that public school systems are "less efficient".¹¹¹ With respect to repetition and social promotions rates, MECYS points out that "public schools are open to all students [...] and enroll more unregistered and non-English-speaking students than other schools [...]", suggesting that student population may be an explanatory factor.¹¹² Furthermore, FBE examination data from 2017-2018 show that public primary schools are associated with low performance.¹¹³ Students in public schools demonstrate a poorer performance across all examination subjects – Dutch, English, Math, General Knowledge – compared to their counterparts in subsidized schools. The UNICEF Situation Analysis St Maarten 2020 underlines that availability of conditional resources may play a vital role in this regard: "Subsidized schools tend to have greater opportunities in accessing state-of-the-art technical equipment such as Digi boards, computers and Wi-Fi-based games and programs which will enhance students' interests and learning" (p. 77).

Public schools therefore typically deal with a challenging student population and have limited access to resources that boost performance. This raises the question whether public schools are receiving sufficient funding and whether public resources are being used efficiently.

Lastly, drawing up a budget is often a copy-paste operation. Generally speaking, there is no real vision behind submitting a budget. Both government and (school)board budgets seldom reflect multi-annual planning and strategies. The St Maarten Public Expenditure Review also noted that the Ministry of Finance does not manage public finances within a Medium-Term Expenditure Framework. As a result, sectoral strategies and future plans in education are not properly related to the necessary financial resources.

Sub-recommendations

In 2022, a general review of the National Decree on Education Funding is planned. This may mean that some of the issues related to the current budgetary system are already being addressed. Nevertheless, it is important to consider the following sub-recommendations:

- Analyze the effects of the (recent) changes to the lump sum subsidy system to gain insights into whether the adjustments to the calculations are adequate, and whether school boards with secondary schools are receiving sufficient funding.
- Design a procurement system to facilitate the public schools until the transfer of the organization of public education to a public body has been finalized.
- Draw up multiannual budgets and update them each year when the annual budget is determined. This should apply not only to schools and school boards but also to the government. The use of multiannual budgets will enable timely action when multiannual figures deviate from the current year's budget. Also take into account the timely processing of subsidy requests which affects the budgeting process.

Recommendation 8: Strengthen financial accountability

Good governance is important within the education system. This includes the accountability of school boards regarding educational and financial policies. It is important that there is supervision of how public money is spent and that intervention takes place when necessary. In the current situation, the required financial reports – including the auditor's report – are sometimes not submitted or are submitted too late. Also, the time of our investigation, there was no consistent evidence that control and sanction options were consistently applied in practice. We therefore recommend strengthening financial accountability.

Problem analysis

According to the National Decree on Education Funding, the competent authority (i.e. the school board) is required to provide the Minister with an annual written account of the use of the funds obtained. For this purpose, the competent authority must submit a financial report for the preceding year to the Inspectorate of Education, no later than February 1 following the end of the fiscal year. The financial report must be accompanied by an audit report from a certified accountant or a chartered accountant.¹¹⁴ The Minister may alter or suspend the amount received in funding if the school board fails to comply with regulations (e.g., by not providing the financial report). As per March 5, 2021, 10% of the calculated subsidy will be withheld annually on a cumulative basis from school boards that have failed to meet their financial reporting requirements and/or have not submitted all the mandatory documentation. However, at the time of our investigation, there was no consistent

evidence to suggest that school boards were held accountable for failing to meet their reporting requirement on time.

By law, the Minister has the authority to exercise control over the lawful and efficient use of education funding and demand financial accountability of the school boards.¹¹⁵ The Minister can also request SOAB to conduct an audit. In practice, such checks are not carried out on a regular basis. Under the terms of the National Decree on Education Funding, supervision is assigned to the Inspectorate of Education.

As indicated above, it would appear that although control and sanction measures are regulated to a limited extent, at the time of our investigation they were not always applied in practice. A number of bottlenecks and problems have been identified in this regard:

- The supervisory and enforcement measures included in the National Ordinances were (up until recently, see below footnote) hardly ever applied in practice.
- The financial reports required by law are sometimes not submitted or are submitted too late by the school boards, and (up until recently) not all financial reports were audited (although this is mandatory). In some cases, only a compilation statement is provided.
- The financial reports submitted could serve as a guidance mechanism for the long-term budget of both school boards and government. Such a mechanism is lacking on Sint Maarten.
- At the time of our investigation, supervision of the correctness, completeness and lawfulness of the funding process and use of education funding was often lacking. Due to insufficient supervision and because not all annual reports had been audited, there was a risk of resources being used unlawfully, inefficiently or wastefully.
- The Inspectorate's supervisory function, as formulated in the National Ordinance, is not sufficiently fulfilled in practice. The Inspectorate lacks the staff and resources to actively carry out this task (and the relevant INSP-ECYS document does not adequately list all functions that would benefit from the supervision that the division needs to execute).

Sub-recommendations

The following sub-recommendations apply to the bottlenecks identified above:

- Enforce what has been regulated in the National Ordinance regarding accountability. This means ensuring the timeliness and completeness of the submission of financial reports, including the required auditor's report, and applying sanctions when these requirements are not met.
- Facilitate the inspectorate-function as prescribed by law with adequate financial resources and staffing. Enable a staff member of the Inspectorate to 'shadow' an SOAB consultant as a learning experience.
- Build a culture of trust, making the enforcement of legal and other requirements a standard part of the budgetary process.

c Note that with the establishment of the Lbham Bekostiging in 2019 came the possibility to sanction educational institutions that fail to meet financial accountability requirements. Cumulative withholding of subsidy was introduced and enforced with the subsidy decisions for the school year 2020-2021. Recent information suggests that as per 2020-2021 seven out of the nine school boards have submitted up to date audited financial reports.

d But see the above footnote.

