

Educators' valuable efforts to prevent early school leaving may receive little attention. School improvement is based on the daily work of teachers, principals and other school staff who have as their mission to support children not only to succeed, but also to thrive. Occasionally a school working with a clear mission and strategy to support children receives wider notice. This is the case for the Malmaskolan (the Malma school) in the small community Kolsva in the municipality of Köping in central Sweden. The school is a municipally- owned primary school with just over 600 pupils between the ages of 6 and 16. The school and its principal have been highlighted as an example of how to build a systematic school-wide strategy to improve results for all of students. A deep commitment to education for inclusion in a democratic society is at the core of the Malmaskolen's work.

Under Swedish legislation, every child has a right to education, and to as much special assistance as he or she needs. The Malmaskolan has interpreted the legislation very literally, placing no limits on how far they will go to ensure children's' right to an education are fulfilled. For them, support can mean anything from "text to spoken voice" for a dyslexic student to providing early morning wake-up calls, or even picking up students at their homes to ensure that they come to the school. The school is organised around this simple philosophy: if they can identify what a student, needs they will find a way to provide the right kind of support,

The school's change story began in 2001 when the newly appointed principals Johan Hallberg and Gun-Marie Persson started to discuss Malmaskolan's situation. It was a rather typical Swedish elementary school, situated in an community dominated by old industries, In the school at that time, each year, nearly 15 % of the students didn't earn the grades needed to enter upper secondary education-- indicating many pupils did not get the support they needed. Hallberg and Persson started to reflect on how they might improve student results. Hallberg recounts that he referred to Swedish National Agency for Education reports that focused on the need to connect and to coordinate school services -- including in the areas of psychology, vocational guidance and special education. At that time, teachers at Malmaskolan noted that students who needed help did get some support, but services were provided in a haphazard manner. Several people could work with the same student, but not know about the support others were providing. Teachers also noticed that they did not talk to each other about their students or about difficulties that they had in their classrooms. They feared being perceived as a weak teacher.

To address these problems, Hallberg decided to focus on the school's student support services – that is student health care, and teachers' competencies and to adapt pedagogies to student needs. This strategy was meant to ensure that a team of professionals provided systematic support for students. After a lot of reflection and planning, the school initiated a new development project in 2005. The first step was to create a Student Health Team, comprised of a school nurse, a special pedagogy teacher, the principal, the school counselor, a special educator, the recreational pedagogues, the study and career counselor, a social worker, the school physician and a school psychologist. This Health Team was to become the core for the development of teaching, and support at the school. The next step was to organise weekly sessions where teachers could discuss different issues with and educational

dilemmas with the Health Team on a regular basis. A kind of open meeting or reception is now held three days a week. Everyone is welcome to book time with the Team.

This new approach was not easy for teachers at first. Teachers continued to try to solve their problems on their own or through discussions with colleagues in the teacher's lounge. To create a new dynamic, a rule was therefore enforced: teachers were required go to the student Health Team if they had a student who failed to meet one or more of the national knowledge requirements. Teachers were also free to attend the regular open Health Team meetings at anytime for any other reasons. This new requirement led more teachers to work with the Health Team. New working methods – and a culture shift -- took hold.

The basic idea behind Malmaskolan's model is "one way in for the teacher, many ways in for the student". In practice, this means that the student can turn to anybody at the school with their problems. The staff will systematically go to the Health Team if they notice something troubling, be it bullying, learning difficulties or problems at home. The teachers attest to the strength of this system. If they get anxious about a student, they now always know where to go. The school has found it is important that the work of the team is not centered around paperwork. Only in serious cases do they create protocols and written plans. Their experience is that it is easy to forget and postpone a task once it is written down. The idea for them is that the issue should be directed to the right person and be dealt with at once. Their thinking is that there is no time to lose, especially for the more difficult cases.

The Health Team has become the central hub at the school where all potential problems are addressed. Importantly, the principal is always present at the Team meetings. The principal is therefore both active in and knowledgeable about the Team's work. In some cases, the curator, specialist teachers and social workers need to engage in several rounds of active planning before a strategy is developed. The important elements of this strategy are: explicit awareness of problems and identification of a wide range of potential measures to support students -- ranging from support for teachers, such as working with a teacher specialized in reading and writing, or sometimes working with special education groups. The Health Team and school staff admit that they still fail sometimes, but also that they are improving their capacity all the time.

An important indicator of the school's success is that for the past several years, nearly all students have gone on to upper secondary school. But the school's central focus was not on this specific measure. Hallberg observes that when the students get the support they are entitled to under Swedish legislation, the results follow. Moreover, the culture where teachers felt ashamed if they needed help is gone. Teachers find that because they know that the right help is available, they are more aware of their students' needs. But, Hallberg adds, that it is about much more than that: "We have, and take, a great social responsibility, "

[Basic and mandatory education in Sweden is organised as follows:

- pre-school class (the last year of pre-primary education (age 6),
- primary school (ages 7 through 16). Lower secondary is thus a part of elementary school and the first instance of tracking is in upper secondary school]

Resources:

personal communication, Johan Hallberg, Malmaskolan principal [ADD DATE]

<https://specialpedagogik.se/de-tar-elevhalsa-pa-allvar/>

<https://koping.se/skolor/malmaskolan.html>

<https://urskola.se/Produkter/188171-UR-Samtiden-Elevhalsa-Forstarkt-elevhalsa-i-Kolsva>