

Alignment of educational objectives and collaboration across multiple levels in the development plans of a single county

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Summary

The Estonian education system is characterised by high decentralisation, providing local municipalities and schools with significant autonomy (Eisen-schmidt et al., 2023). While this autonomy allows for flexible management, it presents challenges for strategic coherence and system-wide collaboration (Masters, 2023). Estonia's education system has been recognised for its relatively uniform school quality that supports equitable opportunities. Recent PISA results indicate a growing influence of students' socio-economic background (Ministry of Education and Research, 2023; Kindsiko & Haugas, 2024), highlighting the need to shift from individual school improvement towards coherent and collaborative development in schools (Dimmock, 2016).

Strategic alignment across multiple levels is a central challenge to education systems, as insufficient coherence between national, municipal, and school-level goals can lead to fragmentation and weak coordination (OECD, 2024; Fullan, 2014). While national frameworks set common directions, their effective implementation depends on how local municipalities and schools interpret and operationalise these goals, with varying capacities and autonomy creating risks of uneven quality and coherence (Creemers et al., 2007; Kattai et al., 2019; Vanari et al., 2021). At school level, development plans play a key role in translating system-level objectives into practice. Yet, their quality and impact depend on leadership, stakeholder involvement, and meaningful integration into the school culture, rather than remaining formal documents (Bialik & Merhav, 2020; Fullan et al., 2019; Nehez & Blossing, 2022). However, there is a lack of a comprehensive overview regarding the extent to which national educational objectives are integrated into local plans and how collaboration is structured. The aim of this study is to determine the alignment of goals and the planning of collaboration across national, local municipality, and school development plans, to identify the types of system leadership reflected in these documents

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within one Estonian county. To achieve this goal, three research questions were formulated:

1. What is the thematic alignment of the objectives in the development plans of the national, local municipalities, and schools?
2. How, and to what extent, is collaboration between schools and local municipalities planned based on their development plans?
3. What are the types of approaches that characterise the principles of systems leadership in the development plans of schools and local municipalities?

The study employed qualitative document analysis, and specifically standardised content analysis (Kalmus, 2015). The sample consisted of 14 national-level strategic documents, 7 local municipality development plans, and 18 municipal school development plans from one Estonian county. The analysis evaluated thematic coherence based on the objectives of the Estonian Education Strategy 2035. Furthermore, in this article, we elaborated on the planned collaboration between schools and municipalities based on the system leadership framework, specifically focusing on vertical and horizontal partnerships.

The findings reveal that the thematic coherence between national, municipal, and school development plans is highly variable. National-level documents primarily emphasise lifelong learning and diverse educational opportunities. Municipal and school plans prioritise the learning environment, inclusive education, and quality education. Schools demonstrated stronger alignment with national educational goals than municipalities, whose alignment varied significantly depending on local administrative capacity.

Regarding collaboration, the analysis indicates that horizontal partnership is mostly represented formally and lacks specific strategic planning. Most municipalities describe collaboration in general terms without actionable structures. Only a few schools outlined goal-driven substantive collaboration.

Based on Fullan's conceptualisation of system leadership (2018), the analysed institutions were categorised into four types: system coherence, hierarchical accountability, informal networking, and atomistic functioning. The majority of schools fell into the strict hierarchy category, indicating alignment with national goals but limited regional collaboration. Several rural municipalities and schools exhibited atomistic functioning, characterised by a low goal coherence and weak collaborative readiness. Only a minority of institutions demonstrated system coherence in their plans.

Strategic planning in the observed county is fragmented and lacks consistent system-wide coordination. The abolition of county governments in 2018 has not only increased municipal autonomy but has also created a regional

coordination gap, leaving strategic capacity dependent on individual municipal resources. The gaps in horizontal partnership and vertical coherence identified in the analysis of development plans indicate a need to improve coordination at different levels. The examined documents reflected an uneven capacity at the local level to integrate national goals, indicating the need for additional strategic support at the regional level. One possible approach to mitigating these gaps is to support regional collaborative capacity, for instance, through joint training and clearer guidance materials, which would help harmonise educational goal-setting at the local level.

The study has limitations, namely that due to its scope, we cannot link the analysis of its results to a more comprehensive regional policy, educational policy, and legal framework. Also, the development plans reflect written goals, rather than the actual aims and practices of actors operating at different levels. As authors, we emphasise that the results represent the schools and local municipalities of a single county and that these conclusions cannot be applied to other Estonian counties. Further research on the education system should focus on the outcomes achieved through the implementation of development plans, as well as the collaboration methods and experiences of representatives at different levels, and how these are analysed.

In this article, we provided an overview of the alignment of national, school, and local government development plans with educational trends, using one county as an example. The findings help raise awareness of the need to enhance systemic coherence and to consciously strengthen cooperation at the local level.

Keywords: educational objectives, collaboration, municipal school, local municipality, school improvement plan