

This profile is part of the EU Study on Supporting School Innovation Across Europe. It presents one of the 24 schools in the study, giving an overview of the changes and experiences in that school. Find the rest of the materials from the study at:

www.schooleducationgateway.eu/innovation

Promoting students' autonomy and engagement through innovative instructional system and integrated teaching in Jõgevamaa Gymnasium



About our school

- ◆ **Location:** Jõgeva, Jõgeva County
- ◆ **Established:** 2013
- ◆ **Status:** State-funded upper secondary school (grades 10-12)
- ◆ **Number of pupils:** 207 (in 2016/2017)
- ◆ **Website:** <http://jogevagymn.kovtp.ee/>
- ◆ **Contact person:** Priit Põdra



Why did we innovate?

Jõgevamaa Gymnasium was established in 2013 as a state-funded upper secondary school as a result of the gymnasium reform in Estonia. In Jõgeva, before 2013, with a decreasing number of students at the upper secondary level there were two rivalling schools offering classes in years 1-12. Consequently, these schools could not afford diverse choices and interesting programmes for students. The migration of students to bigger cities such as Tartu constituted another problem. After the reorganisation of the school network in Jõgeva, there is one basic school (years 1-9) and one gymnasium (years 10-12). This allowed schools to focus on improving learning processes at each level and the newly created gymnasium was able to design new development programme, incorporating innovative practices, aiming at improving the quality of instruction and attractiveness of the upper secondary education among the local students, as well ease students' and teachers' workload, which was the problem in the two schools before the re-organisation.



What were our innovations?

Since its establishment (2013) and design of new school development programme, the school has aimed to implement innovative approaches in instruction and school organisation.

Jõgevamaa Gymnasium is distinguishable by its innovative system of instruction. According to the instructional leader, the school was the first in Estonia to apply a 3 x 11-week trimester system consisting of 10 weeks regular instruction while the 11th week is reserved for examinations. One trimester contains approximately 9-10 courses. Not all courses end with an examination, primarily the ones that have centralised exams at the end of the gymnasium.

The gymnasium offers a variety of elective subjects. Students can choose between five general study directions: 1) sciences, with an emphasis on programming, robotics and technical drawing; 2) humanities, with an emphasis on literature and arts; 3) social studies, with an emphasis on economics, entrepreneurship, law and national defence; 4) foreign languages, including Spanish, Finnish and Chinese; and 5) natural sciences, which emphasise practical biology and chemistry. Students may also combine elective subjects of several directions. Some of the elective courses are offered by universities as online courses, or by teachers as regular courses. Others are more practical and are offered by local institutions or community members. For instance, kindergarten pedagogy was an elective subject offered in cooperation with a local kindergarten. It involved theoretical introduction as well as practical activities with children that were planned and conducted by students. In the school year 2016-2017, there were 68 elective courses on the list. However, only those are offered which are chosen by enough students.

Along with the trimester approach in 2013, school established 75-minute lessons. It allows students to focus on longer units and have time to practice what they have learned instead of doing it as homework. With 75-minute lessons both students and teachers have less daily preparation which eases their workload. While the traditional schedule usually contains 7-8 different lessons a day, each 45-minutes long, the block schedule of 75-minute lessons reduces the number of subjects to 5 lessons per day. Therefore, instead of doing homework for 8 different subjects every day, students can focus on fewer subjects.

The school also offers integrated courses – combining several study fields (e.g., culture and nature, chemistry and physics, etc.). These courses are co-designed and taught by several subject teachers. However, despite the existence of some integrated courses, they have not been mainstreamed by all teachers in school, although teachers' own initiative in this regard is appreciated and supported. The mainstreamed innovations include the schedule (the length of lessons and periods), the individual study days and the emphasis on developing a large variety of elective courses.

A recent study of school cultures conducted by Tallinn University in the spring of 2016 indicated that this school has managed to implement, by several indicators, “the changed learning and teaching paradigm” as described in the Estonian Strategy of Life-long Learning (2014). These indicators include cooperation between teachers, cooperative learning of students and inclusive school leadership. For instance, all the innovations were introduced gradually, discussing the ideas and plans with small groups of teachers, taking into account their vision and concerns. This process allowed creating the feeling of co-ownership and co-creation. Also, the school promotes teachers' team work and collaboration. 3-4 times a year, the school offers individual studying days where students stay at home to study and teachers meet at school to collaborate, think about school development and engage into professional learning.

Furthermore, the school introduced the system that collects feedback from students and parents on its processes, through internal surveys. This helps the school to learn and improve.



