



ST. MAARTEN

**MINISTRY OF OCJS**  
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Education Inspectorate  
*Ministry of Education, Culture and Science*

## **SINT MAARTEN EDUCATION REVIEW**

### OBSTACLES AND AVENUES TO IMPROVE EDUCATION

15-03-2022



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## SUMMARY

The Sint Maarten Country Reform Package describes a combination of short-term measures and longer-term structural reforms that are necessary to make Sint Maarten financially, economically, and administratively resilient. For many of the reforms mentioned in the Country Reform Package, the current situation is first mapped out to gain a clear focus on the desired approach.

For the theme 'education and care', the Country Reform Package was regarded as a first step which also implied a review of the education system. As a next step, recommendations were to be made on improving the basic quality of education, the connection between education and the labor market, and the flow between education systems, for instance between Sint Maarten and the Netherlands.

In April 2021, based on the agreements in the Country Reform Package, the Sint Maarten, and Dutch inspections (hereinafter: 'the working group') began screening the education sector on Sint Maarten. For this purpose, central research questions were formulated that relate to the core functions of education: qualification, socialization and allocation, and the conditions to enable these core functions. The working group conducted desk research, held discussions (on location) with stakeholders and policy makers, visited schools, met with school boards, teachers, and pupils/students, and observed lessons.

The primary tasks of the working group are to conduct research and problem analysis, to formulate recommendations, and to initiate blueprints for the implementation of the recommendations. However, the actual implementation is beyond the remit of the working group. The current document is an interim report, describing findings and recommendations for the Sint Maarten education system. In our final report, the recommendations (WHAT should be changed) will be further operationalized in proposals on HOW these changes can be realized.

The Sint Maarten and Dutch education inspectorates worked together closely to prepare this first report. In doing so, we are building on a tradition of joint inspections involving Sint Maarten, Curaçao, Aruba and the Netherlands. For several years we have been helping and learning from each other, sharing knowledge and insights. This collaboration is a key aspect of the quality culture for which we strive.

### *Strengths of the Sint Maarten education system*

The teachers are a strength of the Sint Maarten education system. We have spoken to many teachers who make a sustained and concerted effort to give the students a good education and who have the desire to invest in the further development of their own professionalism.

There have been several initiatives to improve the Sint Maarten education system, often resulting in reports with advice on how to improve the education system. These reports contain starting points for improvement.

Education in the country uses either English or Dutch as a language of instruction. In theory, this opens the opportunity for students to prepare for different types of education beyond secondary education and for a diverse range of jobs.



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### *Challenges*

At the same time, the system faces many challenges, starting with the lack of adequate information to enable the relevant professionals to set priorities and steer a course towards improvements in education. If reliable indicators on the performance of education are lacking, this can soon become a process of 'steering in the fog', and the assessment and monitoring of necessary improvements is compromised.

Secondly, it was noticeable (within our limited observations) that the educational process at several schools on Sint Maarten falls short in several ways. These include a lack of basic conditions to support students with extra educational needs, little focus on and support for a result-oriented approach or educational leadership, and little structural attention to the competence development of teachers and instructors.

Another challenge is presented by several barriers to a continuous educational path. Childcare has no legally defined role in preparing children for primary education and the entry requirements of one school or sector do not always correspond to the outflow criteria of the 'delivering' school or sector. The transition from secondary to tertiary education is often difficult. In many cases, students are insufficiently prepared, for example in terms of the skills they need to successfully complete a study program in higher education on Sint Maarten or abroad (e.g., in the Netherlands).

The education sector's connection to the labor market at home and abroad is also problematic. Vocational schools have difficulty finding enough internships. Employers on Sint Maarten observe that many of the apprentices they work with are insufficiently equipped to enter the labor market.

We have also identified structural omissions in the system within which educational institutions operate. There is a lack of adequate, relevant, and up-to-date legislation for schools. The same applies to the regulations by which the Inspectorate of Education operates. There are also several shortcomings related to governance within the education system and the financial and budgetary aspects in this field. Lastly, there is a significant lack of conditional resources, such as well-equipped school buildings and sufficient available staff.

### *Recommendations*

Our recommendations, described in detail in Part II of this report, concern improvements in the areas discussed above: better and reliable key figures, the improvement of education and strengthening of the system within which education operates.

#### **Data registration system**

1. Establish a reliable and sustainable data registration system for key figures.

#### **Improving education**

2. Improve the educational process.

The translation into practical recommendations requires further research during the next phase of the current investigation. A recommendation for the short term is to provide direct support to teachers, for example by appointing additional remedial teachers.



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3. Provide a continuous learning path.
  - Develop a support structure for students with special educational needs.
  - Consider the variation in native languages of students when developing school language policies.
  - Improve the vocational track of the education system by emphasizing vocational value and by ensuring that the curriculum meets current labor market requirements.
  - Systematically track students and monitor alumni success.
  - Prepare students more effectively for tertiary education.
4. Enhance the connection between education and the labor market.
  - Improve the connection between (developments in) the labor market and educational programs in tertiary education.
  - Establish a system in which companies are recognized as training companies according to clear criteria and in which professional practical supervisors are trained and certified.
  - Increase the number of internships.
  - Organize permanent consultation for each sector between representatives from the professional field and the vocational education institutions.