Recommendation 9: Guarantee the basic conditions for good education

The continuity of good education requires a basic level of conditions including maintenance of school buildings, up-to-date teaching materials and ICT facilities, and a sufficient number of qualified personnel. Unless these conditions are fulfilled, the core functions of education – qualification, allocation, and socialization – are at risk of being compromised. We have observed that education on Sint Maarten is struggling with structural deficiencies in these basic conditions. Such shortcomings perpetually impede the education system and mean that students may be hindered from reaching their full potential. We therefore recommend realizing and maintaining basic conditions for good education on a structural basis.

Problem analysis

During conversations with various stakeholders and during visits to schools, the working group noticed that several concerns and bottlenecks around basic conditions for good education were being raised. Bottlenecks were present at several schools, but mainly in public schools and in secondary education.

Housing (maintenance/climate control)

There seem to be major deficits regarding housing and the necessary maintenance of school buildings. Despite structural funding for ongoing maintenance of educational infrastructure and related materials, schools mention problems with the maintenance of buildings. The size and scale of these problems rapidly increased following the passing of the hurricanes in 2017. School boards are required to take care of their school buildings, but do not always have the budgetary means to do so. Damage from hurricane Irma has created a pressing budgetary problem for the education sector.

The working group encountered several school buildings with a leaking roof, holes in the roof or even roofs that were partially missing. At some schools, a number of classrooms were no longer accessible. In addition, air conditioning is not present in every school/classroom, and the space available is sometimes too small to accommodate all of the students. Teachers have resorted to other means, such as donations or their own resources, to furnish the classrooms.

Teaching aids and ICT facilities

A large proportion of the teaching materials are outdated and sometimes missing altogether. We spoke to some schools that were forced to copy teaching materials every year. Teachers sometimes pay the costs of making necessary copies of schoolbooks themselves. In addition, teachers sometimes have to translate the learning materials into the language of instruction because there is no budget to have them translated or to purchase the appropriate learning materials.

School boards receive funding for educational materials and professional development (also related to ICT). However, a lot of schools mentioned that they receive too little funding to invest in ICT resources. We noted that equipment is often outdated, while the overall infrastructure (such as available internet connections and bandwidth) also falls short of current needs. Schools sometimes receive a smartboard, but do not have the necessary expertise to use it with the result that the smartboard ends up being used as a whiteboard.

e For the schools that do have air conditioning, these are used for short periods during the hottest part of the day due to high electricity bills. Schools are billed according to business tariffs despite several (failed) attempts to have the tariffs adjusted to domestic tariffs as schools are non-profit organizations..



Personnel investments (salary, training)

A lot of schools mentioned that there is a shortage of (qualified) teachers, especially but not exclusively at public schools. Furthermore, some school principals indicated that it is difficult to dismiss teachers whose performance is below par. Some public school principals raise the issue of teacher shortage with the Ministry, but applications for additional staff are not always honored, sometimes resulting in a lack of personal attention to students' needs. The boards of subsidized schools struggle to recruit teachers as well. Not only is there a shortage of qualified teachers but in most cases these boards can only offer a standard salary within the means of the salary scales and according to subsidy, which makes these schools unattractive, especially to foreign candidates. By way of contrast, a (costly) private school reported a waiting list for teachers because it could offer much higher salaries. Besides budget constraints, there is also an issue with hiring practices, high turnover rates, and high incidences of long term sick leave among teachers.

Another complicating factor, especially for secondary education, is that the University of St. Martin (USM) cannot offer a lot of different educational programs to prepare teachers. The focus is on a training program for primary education and a secondary education certificate for persons qualified in certain particular subjects. As a result, teachers take online courses once they have been hired to broaden their skill set while not meeting the required qualifications. In-service training of teachers is according to some schools generally too costly and recruiting teachers from abroad may be problematic due to lengthy immigration procedures, short contracts and low salaries. Several stakeholders expressed their desire for USM to broaden its teacher training program and to expand its internships with the intention to delivering teaching graduates who already have some more hands-on experience.

In general, the supply of teachers cannot meet demand. Different school principals mentioned they would like to help teachers with further training to improve their didactical possibilities, but they see limited possibilities with the budget they receive. The quality of the lessons inevitably suffers as a result of these obstacles.

Sub-recommendations

The failure to realize basic conditions – in all the domains mentioned above – is having a major impact on the quality of education. We therefore recommend realizing and maintaining the basic conditions for good education. One priority in this regard would be to ensure adequate housing and necessary maintenance of school buildings. Even though everyone agrees all of the hurricane-damaged roofs need to be repaired, this process so far is taking 5 years and counting. The obvious recommendation is for the government to accelerate this process by all means. Support for teachers by appointing (extra) remedial teachers is another quick win that was mentioned earlier in this report. Lastly, and in addition to current efforts, we recommend taking advantage of opportunities for cooperation and expertise sharing in the region and between the countries of the kingdom when it comes to addressing teacher shortages. Kibrahacha – Partnerschap Samen Opleiden Caribisch Gebied is an example of such cooperation. Twinning institutions in the region and within the kingdom can also yield worthwhile results.

