# OIF

## City of Gothenburg

# From Improving to Promoting School Attendance

# Operational Implementation Framework

From improved to promoting school attendance

# Contents

# Operational Implementation Framework
From improved to promoting school attendance

## Introduction
This report describes how the task of implementing a joint municipal strategic plan for improving school attendance in Gothenburg evolved during the period 2014 – 2019. More precisely, the remit was to assure every child and young person that the conditions and quality of education would remain consistently good throughout their school years. The task of implementing strategies and activities to improve school attendance has been one of a number of initiatives that have been undertaken to promote and develop social sustainability in the city.

By way of introduction, the contextual and political context of the implementation work is summarised along with the reasons why the city has opted to focus on school attendance. This is followed by a general description of how the implementation work was planned and organised. This is in turn followed by the results of the work presented in the form of a learning path, divided into the phases the work process can be said to have gone through. For each implementation phase, there is clarification of the obstacles and challenges that we were faced with in our professional capacity as we attempted to realise the plan. The account highlights the obstacles that emerged during the course of the work and the barriers that have proved difficult to surmount. It also highlights the tools and resources that contributed to the actual changes that materialised. A number of summarising reflections are presented by way of conclusion.

## Background
The task of formulating joint municipal strategies and activities to improve school attendance is part of the work that is taking place in the city to stimulate social sustainability. Interest in social sustainability was kindled back in 2013, and it can be said to have grown in the wake of the World Health Organisation (WHO) report *Closing the Gap in a Generation* (2008) and what is termed the Marmot Report (*Fair Society, Healthy Lives*)[1]. The joint municipal work currently falls under the collective name Equal Gothenburg. However, as early as 2014, a conference was organised on the theme of mobilising around issues related to social sustainability. In 2015, the report *Disparities in health and living conditions* was published, highlighting Gothenburg as a strongly segregated city with major social and economic rifts within the city's population. This can be exemplified by the fact that the difference in average lifespan between the people living in different parts of the city was almost 10 years, and academic results also varied considerably between the districts. The report highlighted the need to reach political decisions aimed at bringing about change.

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[1] The term social sustainability is part of the sustainability concept, which includes environmental, economic and social dimensions. Social sustainability is about developing an urban environment where everyone has equal potential to participate and exert an influence, and to enjoy good health, education, housing etc.

# Operational Implementation Framework

From improved to promoting school attendance

For the city to be more socially sustainable, a political goal was formulated in 2016 and was included in the city budget. The goal was *"Gothenburg should be an equal city".* Since then, social sustainability goals have been formulated each year as part of the city budget, and similar goals and remits have been extended to include the city's committees and administrations. Under the collective title *Equal Gothenburg,* steering committees and working committees were set up in parallel, charged with the task of developing work within four strategic areas:

1. Give each child a good start in life
2. Continue to provide children with good conditions throughout their school years
3. Create preconditions for employment
4. Create sustainable, health-promoting environments and communities.

It was within Strategy Area 2 that the idea emerged of developing a strategy and activities covering the whole municipal area in an effort to improve school attendance. At that time, the city was organised into 10 districts, each responsible within its geographical area for services such primary and secondary schools, individual and family welfare, and culture and recreation. During the course of this work, the city underwent a reorganisation, and with effect from July 1, 2018, municipal primary and secondary schools are administered centrally. There was also a change in city governance following the elections in autumn 2018.

## School attendance or school non-attendance

The choice of developing a strategy and activities for school attendance was initiated by the steering committee responsible for the target area *Provide children with good conditions throughout their school years* (now *Conditions under which children and young people can grow and develop/Good conditions for growth and development during school years*).[2] There were several reasons for opting to focus on school attendance.

Firstly, the report *Disparities in health and living conditions* (2014), produced within the framework of the Equal Gothenburg initiative, included a description of the current situation in the city along with an external analysis highlighting factors that impact on the conditions in which children and young people grow up. The authors highlighted in particular the significance of early initiatives, health, education, good academic results, social relationships, security, and involvement. As is the case in the research world, the school was highlighted as being one of the most important arenas for children and young

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[2] The steering committee has worked with several prioritised areas, including multilingual study guidance and a family-centred working approach (2017).

people, the reason being that everyone, regardless of socioeconomic status and background, spends a large percentage of their formative years at school.

Secondly, there was a parallel movement throughout the country that focused on drawing attention to pupils' non-attendance at school, which was regarded as a nationwide problem. Both the National Agency for Education and the Association of Local Authorities and Regions had for some time highlighted and attempted to disseminate methods to improve school attendance. The Gothenburg Upper Secondary School Administration also took part a major national project, funded by the European Social Fund, which aimed to reduce upper secondary school dropout rates (Plug In). In addition, the National Agency for Education had issued general guidelines in 2012 regarding the work involved in stimulating school attendance and to highlight, investigate and rectify non-attendance.

By way of summary, school attendance and non-attendance were and remain a vital issue. Academic success is also one of the key structural factors related to social sustainability that can be influenced.