### **Strengthening the education system**

5. Develop a mature governance structure.
  - Implement a system that gives school boards sufficient control over finance and educational management and ensure that they fulfil their role adequately.
  - Organize a structure in which supervisory boards support school boards and correct them where necessary.
  - Formalize the establishment of a joint participation council in which teachers, parents and students are represented and give it legal status.
6. Ensure up-to-date and adequate legislation.
  - This applies to each education sector and to the Inspectorate of Education. Develop and deploy a supervisory framework in addition to valid research instruments and ensure enough trained staff to allow the Inspectorate to systematically assess the quality of the educational process.
7. Organize an efficient and transparent budgetary system.
  - Gain insights into whether the adjustments to the lump sum subsidy system are adequate (especially for school boards with secondary schools)
  - Design a procurement system to facilitate public schools until the transfer of the organization of public education into a public body has been finalized.
  - Draw up multiannual budgets and update them annually.
8. Strengthen financial accountability.
  - Enforce what is regulated in the National Ordinance regarding accountability.
  - Facilitate the role of the inspectorate as prescribed by law; provide adequate financial resources and staffing.
  - Build a culture of trust, making the enforcement of legal and other requirements a standard part of the budgetary process.



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9. Guarantee the basic conditions for good education.
  - This concerns a wide range of conditions including maintenance of buildings, up-to-date teaching materials and ICT facilities, and sufficient qualified staff.
10. Analyze inefficiencies in the education system.
  - Carry out an analysis of inefficiencies in the education system and channel any resulting savings into realizing the necessary improvements to education on Sint Maarten.

#### *From plan to action*

Some of these recommendations are not new and have received attention in previous reports. However, these reports stopped short of presenting a coherent approach. At least in part, they failed to clearly assign final responsibilities, identify those tasked with implementing improvements, specify intermediate and results, and set out the financial implications.

With this in mind, the current working group wants to go a step further: perhaps more important than the 'what' question (the 10 points listed above) is the question of 'how' these improvements can be realized in the specific context of Sint Maarten. Part III of this report makes an initial attempt to fill in the 'how' question for the above recommendations in the following areas.

#### **Data registration system**

To gain insight into key figures (recommendation 1), in the period up to our final report we will explore how the joint inspectorates can support the implementation of the Ministry Management Information System that is currently being built by the Sint Maarten government. To fully realize the potential of this project, we recommend making this data openly accessible to all relevant stakeholders.

#### **Implementation agendas for recommendations on education and the system**

For the educational recommendations (2 to 4) and the system recommendations (5 to 10), we will follow up this interim report by establishing two implementation agendas. An implementation agenda contains all the elements needed to bring about real change. In addition to identifying the organizations and/or persons responsible for realization, the agenda identifies the organizations and persons involved in implementing improvements and details which results need to be achieved, complete with deadlines and applicable criteria. All these elements are then incorporated into well-substantiated periodic reports that are forwarded to the Minister along with the advice of the Sint Maarten Inspectorate of Education. Where points for improvements have previously been identified, these will be included in the implementation agenda and made concrete and measurable ('SMART'). The proposed ambition is to implement improvements in the next four years.

While the agreements being proposed at this stage may seem somewhat bureaucratic, they are already generating considerable enthusiasm in the field. For example, key players in the business community have already expressed their willingness to actively participate in measures to enhance the connection between education and the labor market (recommendation 4). This also applies to the ministries involved. We will make use of this momentum and ensure that the resulting agreements are clearly set out in our final report.



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### **Phasing and feasibility of recommendations**

The present recommendations are diverse in nature and, as indicated above, partly require translation into implementation agendas. At the same time, some recommendations can be implemented (or partly implemented) relatively quickly and help alleviate the pressure on the education system. For the time being, we see five recommendations that can be realized with a compact plan of action and targeted financing in the short term:

1. Establishing a reliable and sustainable system for key indicators of educational performance (recommendation 1).
2. Supporting teachers by appointing (extra) *remedial teachers* (part of recommendations 2 & 3).
3. Fixing roofs and making other overdue repairs to damage caused by Hurricane Irma (part of recommendation 10).
4. Organizing an efficient and transparent budgetary system (recommendation 7).
5. Examining inefficiencies in the education system (recommendation 9).

An important point of attention in the implementation of recommendations is the availability of the necessary people power and skill sets to achieve them. When it comes to delivering on recommendations that call for sufficient qualified personnel, the skills required for good governance and supervision, and the specialist knowledge to modernize legislation, there are limits on the expertise to hand.

In addition to phasing, it therefore makes sense to explore opportunities for cooperation and the sharing of expertise, both in the region and between the countries of the kingdom. Kibrahacha – ‘Partnerschap Samen Opleiden Caribisch Gebied’ – is a good example of such cooperation. Twinning institutions in the region and within the kingdom can also yield worthwhile results. The working group has already seen encouraging examples of this in its current investigation.

### **Financial consequences of recommendations**

Financial consequences of recommendations have not yet been specified in the present document. Nevertheless, several conclusions can already be drawn about the financial effects of the measures it proposes.

