

Social Sector Practice

Education reform in Norway: Looking beyond politics to bring sustained change

Education policy in Norway has been shaped by data more than by doctrine. As a result, education reforms in the country have been supported by various governments across a broad political spectrum for more than a decade.

by Li-Kai Chen, Emma Dorn, and Tore Vamraak



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Norway is one of the few countries that has managed to sustain its program of education reform over multiple years, despite changes in political leadership. Since 2000, when Norway performed well below expectations on the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA)—an event now known as the “PISA shock”—leaders across the political spectrum have collaborated and focused on data-driven policies to improve education outcomes. The professionalism and stability of the Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research also helped to foster excellence, with experienced civil servants on hand who could collaborate with ministers from both the Conservative Party and the Socialist Left

Party. These civil servants brought a common set of evidence and research to help find balance and implement the policies of both parties in a high-quality manner. Almost two decades later, the results are in: students are on an upward trajectory across all subjects in international assessments, with especially strong improvements in reading (exhibit).

For this article, McKinsey spoke with two of the main architects of education reform in Norway from opposing political traditions: Kristin Clemet from the Conservative Party, who was the minister of education from 2001 to 2005, and Kristin Halvorsen from the Socialist Left Party, who was the minister of education from 2009 to 2013 (see sidebar “Timeline of education reform in Norway”).

Timeline of education reform in Norway

From 2001 to 2005, the Conservative Party in Norway followed the themes of “knowledge promotion” and “schools know best” (the minister of education was Kristin Clemet), performing the following actions:

- creating the Norwegian Directorate of Education and Training (Utdanningsdirektoratet)
- aligning and devolving to municipalities several education-related responsibilities (such as pay bargaining)
- launching national education tests, using the National Quality Assessment System
- creating new education standards and curriculum (such as the primary reading standards)
- raising the minimum requirements for entering teacher education
- enabling the expansion of government-dependent private schools

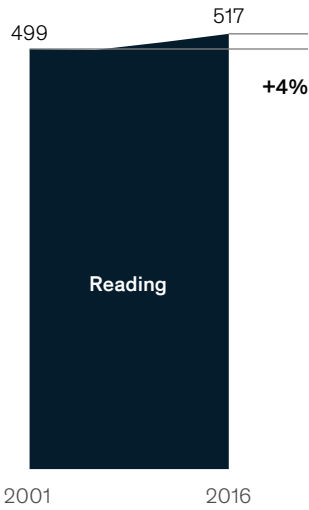
From 2005 to 2013, the Socialist Left Party in Norway followed the themes of “assessment for learning” and “GNIST (Norwegian for “spark”) teacher quality” (the ministers of education were Øystein Djupedal, from 2005 to 2007; Bård Vegar Solhjell, from 2007 to 2009; and Kristin Halvorsen, from 2009 to 2013), performing the following actions:

- refining and continuing education reform, with national tests becoming more formative
- maintaining new curriculum and standards
- reforming teacher education (such as grade- and subject-specific skills)
- establishing a legal right to early-childhood education from the age of one
- revoking government-dependent private-school expansion

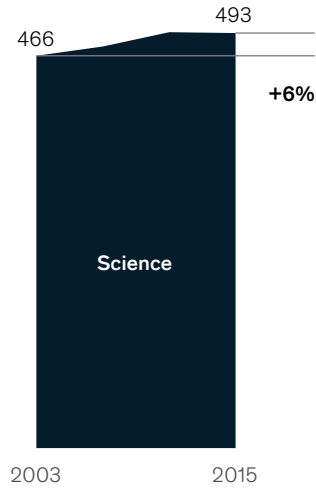
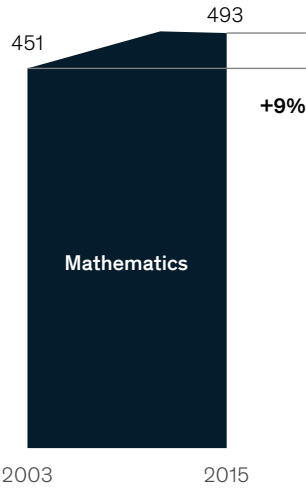
Exhibit

Norway's education system has seen sustained improvements.