## Method

The task of formulating and implementing a strategy for improving school attendance was organised through the working committee for Focus Area 2 within the framework of Equal Gothenburg (see above). Under the working committee there has been a related strategic and operative management team made up of representatives (managers) from the Education, Society and Culture, and Individual and Family Welfare/Functional Impairment sectors. The management team has gradually formulated and reformulated the assignments, focusing on strategy work related to school attendance.

It was in the budget for 2018 that the task of producing a guideline covering the whole city aimed at promoting school attendance was formulated. A working group was set up at the end of 2017, made up of personnel from the Education, Individual and Family Welfare/Functional Impairment, and Society and Culture sectors. The tasks assigned to the operative and strategic management team, which is part of the working committee for Focus Area 2 within Equal Gothenburg, are as follows:

- To produce a guideline relating to school attendance covering the whole city
- To implement different forms of education and learning support initiatives focusing on improving school attendance to enable pupils, subject to their personal prerequisites, to develop as far as possible in line with the goals specified in the course programme.
- To provide the different units with support in matters relating to school attendance.

# Operational Implementation Framework

From improved to promoting school attendance

The guideline should be part of the system that was in place for regulatory and governing documents in the City of Gothenburg and be produced in line with the reinforcement areas highlighted in the city's *Enquiry into school and education within the area of responsibility of the district committees (2016).* The enquiry should cover all the documents categorised as instructions, routines, directives and rules. The design was also based on the city's *Plan of action for adopting an inclusive approach within preschools and schools in Gothenburg (2016)* and the guide *Transform non-attendance into attendance (2012),* produced by the Association of Local Authorities and Regions and aimed at promoting systematic school attendance work in municipalities. Extracts from the following documents contributed to the creation of the guideline:

- *UN General Declaration of Human Rights, Articles 28-29*
- *UN Convention on the Rights of the Child*
- *The Salamanca Declaration (UNESCO)*
- *Education Act SFS 2010:800*
- *Social Services Act SFS 2001:453*
- *Health and Medical Services Act HSL SFS 2017:30*
- *Pupil Health Guidelines (2016).*

The idea behind the guideline was that it should highlight school attendance work from a promotional perspective, which would also include preventative and remedial elements. The aim was to highlight the success factors that stimulate school attendance with the purpose of improving the level of quality within the city of Gothenburg. For this reason, the importance of working to establish good relationships was highlighted, as well as the outcome of collaboration between organisations working to stimulate school attendance, e.g. collaboration between parents and guardians, schools, society and culture, social services, civil society and associations. The long-term aim of this work was to create a functioning education system that extended across primary school, secondary school and upper secondary school.

## Results

Implementation work was carried out in a number of stages and each one provided lessons and insights for those involved. At each stage, the limitations that ensued from the city's organisational frameworks and guidelines became gradually clearer. A number of barriers and challenges proved impossible to surmount whilst others were easier to address and work around. It was mainly in the second and third phase of this work that we understood in greater depth the crucial significance of having access to the correct form of dialogue and the correct channels.

# Operational Implementation Framework

From improved to promoting school attendance

## Phase 1 – Preliminary work (2015-2017)

Implementation work commenced with the management team acquainting themselves with the issue. A number of the members were assigned the task of compiling a report containing (i) an overview of the data available regarding school non-attendance and attendance, and (ii) a review of the ways in which the city's primary and secondary schools are working with this issue. The report highlighted the importance of working on a preventative and promotional basis to counteract non-attendance. In response, a further report was produced in 2016 aimed at highlighting and disseminating good examples from schools in the city that were working actively on preventative and promotional matters to address school attendance. The idea was to initiate a reversal of the standpoint where the focus was on school attendance rather than non-attendance.

The reports provided insights into the differences that existed between the approaches and working methods adopted throughout the city. They resulted in a decision to continue to allow school attendance to be a prioritised area within Equal Gothenburg. This work also resulted in the political remit of "producing a guideline to promote school attendance that covers the whole city", as defined in the city budget for 2018.

## Phase 2 – Obstacles during the production phase (spring 2018)

The working group was set up at the end of autumn 2017 and was made up of personnel from the Education, Society and Culture, and Individual and Family Welfare/Functional Impairment sectors. The group met for four full days each month and between the meetings the group members worked on their own preparations and presented proposals for contributions to the group's joint 'Google document'. During the course of this work the working group also had close contact with the strategic and operative steering committee in order to discuss the focus and formulations within and around the guideline.

The first obstacle encountered by the group was to find the right focus for its work. There were differences within the group regarding our prior understanding of the problem and there were diverse opinions about what had been done within each administration and what form the solution to the problem of school non-attendance might take. To address this, several of the introductory meetings were devoted to discussing the current situation, despite the earlier review and analysis reports. At the same time, the group's remit was specified clearly by the steering committee. The text should include formulations focusing explicitly on the Gothenburg context, as well as critical factors, promotional and preventative perspectives, inclusion, collaboration, systematic quality assurance work, and descriptions of the roles and responsibilities of the support chains.