Recommendation 10: Analyze inefficiencies in the education system

It is important that public resources for the education sector are being used effectively and efficiently. We therefore recommend analyzing inefficiencies in the education system and channeling any surplus of funds into making the necessary improvements to education on Sint Maarten.

Problem analysis

With Sint Maarten making an effort to rebound from two category-5 hurricanes, the COVID-19 pandemic, and related salary cuts, several school boards indicate they are experiencing shortages. The State of Education report for 2017-18 points out that “With funding under pressure, many School Boards face some important choices regarding how they should prioritize spending. For many areas of expenditure, little is known about their effect on the quality of education. As a result, Boards sometimes make choices that do not benefit quality and do not result in a healthy financial policy”.¹¹⁶

A possible consequence of emerging deficits is that school boards start working with two budgets: an internal budget that consists of third-party income (including parental contributions) and an external budget that consists of the subsidy received from the government. Subsidized schools are allowed to charge students’ families modest fees, although these are waived for families that cannot afford them. Publicly funded schools are not allowed to charge fees. There is no clear understanding of the extent to which school boards are dependent on third-party income. A strong dependence on this kind of income may result in parental contributions being made compulsory for obtaining education. However, requirements regarding parental contributions are legally established: the National Ordinance on Primary and Secondary Education (Section 20) states that school admission may not be dependent on parental contributions.

Currently, there is also a lack of insight into demographic projections. Does the school-age population correspond with demographic projections? If a country’s school-age population is expected to grow or decline significantly, these trends will obviously affect the government’s required expenditures.¹¹⁷

Sub-recommendations

It is important that insight is gained into budget deficits and other income (including parental contributions) for schools and school boards. It is advisable to carry out an analysis of the efficiency of spending and to set up a system in which shortages, risks, maintenance and (the state of) provisions are visible. This includes for instance an analysis of turnover rates and sick leave among teachers. As a result, the necessary fees can be determined more quickly and more accurately, and can serve as a basis for a (multi-annual) budget. This should include an analysis of the number of students and a multi-year demographic projection, in relation to the number of schools and available square meters. Optimizing educational provision when student numbers start to decline (mergers, disposal of surplus buildings or classrooms) or start to increase is an interesting option that should be explored further.

Money saved by reducing inefficiencies can perhaps be used to solve bottlenecks and the financing of necessary improvements described elsewhere in this report.

PART III: From policy intentions to action and change

In this part of the report, we explain how the recommendations from Part II can be further operationalized and realized. We present plans of action for two core topics:

1. The alignment between education and the labor market
2. The system within which education operates

This elaboration covers only a selection of the broader set of recommendations from Part II. Notwithstanding the urgency of the other recommendations, the working group considers this selection as core recommendations to be implemented. Additionally, Sint Maarten can make use of the insights derived from this exercise for the further operationalization of the other recommendations listed.

This section concludes with a proposal for a phased approach to improvement and some financial considerations.

The working group considers Part III to be not so much a final piece of its recommendations, but as a key element. As described earlier, we have seen a long history of optimistic planning in many areas but translation into concrete action is often missing or incomplete.

In this review, the working group therefore wants to go a step further than previous exercises. Perhaps more important than addressing the 'what' question (the list of recommendations described in Part II) is the matter of 'how' these improvements can be realized in the specific context on Sint Maarten. Evidently, the below formulation of action plans is merely a first step in the achievement of intended results. For each recommendation formulated in this report, essential next steps include mandating the appropriate parties or individuals, ensuring that those given responsibility take charge, and making comprehensive project plans. Such project plans contain at least the following elements:

- identification of organizations and/or persons responsible for realization
- identification of organizations and persons involved in implementation
- a detailed elaboration of the intended (partial) results, complete with deadlines, applicable criteria and conditional resources
- a financial paragraph that explicates both costs and benefits of intended results

Primarily, it is the government's responsibility to make a deliberate prioritization of intended results and to formulate short-term, mid-term and long-term goals.

1. Plan of action on improving the alignment between education and the labor market: hospitality training and teacher training

Strengthening the mechanisms underlying an adequate connection between education and the labor market is one of the systemic adjustments that can lead to structural improvements in the quality of education on Sint Maarten. Below we outline proposed actions for two branches of education/employment: i) hospitality training and ii) teacher training for primary education. Hospitality is currently one of the largest sectors of employment. Teacher training for primary education is of great importance for the quality of education. Clearly, it would be desirable to launch similar initiatives for other vocational schools in due course. Prioritization of sectors of employment should follow a government vision of the Sint Maarten's desired future labor market: what type of employees will be needed most?

In August 2022, the working group organized two round table discussions on improving the alignment between education and the labor market. One round table focused on the hospitality sector, with invitations sent to the hotel industry and hospitality training programs. The other round table focused on primary education, with invitations sent to (receiving) schools and the teacher training institute (USM). During the actual meetings the hospitality training programs were underrepresented and the institute for teacher training was missing. An online meeting was held with the latter party afterwards. Based on the outcomes of these conversations, we outline below a follow-up approach to strengthen the connection between education and the labor market, for hospitality training and teacher training separately.