Firstly, not every improvement cost money. The recommendation to achieve a two-tier governance system with strong boards, good internal supervision and mature participation is a case in point. Decisions in areas such as monitoring and limiting the overhead at schools, the need to invest in the training and supervision of teachers and building maintenance are best made by a strong board that operates in close cooperation with its schools. If implemented correctly with proper checks and balances this enables money to be spent much more efficiently, which would be a huge step forward for education on Sint Maarten.

Secondly, it is important that any available surplus of funds from the Country Reform Package should at least partly be channeled into making the necessary investments in education. However, this is only a good idea if the improvements proposed in this report are effectively implemented. Simply pumping money into education will not lead to the desired results.



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Finally, it is important to foresee and calculate the financial effects of demographic and educational developments (e.g., a drop in the number of students). On the one hand, this underlies recommendation 10 regarding the effect on the number of schools and required square meters. On the other hand, the funding – which is based on the number of students ( $q$ ) and the amount of money per student ( $p$ ) in the multiannual estimates – can be kept stable. A decrease in the number of students will then result in higher expenditure per student. Again, this will only prove effective if the improvements proposed in this report are implemented at the same time. In this regard, not only demographic developments are relevant, but also educational developments such as changes in types of students (vocational vs. academic) and educational level need to be considered.



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## **PART I: Starting points for the research and a description of the education system**

In Part I, we will first elaborate briefly on the scope of this study and the research method used. Next, we will discuss several characteristics of the Sint Maarten education system. This discussion is descriptive in nature and lays the foundation for the problem analyses and recommendations in Part II, as well as for the follow-up proposals in Part III.



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# 1 Starting points for the research

## 1.1 Background

The present investigation stems from the mutual arrangement between Sint Maarten and the Netherlands for the implementation of the Sint Maarten Country Reform Package, signed on December 22, 2020. The Country Reform Package contains eight measures, focusing on the following themes: financial management; cost and effectiveness of the public sector; taxes; the financial sector; the economy; healthcare; education; and strengthening the rule of law. In combination, these measures are designed to spur a broad palette of reforms and investments that contribute to the resilience and robustness of the economy and society, thus promoting the well-being of the people of Sint Maarten. The current study, conducted jointly by the Sint Maarten and Dutch Inspectorates of Education, covers the theme of education, for which the Country Reform Package formulates three goals:

- to set a basic standard for education;
- to establish a positive correlation between education and labor market;
- to implement logical and achievable educational paths (be it in the Netherlands or elsewhere).

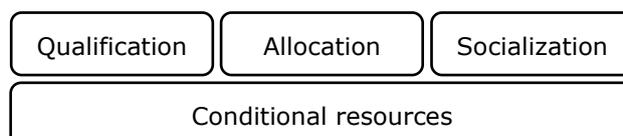
The purpose of this interim report and the final report that follows is to arrive at concrete recommendations on how Sint Maarten can achieve these goals.

### *Role of inspectorates*

The Sint Maarten and Dutch inspectorates see it as their primary task to arrive at recommendations. In addition to conducting research and problem analysis, the working group initiates blueprints for implementation of the recommendations. Many of the recommendations from previous studies faltered in the implementation phase, resulting in limited results. The working group has therefore decided to present some of the recommendations in concrete terms in the final report, for example in the form of implementation agendas with an explicit division of roles and tasks. The actual implementation, however, lies beyond the working group's remit and role. After publication of the final report, the inspectorates will confine themselves to their usual supervisory role, and to aiding and supporting implementation where necessary (compliance assistance).

## 1.2 Theoretical framework

To obtain a clear picture of the quality of education on Sint Maarten and to structure both desk research and interviews with stakeholders, we have focused on the three core tasks of education, and their conditional resources. This is a common perspective that largely corresponds with the framework used by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) in its research on the quality of education systems.<sup>1</sup>



The first core task is **qualification**: education imparts knowledge, attitudes and skills that match the needs of society and the talents of students. The second core



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task is **allocation**, which includes selection and equal opportunities: students pursue an educational career that matches their abilities and talents, and the employment needs of society. The third core task is **socialization**: education contributes to the acquisition of the social and societal competences necessary to optimally participate in and contribute to society. Finally, we set out the conditions for realizing these core tasks: education should be equipped and organized in such a way as to provide continuity and facilitate the three core tasks.

### **1.3 Scope, research strategy and justification**

This study covers the entire education system, from pre-school to higher education. In addition to board members, teachers and other representatives of schools and institutions, the stakeholders consulted included policy staff, a center of expertise, employers, and public and private education. Appendix A contains a list of interviewees.

Prior to conducting the study, we formulated three central research questions as a basis for structuring data collection during both desk research and on-site interviews:

- Central question 1: How is education organized in the country, in what demographic context is it embedded, and what structural and incidental contextual factors affect the quality of the core tasks of education and conditional resources?
- Central question 2: In relation to the core educational tasks of allocation, qualification, socialization, what is the quality of education and the conditional resources in the country, and what quality assurance measures apply?
- Central question 3: Does the country have sufficient insight into the core tasks of education and conditional resources to effectively manage the goals, visions, and ambitions it has set for the quality of education?