A further problem in producing the text was that the guideline should include activities and operations that formed part of the primary school, secondary school, and upper secondary school systems, as well as the Individual and Family Welfare/Functional Impairment, and Society and Culture sectors. The extensiveness of the sectors involved

meant that the formulations needed to be kept general. The group opted to structure the text based on known success factors that stimulate school attendance. Under each success factor three questions were answered: What should be done? Why should it be done? How should it be done? Below is a logbook note that illustrates the work of the group and the issues that we were faced with at the time:

> March 2018: On Monday and Tuesday we reworked the content of the guideline quite extensively and a great deal was deleted. We have clarified the purpose and reduced the length of the text substantially. We have consistently highlighted only the five success factors that reinforce pupil attendance in accordance with previous reports published within Equal Gothenburg; the school attendance guide published by the Association of Local Authorities and Regions, *Guidance for pupil health;* and proven experience.
>
> A guideline should demonstrate how the work should be carried out, but this is not the case with this guideline. Instead, it is formulated more generally and focuses on success factors as at the same time it should provide scope for the operating areas that create the details. A guideline that aims to include so much is difficult to write as the operating areas that are affected are extremely diverse, they work under different conditions, and they have different clients (children and young people). At upper secondary school, for example, there are young people from both the local area and from the surrounding municipal areas. As many are no longer minors, their parents or guardians are not involved.

The draft was completed in 2018. The guideline was then circulated to the different city administrations for consultation. The plan was that it should be passed by the City Council before the summer recess, but this did not prove to be the case.

When the proposal reached the City Executive Office, the process came to a halt and the obstacle that was highlighted proved unyielding. The City Executive Office, which had not been involved in the discussions that took place within the working group, put forward a number of views on the guideline that had been formulated, which they stated lacked remedial instructions for schools that were struggling with high non-attendance levels. During the ensuing discussions, the officials found it difficult to see the point of reversing the standpoint (focusing on attendance rather than non-attendance). They maintained that the text was not formulated as a guideline and was more in the way of support material for city employees. The City Executive Office, which was the body that would decide if the guideline would be presented on the political level, opted to reject the text as a guideline.

We had encountered a barrier that could not be overcome. Instead, it was proposed that the guideline should be renamed, changing from *Guideline for improved school attendance* to *Guidance to promote school attendance*. This meant that the text could no longer be described as a governing document but instead should be put forward as support material which employees within the city administrations who are interested could use. The decision by the City Executive Office deflated the impact of the

document. The decision also involved a change in the remit of the working group, which we began working on after the summer break.

## Phase 3 – Dissemination initiatives (autumn 2018)

After the summer it was decided that the guideline that had been formulated should retain its form although the name would be changed to *Guidance to promote school attendance*. The working group (which continued to be made up of members of staff from the Individual and Family Welfare and the Society and Culture sectors, as well as the new Compulsory School Administration and the Education Administration) were instructed, based on the new assignment conditions, to implement dissemination initiatives with the aim of making the document *Guidance to promote school attendance* known throughout the city. The working group was also charged with the task of investigating how the different operating areas could work with the guidance document and identify which collaborative structures are currently needed in the work related to school attendance. We put the following questions to our operating areas:

- How can we, within our operating areas, collaborate with other bodies to address school attendance on a promotional basis?
- What structures are needed if this is to work?

Below is an account of how the work evolved during the autumn in each sector/administration.

## Individual and Family Welfare sector

The Children and Young People unit manager network within the Individual and Family Welfare sector met on two occasions during the autumn to go through the guidance document. A working group was set up to discuss how operations within the Individual and Family Welfare sector could work on a promotional basis with other bodies to address the issue of school attendance. The group should also identify the structures that were needed for the work to be carried out. The guidance document was sent to all process leaders and unit managers for further dissemination. The following thoughts emerged regarding collaborative structures aimed at improving school attendance.

The collaborative activities that already existed in the districts ought to focus on the promotional initiatives described in the guidance document. The operating areas were instructed to divide up the schools among the personnel. The basic work focusing on measures to improve school attendance must be done at the school first. Initiatives to support collaboration must aim to utilise resources that already exist in the districts. Specialist schools must be included.

## Compulsory School Administration

By the mid-year point, the Compulsory School Administration had been centralised and divided into eight education areas, which impeded the dissemination process. As a result

of the reorganisation, the representatives in the working group were each assigned to an education area. This meant that *Guidance for improved school attendance* was distributed to the principals and the pupil health departments in Education Area 7, whilst the other areas of the city continued to be unaware of the document. Further dissemination initiatives directed at operational managers and unit managers within the Compulsory School Administration were planned for spring 2019. The following thoughts about collaboration structures to improve school attendance emerged in those groups in which representatives from the working group had a chance to meet.

Collaboration and structures are needed to improve school attendance and in particular this requires an active pupil health programme where the different professions assume responsibility and maintain a presence in the day-to-day work. There is a need for more adults in the school who can work on a daily basis to establish relationships with pupils who are at risk. The pupil health team, together with all the staff at the school, needs to work actively to promote attendance. Collaboration with other bodies involves a number of key players, such as student assistants, career guidance counsellors, and the Individual and Family Welfare sector (both in joint outreach work and in other contexts, such as parent support groups). Collaboration with parents and guardians has also been of major significance, although at the same time the use of existing collaboration-enhancing routines, such as *Västbus*, needs to increase.