Hospitality training

All stakeholders present at the round table meeting endorsed the need for follow-up activities geared towards strengthening the connection between hospitality training and the working field.

Several employers – for the most part hotel and restaurants managers – indicated that currently this connection, both in terms of quality and quantity, was faltering. They felt that hospitality courses should put more emphasis on professional skills, such as teaching an independent and hospitable, service-oriented attitude. English language skills would also need strengthening, according to many of these stakeholders. Some indicated that internships could gain value through formulating more concrete learning objectives. Also, new training pathways, or even entirely new courses, with a heavier emphasis on vocational skills in addition to more general education skills, were mentioned as a possible solution. Employers finally called attention to preconditions such as good public transportation for students to internship hotels, financial resources for appropriate, representative clothing, and sufficient resources for vocational education. They felt that this was a government responsibility.

The few hospitality training representatives present explained that they were navigating between a multitude of requirements from the working field on the one hand and a set, outdated and inflexible curriculum on the other hand. They further reflected on the image of the hospitality sector not being positive for many students due to its association with repetitive, low-paid domestic work. They emphasized that creating a positive image, i.e., promoting the attractiveness of working in hospitality, is also a responsibility of the working field.

The working group notes that the desires of the hospitality sector were not unambiguous; there were both signals during the course of our investigation that there is a need for higher educated people, and signals that there is a need mainly for lower or middle educated people.



In a written response on the interim report of the present Sint Maarten Education Review, USM informed the working group that their tertiary degree program for hospitality is today the least sought-after study for incoming students due to the lack of interest on behalf the Sint Maarten youth. According to USM, this is exasperated by a gap in between lower levels of tertiary education and the accredited programs offered at USM.

The round table discussion further revealed that there are many topics that are not currently discussed *structurally* between the training field and the working field. The working group recommends starting such structural dialogue and considers the government responsible for initiating its organization. The Department of Education and the Department of Labor could start a structural consultation to which both the training and working fields would be invited. Ideally, such consultation addresses the organization and planning of:

- Quantitative labor market research: current jobs and vacancies, vacancies expected in the future;
- The desired starting competencies in the hospitality sector and current attainment levels, where attention is paid to the desired balance between general education and vocational components;
- The learning objectives and supervision of interns both from the training program and from and the organizations offering internships;
- The attractiveness of the sector, its image, training opportunities for workers, working conditions.

Each aspect may be followed up in concrete action plans. In the continued development of action plans, it may be possible to align with already stated intentions to strengthen the education-labor market relationship as included in the MECYS Budget 2022 and Department of Education Year Plan 2022. In particular, the Secondary Education Reform and the establishment of the *Raad van Onderwijs en Arbeid* (ROA) may be considered. Both the Governing Program 2021-2024 and the Strategic Plan MECYS 2016-2026 indicate the importance of the connection between education and the labor market as they each outline multiple objectives toward improving the connection.

Teacher training

The second round table discussion focused on primary school teachers, their education and further professionalization. Those present from the school field felt that graduates of the primary education teacher training program generally have limited skills related to: classroom management, didactics for students for whom English is the Second Language (ESL), differentiation and the use of innovative, activating teaching methods. The school field representatives realized that a recent graduate must be able to further develop his or her skills in practice. Wider professionalization opportunities on the skills mentioned would also be desirable for incumbent teachers. Finally, those present also called attention to the shortage of teachers. It would be desirable to make following a teacher training program more attractive, for example by a financial arrangement for students.

Because USM's teacher training department could not attend the round table meeting, a separate online meeting with them was later organized with a focus on primary school teacher education. The working group asked USM to comment on the schools' desire to strengthen skills around classroom management, differentiation and English as a Second Language. USM indicated that school leaders were generally satisfied with the quality of teacher training graduates, as supported by a recent survey of school leaders carried out by USM. For example, theory on differentiation was already in the teacher training curriculum, but not dealing with



students with specific care needs. Since the internship of the teacher training students was only in the second half of the fourth year, USM could not properly assess whether the students were sufficiently competent to put differentiation into practice. USM acknowledged the need for a more thorough investigation of graduate quality in addition to the cited survey or incidental conversations with primary schools.

USM was open to a structural consultation between schools, the Ministry of Education and the USM teacher training department. Among other things, USM would like such consultation to address the qualitative connection between teacher training and the school field, related to developments in the school field or initiated by the Ministry. They indicated to have previously raised the desirability of such a structural dialogue. Another item that USM would like to put on the agenda is the financial burden on students; most students in teacher training, according to USM, are forced to combine their studies with a full-time job in education. Such heavy combination was said to have consequences such as an extended study period and sometimes limited depth of the knowledge acquired. USM also called attention to the lack of specific legislation for higher education and, as for USM, insufficient funding for universities. Finally, as did the schools represented in the round table meeting, USM indicated a shortage of teachers on Sint Maarten. The ongoing Professional Development Plan (PDP) program reduces shortages by financially assisting students already working in education without qualifications to obtain their teaching certification. USM advocated expanding this initiative with a larger budget, or otherwise encouraging potential students to pursue teacher training, e.g., by offering the possibility of a full-time program.