What have we achieved?

Pupils

According to teachers and parents, the new instruction system has made pupils more active and responsible, and reduced overload for pupils and teachers. In spring 2016, Tallinn University organised a study among 38 schools in Estonia, which showed that the students of Jõgevamaa Gymnasium experienced least issues with overload of homework. This can be explained by the 75-minute lessons and doing more work during school hours. Another study conducted by an educational research and development centre *Innove* revealed that the overall satisfaction level of students with their school and teachers is well above the national average.

School as a whole

According to the instructional leader, the effects of the instructional system are hard to measure. Cause-effect relationships are particularly difficult to determine because other factors may have been overlooked. Nevertheless, the school witnessed within the first year of operating a considerable increase of the school ranking based on state graduation exams. The two predecessors of Jõgevamaa Gymnasium had ranked somewhere between 120th and 140th place while the new school reached place 30.



The process of change: what helped us succeed?

School level

Pupils themselves were in favour of the new approach. The school has collected feedback from students for three years and the majority of students supported the change to 75-minute lessons.

According to the instructional leader of the Jõgevamaa Gymnasium, the main supportive factor was the newly recruited teaching staff that was motivated to implement innovations, and the freedom of school to hire teachers that were in line with the school vision.

Motivated and committed school leadership who had the courage and the will to fight against old routines (as many teachers came from the old schools) and to implement innovations.

National level

The development and implementation of the new instructional system did not require any additional resources as Estonian schools can distribute the funding as they see necessary. Estonian schools are quite autonomous to develop pedagogical, content-related or organisational innovations because country's legal framework allows schools to develop their own curriculum based on national guidelines.

The ministry did not require a fully developed curriculum from a new state gymnasium to get schooling licence even though it is usually the requirement for new schools. This allowed the school to design its curriculum in a collaborative way, involving pedagogical staff and students. The chance to create a

new school with innovative practices was given due to the gymnasium reform which was initiated by the state to avoid internal student migration from rural areas and small towns to bigger towns.

The state provided a newly furnished and completely renovated school building for the Jõgevamaa Gymnasium and, by separating the gymnasium from the basic school, it ended the fruitless rivalry between the two full cycle (years 1-12) schools in the town.



The process of change: what limited us?

School level

The main difficulty to implement the new instruction system, according to the instructional leader, was persuading the teachers who were reluctant to change their usual practices. The scepticism and resistance were tackled through engaging teachers into discussions and design of innovations, and constant communication with the school community.

The cooperation with municipal gymnasiums is impeded by the fact that many municipal schools are afraid that they cannot sustain an upper secondary school in the future due to the decreasing numbers of students, seeing the state-funded gymnasiums as competitors.



Sustainability of change

The innovative instructional system in Jõgevamaa Gymnasium is sustainable because it is totally supported by students and teachers. Additionally, the system has been adopted by other state-funded gymnasiums as well. However, some school staff is concerned whether the school would continue with the same system in case a new instructional leader is appointed.

Jõgevamaa Gymnasium uses various monitoring tools to learn from its processed and improve. For instance, every year it conducts satisfaction surveys among students, teachers and parents. The school conducts self-evaluation every three years that is based on the entrepreneurship standard developed by the network of entrepreneurial schools.

According to the instructional leader, the instructional system is easily transferrable, but the concrete application in other schools cannot be identical, as it depends on the way teachers and school leaders cooperate.



What did we learn in the process? Key messages

Pupils' engagement and active participation in newly implemented practices is crucial for the success and sustainability of the innovative pedagogy.

New initiatives should be implemented gradually; first meetings could involve smaller groups and grow step by step to avoid unexpected resistance to the change and to allow the process of co-construction of innovation to happen.

Constraining regulations in educational legislation and the curriculum can be an obstacle for developing innovative content, pedagogies and organisational practices. Balanced school autonomy, trust and professionalism of school leaders and teachers are the key for successful change process.

Further reading

- **A full report** 'Supporting School Innovation across Europe' explores the conditions in the school education system that can enable or constrain positive change in schools.
- **12 case studies** explore the national approaches and individual school innovations. They include the perspectives of key national education experts and stakeholders who were interviewed and took part in workshops.
- **24 individual profiles** give a quick view of the changes and experiences in each school.

Available here:

www.schooleducationgateway.eu/innovation

- The school profiles also feature as part of the [European Toolkit for Schools](#), alongside a range of materials and many other inspiring examples of practice from European countries.

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