## Society and Culture sector

In November and December 2018, the unit managers at the different schools of the arts, the unit managers for out-of-school activities, and area managers for culture and recreation in the district of Lundby, via their respective networks, went through the guidance document and discussed cooperation based on the reflection questions, see above. The dissemination initiatives took place in just one district and, as was the case with the Compulsory School Administration, it was limited. The following thoughts emerged about collaboration structures designed to improve school attendance.

The discussions focused primarily on recreational activities linked to the school day. The school as an arena was highlighted as a means of stimulating school attendance as part of the collaboration process. The need to pursue activities outside the school with a focus on school attendance was also highlighted. It was pointed out that there are many learning examples in the city where the Society and Culture sector cooperates with schools: (i) Angered Out of School Centre housed on school premises; (ii) 1,200 square metres in Askim-Frölunda-Högsbo used as a youth centre, which is visited by teams of teachers and their pupils during school hours; (iii) Public health coordinators and the schools produce questionnaires relating to attendance and physical health; (iv) The district of Örgryte-Härlanda has created a children and young persons' plan to uphold collaboration between the school and preschool, and the Culture and Recreation and Individual and Family Welfare sectors; (v) The school located in the heart of Lundby can

utilise the work that is taking place between public sector bodies and the local community.

It was also highlighted that neither the structure nor the assignment must be linked too closely to individuals as a means of facilitating cooperation. Each operating area must also be instructed to work with school attendance, and it is the principals who are the key persons in the collaborative process, although it is also important that the operating areas understand each other's remit and prerequisites.

## Education Administration

Within the Education Administration, the Executive Committee opted to propose that the Political Committee decides to make school attendance one of the focus areas that the 50 or more school units should highlight in particular in their local development work during 2019. The Political Committee approved the proposal. The plan is for the work to be documented and followed up in the school units' follow-up reports, which will then be presented to the Committee at the end of the year.

The Executive Committee had also formulated a strategy for initiatives using *Guidance to promote school attendance* as a starting point. The strategy was formulated as follows:

**Pupil attendance in all our operating areas will increase**

Strategy: The importance of school attendance for pupils to achieve their goals is central. The work being done by the schools to improve school attendance should therefore be intensified, and initiatives to raise the level of the pupils' motivation to attend school will be implemented at all school units. The work aimed at improving school attendance must include the school unit's systematic quality enhancement programme, and the initiatives will be based on the success factors identified in the city's school attendance guidance document, see below:

- Relationship-enhancing work
- Participation and influence
- Quality of education
- Collaboration with the parties concerned
- Clear leadership with routines for attendance work

Work should also commence to develop routines to increase the use of existing technical aids.

The planned development work was prepared during autumn 2018 by distributing *Guidance to promote school attendance* within the Administration. One of the Executive Committee's managers presented it to all the principals and managers within the organisation during the annual Quality Conference in December. The working group representative presented the guidance document at a meeting of the Education Administration school counsellor network on December 5.

The guidance document was produced as a source of support that could be used by personnel when they develop a more active school attendance programme. The

presentation at the counsellor network also included a brief knowledge overview and evaluation of the school attendance problem as well as a workshop where the participants had the opportunity to focus on the following issues:

1. How do we work within our operating sector to stimulate school attendance?      School, school unit, programme.
2. How can we, in our operating sector, work with other bodies to stimulate school attendance?
3. Which structures are needed for this to be successful?

The Education Administration counsellors presented significant initiatives that are being currently undertaken. Many of the 50 or more upper secondary school units within the Administration are already working actively with school attendance issues and it is common for pupil health personnel at the school units to work both on a preventative and health-promoting basis together with the teachers in the working teams. All the counsellors highlighted the importance of relationships to improving the climate in the classroom and the school, and they described how they actively attempted to reinforce these areas. Some felt that the school units needed more personnel from other professions who could support the teachers in the task of satisfying the pupils' need to be recognised and to be missed when they failed to attend school. At some school units the counsellor was already offering extra support to the mentors as part of the attendance coaching process. The following thoughts about collaboration structures to improve school attendance came to the fore:

The possibility of collaboration with other bodies within the municipality was described as difficult, as upper secondary school pupils and special upper secondary school pupils come from different municipalities. Only half of the pupils within the Administration's area are registered in the municipality of Gothenburg and many of the young people in the municipality are pupils at independent schools. It would therefore be difficult to organise a structured system to boost collaboration – with social services for example.

Collaboration is instead based on personal, individual-based contacts. Furthermore, in many instances there was no transfer of information from the primary school/secondary school, and nor were there links to other bodies. The structured collaboration that the school units, despite everything, offer takes the form of annual theme days where organisations such as Mini-Maria and Men for Equality meet the pupils.