The working group has noticed that the stakeholders involved often had a somewhat divergent view of the priorities and underlying explanations for the sometimes poor connection between teacher training and the school field. However, all stakeholders were in favor of structural consultation between teacher training, the school field and the Ministry of Education. The parties consulted agreed that such dialogue would serve a good forum to make agreements about a concrete approach to strengthen the skills of current and new teachers. Given the small-scale context the working group advocates prioritizing one aspect at a time, e.g., becoming well-skilled at differentiation, which fits the typical diversity of students in classes. In doing so, we advocate combining attention to initial training and professionalization of incumbent teachers. We further believe that an approach with pilot schools rather than a country-wide approach facilitates a running start best. Finally, a structural dialogue could address the shortage of teachers and evaluate ongoing activities.

The above proposals may be connected with or build on ongoing initiatives described in the Department of Education's Year Plan 2022. Likewise, the MECYS Budget 2022 includes provisions made through the teacher recruitment and retraining initiatives made possible by the PDP. The PDP provides in-service primary and secondary school teachers with the necessary qualifications to teach legally on Sint Maarten. The objective of the program is to ensure appropriate level of skill is reached in order to provide quality education in both primary and secondary education. Both the Governing Program 2021-2024 and the Strategic Plan MECYS 2016-2026 aim towards building teacher capacity and continuous development of education professionals, as well as to facilitate and mobilize sufficient teachers and staff in schools through funding and policy development.

2. Plan of action on strengthening the system within which education operates

We have identified structural omissions in the system within which educational institutions operate. It is essential that the conditions under which education can best thrive are optimized. To take the recommendations related to the education system a step further, we have included further operationalizations for the following topics:

- Budgetary system (including financial accountability)
- Governance
- Legislation
- School repairs

Because the topics involved are wide-ranging, with varying recommendations, we have chosen to elaborate on a selection of the sub-recommendations. We will connect as much as possible with already ongoing activities and projects on Sint Maarten.

In August 2022, the working group organized a round table discussion with several stakeholders on improving the education system. The stakeholders that attended the round table meeting were representatives of several school boards and representatives of the Department of Education. The round table focused on three topics: the budgetary system, governance and legislation. Based on the outcomes of the round table discussion, we have included a follow-up approach for each topic below. In August 2022, the working group has also spoken with an activity manager from the National Recovery and Program Bureau (NRPB) responsible for the school building repairs. Based on this conversation we have also included a follow-up approach regarding adequate housing and necessary maintenance of school buildings.

Budgetary system

Regarding recommendation 7 'Organize an efficient and transparent budgetary system' we focus on identified bottlenecks in the existing budgetary system (including financial accountability). Two main issues of the current lump sum system are: school boards that mainly focus on secondary education tend to be short on funding, and public schools tend to be short on funding. Following the problem analysis our sub-recommendations are:

- Analyze the effects of the (recent) changes to the lump sum subsidy system to gain insights into whether the adjustments are adequate.
- Design a procurement system to facilitate the public schools until the transfer of the organization of public education to a public body has been finalized.
- Enforce what has been regulated in the National Ordinance regarding accountability.

Current state of affairs

(Based on the round table meeting held August 2022 and based on the Comparative Analysis of Sint Maarten's Education Review Interim Report, August 2022¹¹⁸)

The stakeholders present at the round table meeting acknowledged that there are problems with the current budgetary system. These problems are mainly related to secondary education and public education. Shortages in secondary education are mainly due to more expensive learning materials and smaller class sizes as compared to primary education. However, for both primary and secondary education, the mere number of students determines the amount of funding received. This is problematic in secondary education, where teachers are expensive, and classes are small. Therefore, the type of programs (e.g., CXC) should also be



considered. Public schools typically deal with a challenging student population and have limited access to resources that boost performance. The budget process for public schools is often very lengthy and sometimes the public-school budget is cut due to other priorities.

It is important to evaluate the budgetary system. In this way, the Ministry of Education gains insight in advantages and disadvantages of the system which will contribute to solving the identified issues. A review of the current budgetary system will be carried out as indicated in the Comparative Analysis. A consultant will be appointed to carry out this evaluation. Discussions will be held with school boards to clarify the bottlenecks. The evaluation should be completed by the end of 2022.

According to the Department of Education Year Plan 2022 recommendations for the amended National Decree on Education Funding are followed up in order to achieve a more efficient and transparent budgetary system. In June 2019, MECYS engaged Stichting Overheidsaccountant Bureau (SOAB) to carry out an Agreed-Upon Procedures (AUP) regarding the school boards that are subsidized by the Sint Maarten Government. The AUP concerned research into three areas: compliance with education legislation and regulations, comparison of subsidy granted and actual financials, and the financial management measures in place. The SOAB assignment was concluded on March 3, 2022 and was therefore not considered for the Interim Report as it was not available prior to the drafting of the Interim Report. The findings of the report from SOAB will be used to support the development of recommendations towards the amending of the National Decree on Education Funding.

The National Decree on Education Funding does not require a multiannual budget at the time of writing. The use of multiannual budgets will enable timely action when multiannual figures deviate from the current year's budget. MECYS Comparative Analysis states that regulating the use of multiannual budgets will be considered in the drafting of recommendations for the amending of the National Decree on Education Funding.