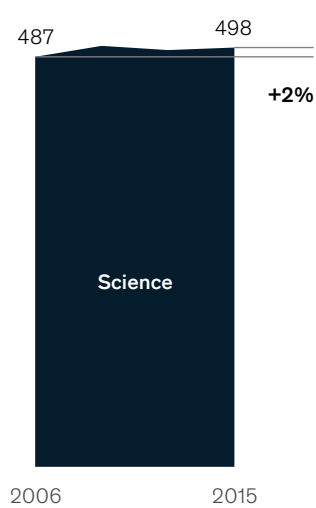
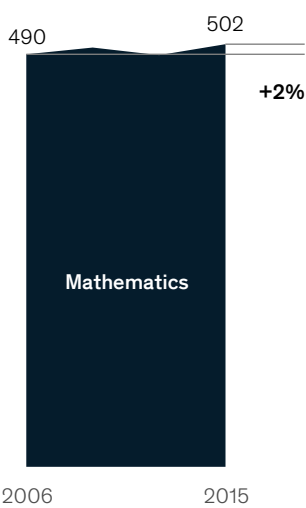
PIRLS¹ reading score



TIMSS² scores



PISA³ scores



¹Progress in International Reading Literacy Study. To maintain trend across years, data shown for Norway 4th grade in all years, similar to 3rd grade in some peer systems.

²Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study. To maintain trend across years, data shown for Norway 4th grade in all years, similar to 3rd grade in some peer systems.

³Programme for International Student Assessment.

Source: Programme for International Student Assessment; Progress in International Reading Literacy Study; Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study

2001 to 2005: Launching the knowledge-promotion reform

McKinsey: Kristin Clemet, you were in a minority government as education minister. In that context, how did you get broad support for your far-reaching education reforms?

Kristin Clemet: I was influenced by a Swedish book I read in the 1980s called *The Privilege of Formulating the Problem* (Norstedts Förlag, 1989). What I learned from that book was that the person who is able to formulate the problem will also likely have a “monopoly” on giving you the solution. As a result, what I did mostly from 2001 to 2003 was to talk constantly in public to shape the perception of the problem we had. And what was the problem? Well, we were spending more on education than all other countries in the world, but we had average results. At first, when it was just the PISA 2000 results, people were skeptical, but disappointing performance on further international tests and research reinforced the message. Between 2001 and 2003, the whole atmosphere changed. We went from believing that we were the best in the world and that if we could just spend more money everything would be fine to recognizing that we had a problem and that more resources were not the answer. We also invested significantly in evidence-based research by leading academics that were credible across parties. As a result, in 2004, when we had to put our reform agenda before parliament, we had a significant majority supporting what we were doing.

Individuals also mattered a lot. We were lucky that the Labour Party didn't have any entrenched positions in the education debate, so it was happy to go along with our ideas. And I had a strong relationship with the education spokesperson of the Socialist Left Party—we had a lot of coffees and cigarettes together—and so we were able to work well together.

McKinsey: It sounds like your consistent communications garnered broad political support. What about broader support from teachers and unions?

Kristin Clemet: Our relationship with the teachers and their unions got off to a rocky start. For years, there had been a mismatch in Norway. Municipalities employed and paid the teachers, but the actual pay and benefits packages were negotiated with the central government. The teachers, of course, liked this situation very much because the state could give them better working hours, better salaries—really, whatever they wanted—since it was the municipalities and regions that had to pay for them. So what I did in 2002, which no government had dared to do before, was to move the responsibility for the negotiations to the municipalities and the regions, where they belonged.

McKinsey: And how did that work out?

Kristin Clemet: Well, the teachers were angry. They went on strike. But I had to be brave because I knew that aligning incentives and structures was a prerequisite to broader reforms. Later, when we came out with the Knowledge Promotion Agenda—using evidence-based research to reform curriculum and teaching to prepare students for the knowledge society—the teachers were so happy in contrast. We were able to get teachers excited about our reforms by appealing to their professionalism and self-understanding. For example, we raised the minimum grade required to enter into teacher's education. We framed this as upping teacher's status in society: only the best students could become teachers. And we also communicated directly with parents and students. There were many more parents and students than there were teachers, and the parents understood the imperative to improve quality.