As for the Education Administration, both communication paths and guidelines need to be presented, accepted and developed within the Gothenburg Region Association of Local Authorities, as the Administration's pupil base is only partly Gothenburg-based. In order to achieve a more structured and general level of collaboration, good

communication channels are also required. The existing guidelines for collaboration also need to be constantly updated and communicated within the city and the region.

### Phase 4 Conclusion of the working group's assignment

The working group's assignment was concluded in December 2018. The dissemination activities will continue within the different administrations during spring 2019. The working committee for Equal Gothenburg has announced that the experience they have acquired during spring 2019 will form part of the decision-making process during the next phase of this work. At the same time, the Compulsory School Committee, in its budget for 2019, has assigned the Compulsory School Administration the task of producing a guideline for school non-attendance for use within the city's schools. Hopefully, this work will be covered by the *Guidance to promote school attendance* that has been produced.

## Conclusions

By way of conclusion, it can be noted that a great deal of the work conducted by the strategic management team and the working group resulted in actual changes despite the fact that the guideline that was produced was never the subject of a political decision. The guidance document has been distributed to a large number of personnel and many of the changes that have subsequently being implemented within the city have had the same intentions that were initially formulated as part of this work.

The biggest barrier during this learning process can be ascribed to the contact with the officials at the City Executive Office. They were not open to reversing the standpoint despite the fact that a similar perspective on school attendance and school non-attendance has in recent years been discussed frequently on a national basis by both the National Agency for Education and the Association of Local Authorities and Regions. In hindsight, we could ask the question whether we could have foreseen that the guideline would not correspond to the officials' expectations. The possibility that the process may have taken another direction if we had involved officials at an earlier stage in the discussions cannot be excluded.

The reorganisation of the city's primary schools and secondary schools (into a central administration) in the summer of 2018 also constituted an obstacle in our work process. During the reorganisation, the Compulsory School Administration focused on creating a new organisation and recruiting new managers and personnel. This meant that the issue of school attendance was given lower priority. The reorganisation also resulted in the structures and networks, which the members of the working group from primary schools and secondary schools had been involved in developing, being ripped apart, distancing them even further from a decision-making forum.

Many of the city employees have, nevertheless, familiarised themselves with the idea of reversing the standpoint regarding school attendance. This work has mainly gained acceptance within the Education Administration, where all employees during 2019 are expected to acquaint themselves with the contents of *Guidance for improved school attendance*. In addition, the in-house magazine for the Administration has published a theme issue that problematises the subject of school attendance and non-attendance. However, the matter of cooperation between different bodies regarding attendance of pupils at upper secondary school and special upper secondary school proved more difficult to resolve. This can be attributed largely to the fact that the schools in the region serve a large school hinterland within which the pupils have freedom of movement.

# OIF

## City of Gothenburg

## Improving Health Through School Attendance

# Operational Implementation Framework

From improved to promoting school attendance

## Contents

# Introduction

This report deals with a project aimed at developing a digital tool to improve school attendance in Gothenburg. It focuses on how the process started and evolved at the schools in a district in north Gothenburg, and how the tool is expected to help teachers change their way of working with pupils in order to address non-attendance.

The schools in Gothenburg have been assigned the task of raising school attendance levels as a means of achieving academic goals. The emphasis in the past has been on pupils' absence from lessons and the teachers' working methods have consequently been reactive. One of the aims behind creating a digital tool is to bring about a change in approach among teachers. The underlying plan is to create opportunities for pupils in municipal schools in Gothenburg to improve their grades, thus expanding their potential to continue studying at post-secondary school level.

# Background

## Angered

Angered is one of ten urban districts in Gothenburg and has a population of around 60,000. It is one of the districts in Gothenburg that faces the greatest challenge with regard to segregation and social exclusion. There is a high proportion of new arrivals, both refugees and those who have migrated for other reasons. In many instances, pupils come to Sweden in their teens and they have not always had an entirely satisfactory education to build on. With a mixture of different ethnicities and educational backgrounds, schools in the area are faced with the monumental task of helping pupils acquire grades that are good enough for them to study beyond compulsory school age. The pupils' school traditions also differ. This means that schools cannot build on old-established practices. They must constantly formulate new ways of working if they are to help their pupils develop as far and effectively as possible.

In 2018, the proportion of the population in Angered born outside Sweden, or with two foreign-born parents, was 74.6% – the highest in Gothenburg. This can be compared to the figure of 35.1% for Gothenburg as a whole. The age range within the population is also lower than for Gothenburg as a whole. Ill health, calculated as the number of days on which payment is received from the Social Insurance Agency, is 35.6 in Angered compared to the city average of 23.9.

Principals and the school administration in the district have identified and analysed the dynamics that impact on pupils' goal achievement. They discovered that the problem of low school attendance is one of the pivotal factors. It was also known that good grades

often open up potential to move on to post-secondary education and are a key factor in improving public health. Systematic collaboration with social services was initiated to enhance the work being done by schools to improve attendance. As part of this effort, all teachers were required to register their pupils' non-attendance in order to demonstrate that they care about the pupils and their attendance record. As the education administration needed to follow up attendance centrally, teachers were asked to use the digital registration tool that was available at all schools in Gothenburg. At the same time, the administration embarked on a carefully structured follow-up of the teachers' registration levels.