It is important that there is supervision of how public money is spent and that intervention takes place when necessary. With the establishment of the National Decree on Education Funding the enforcement of financial accountability of school boards gained legal ground through the option of sanctioning. The National Decree on Education Funding was established in 2020 and has been in force since. As a result, compliance of school boards has increased significantly with seven of nine school boards delivering audited financial reports to account for funds received. With the provision of audited financial information the risk of unlawful, inefficient, wasteful spending is mitigated. Said reports have also been used as a basis to disprove statements made regarding underfunding or to compensate where shortages are evident.

Important preconditions for an efficient and transparent budgetary system are ensuring uniform reporting by using a standard format and providing clear explanations so that school boards know what budget they are entitled to. It must be clearly communicated to the school boards which information is requested for what purpose. In addition, verification of the practical feasibility of the submission period for the audited financial statements is recommended.

Good governance

With regard to recommendation 5 'develop a mature governance structure' we focus on the organization of public education, the organization of internal supervision and the organization of formalized participation councils. At present, the operational side of public education is organized as an executing agency known as the Division Public Education (DPE). The competent authority regarding public education is the Minister of Education. Furthermore, no specific regulations have been established regarding the organization of internal supervision for school boards. This means that some school boards have a functioning supervisory board, while others have no regulated form of internal supervision. In addition to internal supervision there are no formalized participation councils at educational institutions. Following the problem analysis, our sub-recommendations are:

- Transfer the organization of public education to a public body that can function as an independent counterweight to the government and that has an independent supervisory board.
- Set up a system that regulates critical and independent internal supervision and provide the necessary legal guarantees.
- Formalize the establishment of a joint participation council in which teachers, parents and students are represented and give it a legal status.

Current state of affairs

(Based on the round table meeting held August 2022 and based on the Comparative Analysis of Sint Maarten's Education Review Interim Report, August 2022¹¹⁹)

During the round table meeting the need for a mature governance structure has been recognized by all attendees. Regarding public education, the decision that DPE should become an independent public entity has already been taken in 2017 (as advised by SOAB). However, the decision has yet to be enforced by the government. The Strategic Plan MECYS 2016-2026 includes installing a public education school board, with relevant changes in legislation. However, it is not clear yet how and when this will be achieved. It is important to investigate why the organization of public education to a public body has not yet been realized. In this way, better insight can be gained into any possible obstacles. We further advocate making proper guidance available for organizing and implementing any adjustments to the organization of DPE.

It is important for both subsidized and public school boards that school managers and school boards have appropriate responsibilities and control. There should be a clear distinction in responsibilities for day-to-day management and statutory boards. Also, independent internal supervision should be properly regulated. The current legal framework does not require a two-tiered structure for school boards, but the current structure in the legal framework consists of statutory boards and directors. This structure exists across all school boards, except for the public schools. A need for the public schools to be governed through a similar legal framework is recognized.

Given the small-scale society, having many levels of governance may not be efficient. Therefore, defining 'good governance' is essential. To this end, a Governance Code for Education can be designed that sets out what may be expected of an adequately functioning school board.

Legislation

With regard to recommendation 6 'ensure up-to-date and adequate legislation' we focus on the aspect of outdated and missing laws and regulations governing education. In addition to this general problem, there are three points we would like to emphasize: specific legislation for higher education, specific legislation for



educational supervision and specific legislation for the CXC examinations. Following the problem analysis, our recommendation is: evaluate the current laws and regulations governing education and adapt them to the requirements of the present time, thereby prioritizing legislation for higher education, educational supervision and the CXC examinations.

Current state of affairs

(Based on the round table meeting held August 2022 and based on the Comparative Analysis of Sint Maarten's Education Review Interim Report, August 2022¹²⁰)

All stakeholders present at the round table meeting endorsed the need for an update of education legislation. This applies to each education sector, the education system and to the Inspectorate of Education.

At the time of writing there is a draft in progress for the National Ordinance on Higher Education and the National Ordinance on Educational Supervision. A consultant has been hired to realize an update of the education legislation. The following legislations are currently being considered and addressed:

- Finalization of the Education Supervision Ordinance
- Amending and Synchronizing the Education Ordinances
- Ministerial Regulation for the appointment of the Profiles for members of the ROA
- The Higher Education Ordinance
- National Decree for the Funding of Higher Education
- Study Financing Delegated Legislation
- Recommendations for amended National Decree on Education Funding

Once the Ordinance on Education Supervision is established the supervisory framework will be established with delegated legislation.

The Governing Program 2021-2024 aims to transform, monitor and evaluate the education system by implementing new policies, laws and legislation in such a way that students leaving the formal education sector possess the required knowledge and skills for continued education, employment or entrepreneurship.

As there are several laws and regulations that need to be updated, it is important to prioritize. For this purpose, it is possible to identify which regulations are already largely ready in concept (and can therefore be finalized and implemented relatively easily) and which regulations are most important to realize and establish at short notice.

In addition, when updating education legislation, it is important to look at where there are interfaces with other recommendations (for example regarding governance), so that relevant changes in legislation are taken into account.

Furthermore, the Comparative Analysis indicated that the legal and technical expertise related to legislation addresses the proposed recommendation. An important precondition (also for the long term) is therefore that sufficient legislative lawyers or employees with legal knowledge are available to be able to update education legislation when necessary.