McKinsey: Is there anything you would do differently?

Kristin Clemet: We were perhaps too ambitious up front when rolling out the national tests. Tests of all students at the conclusion of fourth, seventh, and tenth grades were required to ensure quality at every school and to highlight which schools and

municipalities needed extra support. We wanted to do everything perfectly immediately. And maybe that was a mistake. But perhaps it was also necessary to go through that difficult moment to institutionalize the tests on a permanent basis.

McKinsey: What do you think helped to sustain reform after you left office and your opposition took power?

Kristin Clemet: The Socialist Left Party came into office after me, and in their election, they had promised to get rid of national testing and knowledge promotion. But that didn't happen. Perhaps the speed and the pressure of reform were reduced, but the core elements of reform remained. I think there are several reasons for this. I had created the Directorate of Education and Training to ensure professionalism in implementing reforms. There were long-standing officials leading the directorate and the ministry who stayed on and were able to explain the policies. Once the opposition party was in power, it could see the facts—it could see the situation on the ground. And there is a tradition in Norway that new governments don't totally overturn everything right away when they come into power. There is a sort of respect for the consensus and a desire to build on what former governments have done.

2005 to 2013: Sustaining reform and refining assessment for learning

McKinsey: Kristin Halvorsen, one of the elements of the Norway education story that is particularly interesting is that the reforms continued across multiple education ministers and across a shift in political power, from the Conservative Party to the Socialist Left Party. Our research has shown that this kind of continuity is critical for sustaining transformation. Can you tell us more about how and why your party built upon the work of Kristin Clemet?

Kristin Halvorsen: The first PISA results in 2000 showed that nearly 20 percent of students were not able to read with any deep understanding. And that is really a challenge not just for education but for democracy as a whole. This piece of data gave us a common platform for change and a common understanding of the problem. We also had to compromise. Although my party had campaigned on a quite different approach to reform, we were part of a coalition and so had to negotiate with the Labour Party and the Centre Party to find a way forward that we could all support. In addition, we were aware of the tremendous work that had been done preparing the reform and new curriculum by all teachers in every school across the country. And so, with a close dialogue with teachers' unions, we did not want to waste that effort and impose extensive additional work on them.

McKinsey: Specifically, you initially didn't support national testing, but you ended up finding a way to transform the tests to meet your own reform goals. Tell us more about that.

Kristin Halvorsen: The introduction of the national tests, the way they were framed, and the fact that—in many people's opinions—they were not nearly as good as they could be created a lot of conflict. We took a one-year break from the tests and invited the teachers' unions to collaborate and find compromise in how to reintroduce them.

The tests were originally going to be held at the end of the school year, and the results were supposed to be published. We were concerned that would appear as a ranking of schools by quality, although significant research shows that the students' social backgrounds are of great importance for test results. We improved the quality of the tests and reduced their number. Most importantly, we shifted the tests to the beginning of the school year, repositioning them as formative tests that would be useful for the local level: for teachers, headmasters,

and local authorities to use to support students in their development throughout the school year. We also canceled the plan for publishing the test results.

McKinsey: And how did you get the unions to be comfortable with the Knowledge Promotion Reform?

Kristin Halvorsen: When you are going to implement reforms, you must collaborate closely with the local level. Our adjustment of the reform program and the test regime built local trust. The first thing that Øystein Djupedal, minister of education from 2005 to 2007, did during his tenure was to reverse the privatization law: to put a stop to publicly supported private schools springing up across Norway. That was strongly supported by teachers and principals as well as many municipalities and counties. That built the trust needed to strengthen the public-education system.

Djupedal, Bård Vegar Solhjell, and I all put great emphasis on being in dialogue with municipalities, principals, and teachers. We were traveling a lot—out there talking to teachers and local municipalities, and to students and parents directly, to understand their needs and to build trust. This was very important when we, for example, increased the support for “early effort” and assessment practice and developed the reforms further.