As grades form the basis for the potential for pupils to move on to further education, school attendance is a key factor. As regards improving public health, falling attendance rates were an important reminder that the schools were under a duty to analyse clearly which areas needed to be improved if the decline in school grades was to be reversed.

## Non-attendance and grades

The grades achieved by pupils in year nine of secondary school in the City of Gothenburg deteriorated over a seven-year period – from 2007 to 2013. When the pattern of falling grades continued despite a series of initiatives, Gothenburg City Council instructed the principals to identify the reasons behind the decline in grades at each school. Each principal presented an action plan for their respective school, outlining what action would be required to halt the decline.

A general initiative highlighted by the principals was aimed at improving pupils' attendance. In many city districts in Gothenburg, various projects and plans were instigated as a means of bringing about a change. The approach that was adopted varied although the purpose remained the same – to improve pupils' school attendance.

The problem of rising non-attendance levels was not unique to Gothenburg and during the same period it was officially identified as a nationwide problem. Both the Swedish National Agency for Education and the Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions had drawn attention to the problem for some time and endorsed methods designed to improve school attendance. In 2012, the National Agency for Education issued general guidelines governing measures aimed at improving attendance, and at highlighting, investigating, and taking action to reduce non-attendance.

## Grades and public health

As ill health in Angered was, and still is, a major cause for concern, there was an incentive to link the results achieved by children and young people to a potential improvement in public health.

# Operational Implementation Framework

From improved to promoting school attendance

The opportunity to move on to higher education is cited as one of the factors behind the improvement. There was therefore good reason to pursue initiatives focused on school attendance and improved goal achievement. Using this knowledge as a starting point,

Angered District Administration public health experts set about formulating a project application. The aim of the project was to identify ways in which the district could handle the task at hand, which included raising pupils' school attendance in Angered with the ultimate aim of improving public health. The work initially covered several different areas and it was decided that the starting point would be 'big data'. However, the work gradually transitioned towards a focus on 'Improving public health through academic success'. The purpose was to develop models and tools for analysing and implementing measures and to follow up school attendance in near real time.

# Implementation

## Local baseline assessment

Angered District Administration, together with a number of partners, applied for funding via the government agency Vinnova for a project which would primarily address improving public health through early intervention initiatives. The project, which is still ongoing, is an innovation project. This means that no one else has previously worked in this area or with this specific orientation and emphasis. Everything is new and the working approach is investigatory.

The partners in the project are Angered District Administration, the Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions (SALAR), Linköping University, Karolinska Institute, the Institute for Futures Studies, Västra Götaland Regional Council, Gothenburg University/Sahlgrenska University Hospital, City of Gothenburg/Intraservice, the computer companies Ping Pong and IVBAR, and Vinnova.

- Angered District Administration is the main owner of the project
- SALAR is involved with two individuals working from a public health perspective
- Linköping University has two researchers linked to the project and they are the ones who are leading the process by carrying out the actual innovation work
- The Karolinska Institute, University of Gothenburg/Sahlgrenska University Hospital, and Västra Götaland Regional Council (Social Analysis Unit) are involved from a public health perspective
- The Institute for Futures Studies is contributing with process know-how and expertise
- Ping Pong is participating on the basis that it is their platform that is being used to gather data and is being used by the schools as part of attendance monitoring and intervention

- IVBAR digitalises the needs of the project teams and creates software that allows the project groups to present their results
- Vinnova is the authority that handles the funding and management of the project by the state

Originally, the aim of the project was to include maternal health and childhood obesity. However, data in these areas has been much more difficult to access and systematise. These issues also encompass more wide-reaching ethical dimensions that require access applications that are very time-consuming. The available school attendance data does not require the same volume of access applications as the information is already in the public domain. In the area covered by the project, the focus is on the work being done by schools in Angered on improving school attendance. The project is supported by existing knowledge and research dealing with attendance work at secondary schools, and it links this knowledge to the big data emerging from the teachers' daily attendance reports.

## Planning schedule and implementation constraints

The aim of the project is to develop the methods employed in the work being done by teachers and pupils to identify ways in which school attendance could be improved. The plan is to create a user-friendly digital attendance tool linked to *Hjärntorget,* which is the administrative system used by the schools for attendance registration and the teachers are already familiar with the system.

The attendance tool, in the form of a smartphone app, will make it easier for teachers to report and follow up pupil attendance. Based on historical data, it should be possible for the follow-up to show a specific pupil's pattern in terms of non-attendance the week before, during the current week, and in the week to come. Potential non-attendance is based on the pupil's previously registered attendance figures. Working together with the pupil, the teacher can be more proactive and facilitate the preemptive work the school needs to develop. The tool should also provide scope for initiatives that are already in progress to improve the pupil's attendance rate, along with initiatives that are in the pipeline or which are considered to have the potential to reduce non-attendance. This 'toolbox' should function as a means for the teacher to think along new lines in order to maintain a proactive approach. The attendance tool is in the process of being developed in collaboration with teachers and other members of staff at the schools.