Where appropriate, the central questions were translated into specific sub-questions for each sector of education, focusing on factors that contribute to the realization of basic quality, a good fit between education and the labor market, and satisfactory educational paths. In the remainder of Part I we answer the first central research question regarding the Sint Maarten education system. The second and third research questions will be addressed in the formulation and substantiation of recommendations, presented in Part II: Problem Analysis and Recommendations.

#### *Justification*

To obtain an adequate picture of the Sint Maarten education system, we visited and spoke to a selected sample of schools, boards, and other stakeholders (see Appendix A). The sample of schools and boards was specifically chosen to represent a cross-section of the education system, e.g., considering the range of religious denominations. Where possible, we spoke with teachers and students in addition to school boards, and several lessons were observed. We tested the findings of these interviews with reference to the overview of the system provided by the Sint Maarten Inspectorate of Education. This enables us to establish a shared view and create a solid basis for the descriptions and analyses in this report on the continuous learning path, the flow of education (both between sectors and with the labor market), and the quality of conditional resources. A comprehensive and systematic analysis of the quality of the educational process was beyond the scope of the current study. Such an analysis requires the existence of a valid supervisory framework (*toezichtkader*) that both addresses Sint Maarten's unique education system and provides a legal basis for educational supervision. We therefore advise that priority be given to establishing a clearly formulated mandate for the Sint Maarten Inspectorate of Education in the form of a supervisory framework, a legally



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anchored position, and sufficient resources to further empower educational supervision.

Findings that have been recognized and are not exclusive to the schools or boards visited are shared in this interim report. This does not alter the fact that the report may contain imperfections. Any such imperfections uncovered during the continuation of our research will be acknowledged and corrected in the final report.



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## 2 The Sint Maarten education system

### 2.1 The structure of the education system

#### *The current education system and related education legislation*

As a country, Sint Maarten has existed since 10 October 2010. Before this date, from 1954 to 2010, Sint Maarten formed part of the Netherlands Antilles. On 10 October 2010, the covenant of the Netherlands Antilles was revoked and both Sint Maarten and Curaçao became autonomous countries within Kingdom of the Netherlands. Sint Maarten shares an island with its French counterpart, Saint-Martin. Both are self-governing states without a physical border between them, which means that persons are free to move from one to the other.<sup>2</sup> As an autonomous country, Sint Maarten has its own legislation and ministry governing the field of education. Foreign affairs and defense are policy areas where the country is dependent on the Netherlands. The King of the Netherlands is the Head of State and is represented by the Governor. Official languages in governmental, educational, and legal domains are Dutch and English.

Sint Maarten's (compulsory) education system is based on that of the European Netherlands, with American and Caribbean influences. All children receive the same primary education, whereas secondary education is tied to different academic levels. The placement process is monitored by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Youth and Sport (MECYS) and determines whether students receive a more academic form of secondary education (CXC, havo or vwo) or a vocational form (PSVE), the latter being subdivided according to placement criteria for several streams or programs, (VSBO/PSVE-TKL, or VSBO/PSVE-PBL/PKL).<sup>3</sup> The country has an education system that encompasses pre-school, primary, secondary, special and tertiary education, along with government subsidized and private institutions.<sup>4</sup>

There are two instruments which guide the initial secondary school placement: the FBE Exit Exam taken in the final year of primary education, and the student's Educational Report. The Exit Exam is composed of four subjects: English, Dutch as a foreign language, Mathematics, and General Knowledge (Science and Social Studies). Its results provide an indication of the level of secondary education to which the child is most suited intellectually. The Education Report contains the averaged grades for Year 7 (age group 10-11) and considers the child's social context, socio-emotional development, and the school's advice and parents' wishes regarding placement.<sup>5</sup>

In addition to the Dutch examination model, it is also possible to follow the regional Caribbean Examination Council system for secondary education (CXC), in which the Government administers the Caribbean Certificate of Secondary Level Competence (CCSLC) and the Caribbean Secondary Education Certificate (CSEC). The CCSLC exams were held for the first time in 2016-2017 and were taken by 16 students.<sup>6</sup>

The education system on Sint Maarten offers a choice in the language of instruction, curriculum, and the testing standards that prepare students for further education in the regional CXC system, the Dutch system, the American and Canadian system. Parental preference for which system their children should follow is a strong determining factor (if the pupil's test scores meet the entrance requirements), and, in some cases, religious affiliation can be a strong asset.<sup>7</sup>



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Sint Maarten has a Ministry of Education, Culture, Youth and Sport, which is responsible for the country's regulations, policy, and vision on education. The Inspectorate of Education is part of this ministry. The Department of Education bears responsibility for amongst others, the development of policy, legislation, procedures, and the monitoring of the execution thereof. The Department is also responsible for executing required research and developing plans related to the Sector and advising regarding the allocation of resources.<sup>8</sup>

Sint Maarten has a Division of Examinations, which is charged with several tasks, including:

- Developing, legitimizing, and determining valid tests and exams for the benefit of education in the broadest sense;
- Developing, legitimizing, and determining reliable frameworks for quality control of education in (learning) performance;
- Researching and assessing specified tests, exams, and instruments of quality control;
- Reporting points of special interest for policy and legislation in education, from the perspective of quality control regarding conclusion and completion.<sup>9</sup>

### **Pre-primary education and childcare**

On Sint Maarten, early childhood development is available for children under the age of four. The issuance of permits and the inspection of Early Childhood Centers falls under the Ministry of Public Health, Social Development and Labor. However, that Ministry is not equipped to inspect the educational component, thus the process has commenced for the Ministry of MECYS Inspectorate to collaborate with them with regards to inspecting the quality of the curriculum and the inspection of the curriculum of Early Childhood Centers. The working relationship regarding inspection is expected to be formalized shortly. Most ECD Centers uses the HighScope Curriculum, seeing that this fits with the FBE Education of the primary schools. A comprehensive draft for Early Childhood Development policy has been in the making for several years.