Basic conditions for good education: adequate housing and maintenance of school buildings

With regard to recommendation 9 'guarantee the basic conditions for good education' we focus on the aspect of school building repairs. In our problem analysis we noted that there are major deficits regarding housing and the necessary maintenance of school buildings. The size and scale of these problems rapidly



increased following the passing of the hurricanes in 2017. Basic conditions and the quality of education are directly and strongly related. We therefore recommend realizing and maintaining the basic conditions for good education. A priority in this regard is to ensure adequate housing and necessary maintenance of school buildings.

Current state of affairs

As indicated before, the working group has spoken with the activity manager responsible for school repairs from the NRPB. The NRPB was established as an independent administrative agency in January 2019. On behalf of the Sint Maarten Government, the NRPB is (as the project implementation unit of the Sint Maarten Government) responsible for the preparation, implementation and evaluation of the projects that are financed by the Sint Maarten Trust Fund or by other available sources of funding. Currently, there are ten Trust Fund projects under implementation.¹²¹

One of the projects is the Emergency Recovery Project (ERP-1), the first project authorized under the Sint Maarten Trust Fund. This project was created to respond to the immediate and long-term recovery needs due to hurricane Irma. One component of the project is Public Building Repairs (budget of \$16.5 million). This sub-component finances the repair of high priority facilities and the cost of temporary relocation. As reconstruction needs far exceeded the available budget, the Sint Maarten Government prioritized the repairs of 19 schools to be addressed under this sub-component. The school repairment agreement includes the scope of the repairs. The repairs are mainly focused on roofs, windows and doors, but include in total:

- mold & asbestos assessment and removal/remediation
- roof repairs
- fencing
- installation of hurricane shutters
- electrical work
- plumbing
- replacing of broken windows and doors

The project only includes subsidized schools as the operational side of public education is currently organized as an executive agency within MECYS and therefore the repairs for public schools would be paid for by insurance monies. Large expenditure of public funds must first undergo a process of public bidding after which repairs and reconstruction can begin. There is an exception, the Leonard Connor School (which is a public school) has been included in the NRPB project. The decision was made to place Leonard Connor School under the Emergency Recovery Project (ERP-1) school repair project due to extensive damages to the building. The other public school buildings underwent quick fixes to get schools to an operational level but remaining extensive school repairs still need to be carried out.

As of September 2022, the repairs to three schools have been completed, while works are currently underway at Milton Peters College, St. Dominic High School, and Methodist Agogic Centre Comprehensive Secondary Education. The repairs to all three schools are expected to be completed in the fourth quarter of 2022. At the time of our consult, the contract for the remaining 13 schools was said to be signed within weeks. Because of the large number of schools to be repaired under this contract, the work will be done in four batches. The decision on how to group the schools was made in consultation with MECYS. The work on each batch will take an average of four months.¹²²

At the time of writing the reparation of three schools under the school repair project were almost completed and three other schools were under repair. This means that repairs for many schools had yet to take place. There has been a delay in carrying out the repairs, the first repairs did not start until the beginning of 2021. Repairs for the last 13 schools are expected to start in January 2023, and the last batch is scheduled to start in the fourth quarter of 2023.

The working group once again stresses that the realization of basic conditions is essential for the quality of education. That is why ensuring adequate housing and necessary maintenance of school buildings should be a priority. It is important that the government ensures that the schools' repairs are carried out as soon as possible, for both subsidized and public schools, and on a regular basis.

3. Phasing and feasibility of recommendations

The listed recommendations are diverse in nature and, as indicated above, partly require translation into implementation agendas. At the same time, some recommendations can be implemented (or partly implemented) relatively quickly and help alleviate the pressure on the education system. Two examples of recommendations that can be realized with a compact plan of action and targeted financing in the short term are:

1. Supporting teachers by appointing (extra) support coordinators (*interne begeleiders*) and remedial teachers (part of recommendations 2 & 3).
2. Fixing roofs and making other overdue repairs to damage caused by hurricane Irma (part of recommendation 10).

The availability of sufficient personnel and adequate competences to implement these recommendations deserves special attention. There are however limitations concerning the expertise at hand. This has effect on implementing recommendations that require sufficient qualified personnel, skills for good governance and supervision, and specialist knowledge to modernize legislation.

A first way to deal with this scarcity is to apply a phased approach to implement the recommendations. In addition to phasing, it should be considered worthwhile to explore opportunities to cooperate and share expertise, both in the region and between the countries of the kingdom. Kibrahacha – 'Partnerschap Samen Opleiden Caribisch Gebied' – is an example of such cooperation. Twinning institutions in the region and within the kingdom can also yield worthwhile results. The working group has already seen encouraging examples of this in its current investigation.

Similarly, it may be considered to further the collaboration between the Sint Maarten and Dutch inspectorates, i.e., aimed at developing a supervisory framework and accompanying research instruments, and training staff in how to use them, for example through joint school visits in the Netherlands and by exchanging best practices.

4. Financial consequences of recommendations

Financial consequences, both in terms of costs and (to be expected) benefits of recommendations have not yet been specified in the present document. This should be given a prominent place in the project plans that serve an essential next step in the realization of intended results. Nevertheless, a number of conclusions can already be drawn about the financial effects of the measures it proposes.