When the project is completed, the tool will become an important part of the school's efforts to increase the level of attendance. It could also act as a source of support, ensuring that more pupils are contented at school, and it could lead to more pupils achieving higher grades and better access to post-secondary education. The module is expected to help increase the knowledge and skills of the teachers and create a deeper understanding of which factors appear to have a material impact on non-attendance. It allows for earlier and more informed intervention measures to be taken. By extension, it also leads to adapted interventions in schools and more efficient use of public funds. The

vision is that it will eventually result in improved public health within the target group, i.e. children and young people.

To achieve the goal, a detailed activity plan was formulated based on the application and project plan submitted to Vinnova. The activity plan clearly set out what needed to be done and when it would be implemented. As there are numerous stakeholders involved with a range of perspectives, frequent follow-ups are conducted and over time they have helped to build up an understanding of the various parts of the project. The follow-ups also help to sustain the pace of the work, and to identify and overcome obstacles.

## Identified obstacles and challenges

*Communication*

When a large number of stakeholders are involved, an effective communication process is the key to moving forward. Everyone involved should know what is happening and why. At the same time, it is not guaranteed that everyone views all the information in the same way. This represents a challenge and a clear communication plan needs to be formulated. Agreement must also be reached on which expressions should be used along with designations for the different areas. It is otherwise easy for culture clashes to arise that would result in misunderstanding and a breakdown in communication at the interface between research bodies and companies and the schools. Those involved work in a variety of ways and they endeavour to incorporate their mode of thinking into the areas covered by the other stakeholders.

*Lack of understanding of each other's perspective*

When there are stakeholders from many different areas, there is a need to understand what the different professions can contribute and what perspectives they can incorporate into the reasoning surrounding the project. There also needs to be a willingness on their part to relinquish their personal positions and agree on a common standpoint. This is acutely obvious in a project dealing with the school world, where everyone has a certain understanding and specific opinions about what the school is working with and how it should address the challenges. Everyone has experienced at some point during their life what it is like to participate in the teaching-learning process and to be part of the school structure. Most people therefore feel they have sufficient knowledge to hold opinions on how the school should work in the future. At the same time, the various school professions must be open to adopting perspectives that they are not normally accustomed to introducing into the school's methodology and way of thinking.

*Operational acceptance*

Involving teachers and other professionals in the school world in development work

related to the teachers' remit could be regarded as self-evident. And that is the case in this project.

The fact that from the outset the project works with operational support and acceptance as part of its work is one of its strengths. However, it is still a challenge to free up time for teachers to actively engage in the work as a whole. Time is a finite resource. The teachers' wish to be involved in development meetings, follow-ups and reconciliations is constantly vying with the desire to educate and support their pupils.

Another challenge is that the digital tool that has been developed is based on the pupils' school attendance data entered by the teachers. To assure the reliability of past, present and future data, it is important to promote a system that actively manages registration of pupils' non-attendance.

To surmount the challenges, a well-defined mission statement is required from the principal. Also required are a carefully considered plan, along with good support and guidance from the principal regarding prioritisation and allocation of the time available. There is also a need to free up resources to drive the process forward.

## Response to implementation challenges

### Communication - *Solving the issue of what creates productivity*
One of the challenges when communicating within the group was that it was easy to talk past each other because the starting points were so diverse. To overcome this, the steering group was forced to address the issue of which factors promote productivity within the project. The group was assigned the task of identifying areas in which they needed to agree on a common definition and starting point.

To ensure a functioning, forward-thinking discussion, the steering group was required to continuously identify which areas would be prioritised and where it would be meaningful to proceed. As part of this process, the steering group had to reach a consensus. They needed to agree that the initial step would involve focusing on improving the pupils' school attendance using a digital tool. The other public health perspectives had to wait until a later stage.

A procedure such as this, which involves addressing expectations, ideas and wishes, requires time. Often more time than was originally planned or anticipated. The more people who are involved, the more time is required. In order to create more scope to develop the process together, the working plan was revised with the inclusion of more reconciliation points.

# Operational Implementation Framework
From improved to promoting school attendance

## Lack of understanding of each other's perspective - *be clear about the aim*

It is important to emphasise that all stakeholders in the steering group and the reference group are committed individuals who aspire to achieving something that is of significance to the advancement of public health work. Their commitment is based on their personal knowledge and experience, which is why they are involved in the project. To create an understanding of each other's perspective, it is crucial to constantly emphasise the purpose of the project. In this case, this involves raising the level of school attendance among pupils to improve their academic results and thus achieve greater success at school and in doing so bring about an improvement in public health.

Emphasising the purpose also means being constantly urged to set clear boundaries to ensure the work is both manageable and feasible. One means of establishing clear boundaries is to adhere to the project plan and allow the creative process to be supported by the plan instead of it becoming an obstacle. Another approach could involve regular structured telephone meetings between the project manager and the steering group. In that case misunderstandings are avoided, and if they do arise they can be addressed at an early stage.