A sustainable funding model for daycare centers is being investigated and developed with key stakeholders and professionals. The funding model aims to help strengthen the supply of existing daycare centers and increase access and equity to these services for more children.

According to the EU Council Recommendation on High Quality Early Childhood Education and Care Systems (June 12, 2019). Both policy makers and researchers recognize that it is in the early (6) years that children create the foundation and capacity to learn throughout life. Learning is an incremental process; building a strong foundation in the early years is a precondition for higher level competence development and educational success as much as it is essential for health and the well-being of children. Therefore, early childhood education and care needs to be regarded as the foundation of education and training systems and be an integral part of the education continuum.

The following Day Care Centers are presently operating on Sint Maarten: Alexander's Early Stimulation Center; Busy Body; Brighter Child; Blue Print Academy; Bright Star Early Stimulation; Care Bears; Children's World; Discovery Kidz; Excellence Learning Academy; Ebenezer Learning Center; EduCare Preschool; Fun 'n Learn Kids Pre-school; IDEAL Pre-school; Green Academy Kid's World United Daycare Center; Little Dreamers; Little Explorers; Little Goselings Lucia Learning Center Foundation; Ms. Ingrid Home Care; Pampers 2 Crayons; Tiny Tots Collage; Teddy Bear Playschool; Beginners Luck; 721 kids; Gribouille.



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### **School boards**

The following school boards are present on Sint Maarten:

- SVOBE: Stichting Voortgezet Onderwijs Bovenwindse Eilanden
- SKOS: Stichting Katholiek Onderwijs Sint Maarten
- MAC: Methodist Agogic Center
- CBAF: Charlotte Brookson Academy Foundation
- SPCOBE: Stichting Protestants Christelijk Onderwijs Bovenwindse Eilanden
- SDA: Sint Maarten Seventh Day Adventist
- ACE: All Children's Education
- DPE: Division of Public Education Services (Openbaar Onderwijs)
- FAVE: Foundation for Academic and Vocational Education (Academic and PSVE sections/streams)
- NIPA: National Institute for Professional Advancement (AVE)
- LU: Learning Unlimited Preparatory School
- CIA: Caribbean International Academy (Ontario Secondary School Program)
- USM: University of St. Martin

The boards of subsidized schools are said to have a higher degree of flexibility and autonomy than their publicly funded counterparts, since the latter are obliged to adhere more closely to rules and regulations within the government system. Subsidized schools also engage and involve parents more in school management through parent support groups. This not only gives parents a voice but fosters a level of involvement that can be financially beneficial to these schools when it comes to fundraising. This gives the schools greater scope to offer a more diverse education program, school trips and sports or debating competitions.<sup>10</sup>

Although education is free at public and subsidized schools, the cost of books, uniforms and lunch can be a challenge for some families. Non-mandatory parental contributions are common and can be as high as USD 175 per child, per year. The government provides aid to low-income families and the subsidized schools assist a small number of families in need. Free school bus services for all children needing transportation to and from school is also provided by the government.<sup>11</sup>

### **Primary education**

There are nineteen primary schools on Sint Maarten, some of which are public, while others are government subsidized. In addition, there are six private schools. The schools belong to a range of different denominations, including Catholic, Methodist, Protestant and Seventh Day Adventist. All schools, except for public schools, are administered by a school board. The language of instruction is English or Dutch: most funded schools teach in English. However, five primary schools (three Catholic, one Protestant and one public with a Dutch stream) have Dutch as their language of instruction.<sup>12</sup>

In 2016, three primary schools – the two Hillside Christian Schools (Asha Stevens and Helmich Snijders) and the St. Dominic Primary School – joined a project in which Dutch is taught as a foreign language rather than a second language. The Dutch Ministry of Education decided to develop a package of primary school learning materials called *Nederlands onder de Zon* (English: Dutch under the Sun) to better represent Dutch in the Caribbean setting, where for many children it is a foreign language. Several other schools and school boards (MAC, DPE, St. Joseph school) also opted to purchase these materials and arrange the necessary training.<sup>13</sup>



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Private schools on Sint Maarten are registered as businesses rather than educational institutes and do not fall under central education laws and policies.<sup>14</sup>

The primary system was reformed at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, with the initialization of Foundation Based Education (FBE). The most notable change was the merging of kindergarten with primary school. In addition, Foundation Based Education centers on several key principles, such as:

- a child-centered approach that fits the curriculum to the child;
- an individual approach to learning, in which children are not compared to each other.
- the Caribbean region as the point of departure for learning;
- English as the language of instruction, with Dutch taught as a foreign language.<sup>15</sup>