McKinsey: So collaboration and communication with the unions and with other stakeholders were critical planks of your reform. What else made your reforms successful?

Kristin Halvorsen: Let me give you one concrete example on how we worked. We took 30 people—teachers, headmasters, and local municipality and directorate staff—to Ontario, Canada, a place well known for its educational successes. I led the delegation myself, and we learned from the Canadians that we needed to be light on judgement, heavy on support. And I prioritized that when I was minister from 2009 to 2013. And I tried to make sure we spoke the same language

and had the same goals, from the ministry down to the local level. I wanted everyone to have the same focus: early effort, assessment for learning, and improvement of teachers' skills. This was also essential in the white papers we presented to the parliament during these years.

We used the same methods when we improved the quality of the teachers' education and when we introduced reforms to make the lower- and upper-secondary schools more relevant.

McKinsey: And now the conservatives are back in power. Will your reforms be sustained?

Kristin Halvorsen: In practice, they are continuing most of the work, with some small changes. For example, I established a committee to work on the new curriculum for the school of the future because we'd had the same curriculum in the Norwegian schools for decades. Everyone could see that we have too much surface learning. We needed our students to learn more in depth. And the new conservative minister took the evidence-based results from this committee, and the policy is now being implemented. So my initiative is now being fulfilled by a conservative government. This kind of continuity gives me hope for the future.

It also helps tremendously to have the professionalism and stability of the Norwegian ministry and bureaucrats: civil servants who could collaborate with ministers from both the Conservative Party and the Socialist Left Party. They bring a common set of evidence and research and helped us find balance and implement our policies in a high-quality way (see sidebar “Hearing from the ‘silent implementers of change’”).

In the end, we need a much broader perspective than improving our PISA test results. We have to balance that with the mental and emotional health of our students, with the goal of preparing all our students for the future, making sure we don't leave any children behind.

Hearing from the ‘silent implementers of change’

Former Norway education ministers

Kristin Clemet and Kristin Halvorsen both mention quality and longevity of senior officials—and the close relationship among politicians, civil servants, and academics—as success factors in Norwegian education reform. Here we hear directly from a few of these important facilitators of change:

- Trond Fevolden, secretary general of the Ministry of Education and Research from 1992 to 2016
- Petter Skarheim, director of the Directorate of Education and Training from 2004 to 2016 and secretary general of the Ministry of Education and Research from 2016 to the present
- Marit Kjærnsli, associate professor in the Department of Teacher Education and School Research at the University of Oslo, responsible for the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) in Norway

Trond Fevolden: What we have done is to establish a system where we have sufficient information for the policy-formation process. Data makes it easier to establish some common ground. We wanted to use the national tests as a tool for understanding and improvement at the local level, not as an instrument of control. Similarly, our municipal inspections were not designed to be legalistic but instead were designed to combine inspection with advice on how to improve.

Petter Skarheim: In the Norwegian system, we have a significant number of small municipalities that control the front lines of education, and their quality and capabilities are very diverse. It is hard for the central government to reach the schools directly, so we had a lot of meetings and conferences, at the national level, with trade unions, teachers, and municipalities. But then we also traveled around to every county. We were constantly on the road. We

talked with the county governors and brought them data on how the different municipalities were doing. And, as a result, we were able to show them how we could support them in doing better in their own communities.

Marit Kjærnsli: Our Directorate of Education and Training and Ministry of Education and Research has been focused on evidence-based research. The PISA group in Norway has always communicated well with both the directorate and ministry. For example, some of the ministers have checked their understanding with us before they used the data. I remember before one debate on a TV program on education in 2012, both Kristin Clemet and Kristin Halvorsen called me to understand the facts. They wanted to understand the data. And that focus on the data and our shared concern for the students have helped to keep us all aligned.

Li-Kai Chen is a partner in McKinsey’s Kuala Lumpur office; **Emma Dorn** is global Education Practice manager in the Silicon Valley office; and **Tore Vamraak** is an associate partner in the Oslo office.

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