## Operational acceptance – *Workshop*

If we are to move from reactive attendance work to a more proactive approach, there needs to be a change in thinking regarding pupils' school attendance and the response to pupils when they return to school after being absent. One source of support in this change process is the development of the digital tool. Involving teachers in this process facilitates acceptance and adaptation to how teachers want the change process to evolve.

Acceptance on the operational level is one of the main elements in the project. Without this acceptance, there is a very tangible risk that it will become a product that is of no interest to the professions involved. The tool that is being developed is essentially a product created by the professions for the professions. The knowledge, thoughts and wishes of teachers and others should thus permeate the course of action that has been adopted. To achieve this, workshops are run on an ongoing basis, allowing teachers and other representatives on the operational level to work together with the creators of the tool and the researchers responsible for monitoring the progress that is being made. The workshop also generates common thoughts and ideas on how results should be modelled and achieved.

# Analysis

## Learning path

Starting a project of this magnitude requires clear, methodical preparation. The clearer and more structured the preparations, the easier it is to deal with the challenges and obstacles that arise during the course of the project. The 'big data' project was relatively well documented, with a clear preliminary study, and yet there were many details that took more time than was anticipated from the outset or which needed to be adjusted. The project was, and still is, highly ambitious, which means that clear boundaries had to be set. The delimitations are primarily related to what is possible to achieve during the initial stage in order to open up potential new steps in a subsequent stage. The project has therefore been given a new title and a clearer focus: 'Improving public health through academic success'.

Gaining access to data took longer than expected, which meant that the project work could not begin as planned. There is an infinite amount of data that we would like to utilise, and which is already being employed in research, but there are also numerous obstacles to putting this data to good use. A great deal is governed by the rules set out in the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR). Data in the healthcare sector for example is more difficult to access due to the strict GDPR rules, and it takes time before all the rules are complied with and applications are processed.

It is difficult to create a product before needs are identified, and it took time before the reference group, made up of teachers, was in place. As stated earlier, it is crucial that work of this nature is put on hold until representatives from the operational level have a chance to become involved. Working top down in a project such as this is not an appropriate approach if you want those on the operational level to use and be affected by the product. By waiting for the reference group, the project helps to establish conditions for working directly with users and creating a product that can be of benefit. Consequently, the two external companies, IVBAR and Ping Pong, have acquired a greater understanding of operational requirements, how the tool should be designed, and how teachers think. Based on quality-driven operational development, these have proved to be crucial aspects.

# Summary

The aim of the project has been slightly different to that of many other projects. Often the choice is between working on changing the approach or focusing on a new digital tool. This time we have opted to combine the objectives and allow a digital tool to support the task of changing the approach. This has led to encounters between professional groups

which under normal circumstances would not meet very often. This in itself created challenges that were quite new for the majority of those involved.

The overall perspective in such a project is twofold. It is based not only on the composition of the steering group, with nine different stakeholders, but also on the manner in which the task of assuring operational acceptance and development should be approached. Although the steering group agreed on a common methodology, it needed to reconcile the mode of thought on the operational level with the way representatives on the operational level wanted to work with the results. If, as in this case, the project leader comes from a setting that is different to the school world, she/he would require a solid introduction to both the context and circumstances, as well as the purpose and objectives of the project. It is then easier to clearly shape the responsibilities and deadlines that are necessary to establish a satisfactory structure.

Having different stakeholders is both enriching and challenging. With an awareness of the challenges that have been outlined in the past, and with clear strategies for managing those challenges, the differences will prove invaluable in the work that is taking place. Everyone involved must learn to understand and appreciate the skills of each stakeholder and the underlying basis of their involvement. There is a need to deal with everyone's expectations and manage them when the time comes. In the meantime, it is both instructive and enlightening for the stakeholders to be forced to view their personal perspectives through the eyes of others, which also opens up new dimensions on what they are seeking to achieve and with a better outcome as a result.

The willingness among teachers to change and the development of a methodology in partnership with the pupils have been consistent features throughout the process. At the same time, the work has taken much longer than anticipated and the challenge has been to maintain a solution-based approach when a task takes longer to complete. Important parameters required to achieve operationally based development work are good leadership, together with strong support and commitment. To progress, a clear, detailed and simple plan is needed. Not only for the work generally, but also for the work taking place locally at each school. A good structure is necessary in the endeavour to achieve a common understanding among stakeholders.

The most significant change we have identified is the impact that the working methods adopted by teachers, along with cooperation between teachers and pupils, has had at the pilot schools involved in testing the tool. The finished tool will make it easier for teachers to move from adopting a reactive to a more proactive approach in work related to school attendance. This means that teachers can work better with individual pupils to prevent non-attendance/improve attendance instead of working on establishing why the pupils were absent.

# Operational Implementation Framework

From improved to promoting school attendance

When describing the challenges facing the project leader and participants in this project, we have chosen to focus on communication, understanding each other's perspectives, and securing acceptance of the activities the project is designed to influence. Experience shows that regardless of the project you are working on, the effective management of these three areas is vital if the project is to move forward and continue to produce results even after it has come to an end.