To cater to the diverse needs of pupils, each classroom must feature centers for the different subjects, where pupils can learn and explore individually. The pupils are grouped according to broader year groups: cycle 1 (4 to 8 years old) and cycle 2 (8 to 12 years old). A National Framework for the FBE curriculum was written by the territories of the Netherlands Antilles in 2000. The curriculum is divided into eight Education Areas:

- 1 Language and Communication (A. Native Language and B. Foreign Language);
- 2 Mathematics;
- 3 Social Studies;
- 4 Philosophy of Life;
- 5 Social Emotional Development;
- 6 Cultural Artistic Development (A. Music, B. Dance, C. Drama, D. Visual Arts);
- 7 Science & Technology;
- 8 Health & Physical Education.<sup>16</sup>

Since the introduction of Foundation Based Education in primary schools, there has been a gradual increase in schools changing their language of instruction from Dutch to English. While seven primary schools had English as their language of instruction in 2008, by 2013 this number had risen to thirteen.<sup>17</sup>



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*Overview of primary school boards, schools, and students, 2021-2022<sup>18</sup>*

<b>Board</b>	<b>Primary school</b>	<b>Number of pupils</b>	<b>Language of instruction</b>
DPE	Oranje School	241	English
	Marie G. de Weever Primary	272	English & Dutch
	Dr. Martin L. King Jr. Primary	167	English
	Ruby Labega Primary	129	English
	Leonald Connor Primary	213	English
	Prins Willem Alexander School	53	English
SKOS	St. Dominic Primary	260	English
	St. Joseph Primary	191	English
	Sr. Magda Primary	293	Dutch
	Sr. Borgia Primary	201	Dutch
	Sr. Marie Laurence Primary	143	English
	Sr. Regina Primary	201	Dutch
SPCOBE	Helmich Snijders Campus	222	Dutch
	Asha Stevens Campus	400	English
MAC	Rev. John A. Gumbs	389	English
	Browlia F. Maillard	388	
SDA	St. Maarten Seventh-Day Adventist School	330	English
Private	St. Maarten Montessori School (primary)	40	English
Private	Caribbean International Academy (CIA) (primary)	53	English
Private	Learning Unlimited Preparatory School (LUPS) (primary)	164	English
Private	All Children Education (ACE) Foundation	Unknown	English
Private	Clay Montessori	Unknown	English
Private	Excellence Learning Academy	Unknown	English



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### Secondary education

Sint Maarten offers multiple types of education programs, some of which resemble the Dutch system, while others are closer to the Caribbean or American and Canadian systems:

- VSBO: Voorbereidend Secundair Beroeps Onderwijs
- TKL: Theoretisch Kadergerichte Leerweg
- VSBO TKL: Voorbereidend Secundair Beroeps Onderwijs Theoretisch Kadergerichte Leerweg (similar to vmbo-t/mavo)
- HAVO: Hoger Algemeen Vormend Onderwijs
- VWO: Voorbereidend Wetenschappelijk Onderwijs
- PBL: Praktisch basisgerichte leerweg
- PKL: Praktisch Kadergerichte Leerweg/praktisch VMBO
- PSVE: Preparatory Secondary Vocational Education
- IB: International Baccalaureate
- CSEC: Caribbean Secondary Examination
- CCSLC: Caribbean Certificate of Secondary Level Competence
- CAPE: Caribbean Advanced Preparatory Examination
- CIA: Ontario Secondary School Program
- LU: American High School Program<sup>19</sup>

*Overview of secondary school boards, schools, and students 2021-2022<sup>20</sup>*

Board	Secondary school	Number of students	Language of instruction
FAVE	St. Maarten Academy Academic VSBO/PSVE	404	English
		261	English
CBAF	Charlotte Brookson Academy	123	English
SKOS	St. Dominic High School & IB	323	English
DPE	St. Maarten Vocational Training School	225	English
MAC	MAC Comprehensive Secondary Education	234	English
SVOBE	Sundial	257	English
	Milton Peters College	907	
	- VWO	57	Dutch
	- HAVO	222	Dutch
	- TKL	237	Dutch
	- CCSLC	175	English
- PBL/PKL	216	English	
Private	Caribbean International Academy (CIA) (secondary)	86	English
Private	Learning Unlimited Preparatory School (LUPS) (secondary)	90	English



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### **Dutch exam programs**

To ensure a smooth transition for students from Sint Maarten who wished to continue their studies in the Dutch tertiary education system, secondary education on Sint Maarten was initially completely modelled on the secondary school system in the Netherlands. In the past modifications in the Dutch school system in the Netherlands resulted in similar changes on Sint Maarten. The last such modification was the introduction of PSVE/VSBO in 2002, which consisted of a merger of vocational education (BVO) and lower academic education (formerly mavo).<sup>21</sup> Preparatory Secondary Vocational Education (PSVE/VSBO) is a 4-year program which provides three different vocational streams.<sup>22</sup>

VSBO consists of two years of basic education and a subsequent two years of upper secondary education in one of three different sectors. The student chooses between Technical Studies, Care & Welfare and Economics. The existing learning routes are *theoretisch kadergerichte leerweg* (TKL), *praktisch kadergerichte leerweg* (PKL), and *praktisch basisgerichte leerweg* (PBL). The student sits a final central examination in each subject. Education at VSBO level is designed to allow students to progress to SBO.