ST. MAARTEN

Division of Inspection
**MINISTRY OF EDUCATION,
CULTURE, YOUTH AND SPORT**



Education Inspectorate
Ministry of Education, Culture and Science

Firstly, not every improvement costs money. The recommendation to achieve a two-tier governance system with strong boards, good internal supervision and mature participation is a case in point. Decisions in areas such as monitoring and limiting the overhead at schools, the need to invest in the training and supervision of teachers and building maintenance are best made by a strong board that operates in close cooperation with its schools. If implemented correctly with proper checks and balances, this will enable money to be spent much more efficiently, which would be a huge step forward for education on Sint Maarten.

Secondly, it is important that any available surplus of funds from the Country Reform Package should at least partly be channeled into making the necessary investments in education. However, this is only a good idea if the improvements proposed in this report are effectively implemented. Merely increasing funds towards the education budget will not lead to the desired results.

Finally, it is important to foresee and calculate the financial effects of demographic and educational developments (e.g., a drop in the number of students). This relates to recommendation 10 regarding the effect on the number of schools and required square meters. Furthermore, the funding – which is based on the number of students (q) and the amount of money per student (p) in the multiannual estimates – can be kept stable. A decrease in the number of students will then result in higher expenditure per student. Again, this will only prove effective if the improvements proposed in this report are implemented at the same time. In this regard, not only demographic developments are relevant, but also educational developments such as changes in types of students (vocational vs. academic) and educational level need to be considered.

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Appendix A – Stakeholders

The Inspectorate of Education on Sint Maarten and the Dutch Inspectorate of Education held interviews with various stakeholders, including policy makers, school boards and schools. Where possible, interviews were also held with teachers and students at the schools visited, in addition to the school management. A list of the stakeholders consulted is given below.

School boards

- Stichting Katholiek Onderwijs St. Maarten (SKOS)
- Stichting Voortgezet Onderwijs St. Maarten (SVOBE)
- Stichting ter Bevordering van Secundair Beroeps Onderwijs en Educatie (NIPA)
- Foundation for Protestant Christian Education (SPCOBE)
- Methodist Agogic Center (MAC)
- Charlotte Brookson Academy of the Performance Arts (CBA)
- Foundation for Academic and Vocational Education (FAVE)

Schools

- Sundial School
- Milton Peters College
- National Institute for Professional Advancement (NIPA)
- SXM Vocational Training School
- St. Dominic High
- MAC Browlia F. Maillard Campus
- Helmich Snijders Campus
- SXM Academy CAPE
- Oranje School
- M. G. de Wever School
- Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. School
- Prins Willem-Alexander School (PWAS, special education)
- Ruby Labega School
- Learning Unlimited (private)
- Leonald Connor School
- St. Maarten SDA School
- St. Joseph School
- University of St. Martin (USM)
- Sr. Borgia School
- Charlotte Brookson Academy

Divisions/departments of the Government of Sint Maarten

- Division Public Education
- Department of Labor
- Department of Tourism
- Department of Youth
- Division Study Finance
- Student Support Services Division (SSSD)
- Division of Exams
- Division Education Innovations
- Department of Education
- Department of Economic Affairs

Other

- Stichting Overheidsaccountantsbureau (SOAB)
- Sonesta Resorts
- Simpson Bay Resorts

Appendix B – Key figures data registration system

This appendix provides an overview of data that could be included in a data registration system with a view to monitoring performance and working towards improvements in education.

Allocation

Inflow characteristics per sector:

- Providing schools: school ID, levels of secondary education (e.g. vsbo/havo/vwo); zip code, denomination, etc. (merge with central database)
- Entering students: scores on national advancement test and entry level test; background characteristics (gender, age, home language, home region/zip code, etc.)
- Enrolment characteristics (data per school year): student's position (where enrolled; same course / other course / no course)*.

*Annual information on position of a student offers the possibility of following a cohort. Risks are divergent choices per sector and double counting.

It is advisable for the Directorate of Education and the Education Inspectorate to work together to discuss a smart approach with data experts.

Qualification

- Weighted averages of final exam figures for secondary education
- Weighted averages of advancement test grades for primary education (objectively standardized)

Socialization

- Suspensions and expulsions
- Data on bullying (surveys, objectively standardized)
- Social competence results (student tracking system, objectively standardized)
- Inspectorate's judgements on socialization by schools and training institutes

Financing

- Comparison between budget and results: state contributions, personnel costs
- Key figures for educational institutions: profitability, solvency, liquidity, accommodation ratio
- Developments (both looking back and ahead) at educational institutions in areas including:
 - Depreciation
 - Housing costs
 - Personnel costs
 - Other costs (e.g., ICT/learning materials)
 - (Other) income
 - Provisions
 - Long-term and short-term liabilities
 - Equity capital
 - Liquid assets
- Distribution of income/expenditure: where funds come from (government contributions, parental contributions, other); where the money goes (staff, accommodation, other)
- Ratio of staff costs to total income (by sector)
- Ratio government subsidies/total income (by sector)
- Ratio investments/total income (per sector)
- Ratio private and public capital



ST. MAARTEN

Division of Inspection
**MINISTRY OF EDUCATION,
CULTURE, YOUTH AND SPORT**



Education Inspectorate
Ministry of Education, Culture and Science

Other conditions

- Developments in staff absenteeism due to illness
- Developments in and proportions of hired, permanent and temporary staff
- Developments in numbers of education support staff
- Salary staff
- Unfilled vacancies
- Number of unauthorized persons with dispensation
- Age of textbooks and other teaching aids
- Presence of ICT facilities