Milton Peters College is a secondary school based predominantly on the Dutch system, which offers havo and vwo. The school also offers a CCSLC/CSEC stream. Many of its students sit the standard Dutch school exams while others sit the CXC exams. Milton Peters is the only subsidized secondary school to have Dutch as its language of instruction.<sup>23</sup>

### **The exam programs of the Caribbean Examination Council and other examination systems**

The system on Sint Maarten has both Dutch language of instruction (havo and vwo) and English language of instruction general formative education. The English-speaking schools (St. Dominic High School, St. Maarten Academy, MAC-CSE and Charlotte Brookson Academy) prepare their students for the Caribbean Examination Council exams. Their Dutch-speaking counterpart, the Milton Peters College, also offers a CCLSC/CSEC stream. The Caribbean Examination Council exam (CXC) can be taken at various levels (general, technical, and basic) and leads to a Secondary Education Certificate. The level achieved by a student who passes the CXC exam in at least five subjects at 'general' level with grades 1, 2 or 3 (1 being the highest) can be best compared to a havo certificate in the Netherlands. CCSLC, CSEC and CAPE are all part of the CXC examination system.<sup>24</sup>

St Maarten Vocational Training School was the first secondary school on the island to introduce the CCSLC program in 2013-2014. However, the program was discontinued because the level was considered too high for most of the students enrolled in the program.

In September 2014, a group of 27 students started CAPE at the St. Maarten Academy Academic Campus. The St. Maarten Academy has chosen to focus on preparing its CAPE students for three associate degree programs. The choice of these specific associate packages is based on the subject combinations the school offers at CSEC level, to allow a smooth transition from CSEC to CAPE.<sup>25</sup>

In addition to Dutch and Caribbean exams, some students on Sint Maarten can participate in the International Baccalaureate, the American High School system, or the Ontario Secondary School Program, each of which have their own examination system.



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### **Special education**

The Prins Willem Alexander School (PWAS) is the only public school for special primary education on Sint Maarten, mostly catering to pupils with learning difficulties. The pupils are divided into a Practical Stream (PO) and a Theoretical Stream (AO). Pupils are usually around 8 years old when they start at PWAS. The language of instruction is English.<sup>26</sup>

The institution has had to deal with relocation issues and high rates of absenteeism among both teachers and pupils. Most of the teaching staff are not trained to work with special needs pupils. PWAS has a maximum capacity of only 84 pupils. In addition, the school board SKOS has launched a separate initiative: the Individual Education Program (IE). This consists of two multi-age groups of pupils with socio-emotional/behavioral issues from all the Catholic schools on Sint Maarten. SKOS aims to extend this initiative beyond Catholic schools. Since 2015-2016 IE has also been introduced in three other schools: Sr. Regina Primary School, St. Joseph School and Sr. Magda Primary School.<sup>27</sup>

### **Home Schooling**

The term 'homeschooling' applies to education provided in a home setting, either by a parent or (online) tutors. Parents can request the right to homeschool their child from the Minister of ECYS through the Inspectorate of Education. There were more requests and approvals of homeschooling requests in the school year 2016-2017 than in the previous four school years: 7 requests for primary or secondary education were submitted and 5 requests were granted. Post Hurricane Irma, the requests for homeschooling decreased to four with all four being approved.

### **Tertiary or higher education**

Secundair Beroepsonderwijs (SBO) was introduced to Sint Maarten in 2004-2005. The SBO has two learning routes: *werkend leren* (WL) and *lerend werken* (LW) and four levels of qualification: *assistent*, *beroepsbeoefenaar*, *vakfunctionaris* and *middenkader-functionaris*. Its educational programs range from 1 to 4 years. The qualification *middenkaderfunctionaris* level 4 can be compared with an MBO-4 certificate in the Netherlands. The other levels are comparable to Dutch MBO-1, -2, and -3.<sup>28</sup>

There are two universities on Sint Maarten. The first is the American University of the Caribbean, School of Medicine in Cupecoy. This is part of a Florida-based university and is therefore not subsidized by the state. Its only obligations are to update its accreditation and inform the Sint Maarten government of all developments and changes. The second is the University of St. Martin in Philipsburg, which is subsidized by the state and offers English language of instruction courses and programs of two years (Associate of Arts) which can be compared to an MBO-2/3 certificate.<sup>29</sup> To participate in this program, the minimum requirement is a vsbtkl-diploma or an American General Educational Development (GED) diploma. After acquiring the Associate Degree students can move on to a bachelor's program of 2 years at several collaborating university, such as Mount Saint Vincent University in Canada and the University of the Virgin Islands. The university offers a 4-year teacher training (comparable to a *tweedegraads lerarenopleiding*) leading to a Bachelor of Education qualification. The minimum basic qualification is a havo certificate.<sup>30</sup>



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### **Undocumented pupils and students**

The issue of absorbing undocumented children into the school system was subject to discussion in the 2015 Millennium Development Goals Report, which stated that *"access to primary and secondary education in Sint Maarten is in theory at 100 percent. In practice though universal access is still to be achieved, for vulnerable groups, including undocumented migrant children and disabled or mentally challenged children."* In 2014, a total of 687 undocumented students were enrolled in public and subsidized schools.<sup>31</sup>

In the years 2015-2016 and 2016-2017, the percentage of undocumented children increased rapidly. The 2016-2017 primary and secondary school registration systems reported a total of 962 undocumented students. It is difficult for the government to form a complete picture of the total number of unregistered children. Not all schools routinely submit data, currently, private schools are not obligated to submit data. Children from the French territory of Saint-Martin attending school on the Dutch side of the island and vice versa are also classed as undocumented students, as they may not be registered in the Dutch Civil Registry system.<sup>32</sup>

### **Transition of students**

Individual schools keep track of the flow of their pupils and students within primary and secondary education and submit these data to the Inspectorate of Education on an annual basis. The data received by the Inspectorate refers to the transition of students at individual schools. There is no general overview of the entire system. The Inspection Division monitors the placement process annually and observed together with various schools that the guideline for placement in either a PBL/PKL program or the SMVTS was not clearly determined.<sup>33</sup>

### **Repetition rates**

Repetition rates (i.e., repeating a year of the curriculum) are quite high on Sint Maarten. Repetition and advancing students to the next year based solely on age is highest amongst boys.<sup>34</sup> The Inspectorate last published repetition rates in 2018. In the previous five years, repetition rates had varied between 16.1 and 21.1%. In most upper forms of schools, repetition rates are lower, the only exception being the havo stream at Milton Peters College.<sup>35</sup>

Several secondary schools have high repetition rates. Low motivation is often a factor. Another major problem is that a high proportion of students are dealing with behavioral challenges or face problems at home, where they do not always receive the parental support, they need. After a relatively low number of 77 suspensions in 2013-2014, the average number of suspensions in the next four years increased to 200 in primary and secondary education. Last but certainly not least, it is important to note that many students attending schools with Dutch as language of instruction, struggle with Dutch.<sup>36</sup>

Schools will have to develop effective measures to prevent high repetition rates. However, the Ministry of Education has acknowledged that more extensive reform may be needed. A committee has started to review the PSVE system at national level, along with any practical alternative exam programs (especially CCSLC and CVQ). This review was supposed to have been finalized at the end of the 2016-2017 school year, but lack of time and capacity prevented this.<sup>37</sup> The status of review is unclear.



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### **Student absenteeism**

Education at Sint Maarten is compulsory between the ages of 4 and 18 and is regarded as the right of every child in terms of giving them the opportunity to live productive and successful lives. All schools need to have a clear policy in place for dealing with student absenteeism and to explain its consequences in the Student/Parent Handbook. Teachers are required to register the absence of their students. Most schools use a digital student tracking system to monitor attendance, while the public schools work with analog class registers.<sup>38</sup> The Inspectorate's truancy officers check on students' attendance and have the authority to take measures when students are in violation of the Compulsory Education Law.<sup>39</sup> Most primary schools report that student absenteeism is not a problem at their school.<sup>40</sup>

Vocational schools do complain about elevated levels of truant behavior, either in the form of students staying away from school altogether or skipping certain classes. In 2014-2015 and 2015-2016, the number of students who dropped out was 67 and 85 respectively, while in the subsequent two years the figures were 19 and 17. All these situations involved students in secondary education.<sup>41</sup>

### **Teacher absenteeism**

In 2016-2017, the overall percentage of teacher absenteeism was 7.1%, the same as in 2015-2016. It was also comparable to the level of overall absenteeism in 2014-2015 (7%) and slightly lower than the 7.6% recorded in 2013-2014. In 2017-2018, teacher absenteeism increased slightly to 7.6%.<sup>42</sup> A percentage of between 7 and 8% is quite high and causes problems for schools and school boards in terms of providing a coherent and consistent program of education.

Many schools do not have a written policy or Human Resources solution for how to curb teacher absenteeism. Most schools arrange a substitute when a teacher is absent. This is either the school head or another member of staff with a teaching degree. If managers and student care coordinators must stand in for absent teachers on a regular basis, their own work suffers. In some cases, classes are split up and divided over other groups. Teacher absenteeism has a greater impact on smaller schools than on larger schools with more personnel.<sup>43</sup>

### **Performance**

There is a growing concern about the low marks that students achieve in Dutch. In the academic year 2016-2017, 48% of students recorded in the FBE Exit Exams a grade of 40% or lower in Dutch, slightly down on the previous year when 51% scored below 40%. Even in primary schools where Dutch is the language of instruction, only 14% scored 60% or higher. Performance in English, on the other hand, is consistently good with an average score of 70% in 2016-2017.<sup>44</sup>

Waschke noted concerns about poor comprehension of Dutch back in 2015. He mentioned environmental factors such as low motivation, language background, lack of parental support and problems with learning materials as contributing to this problem. He also concluded that better teacher skills in terms of observation, differentiation, team teaching and enforcing practical learning strategies could lead to improvement.<sup>45</sup>

This analysis feeds into the ongoing discussion about the language of instruction in schools. This is particularly relevant for Sint Maarten, where English is the language of day-to-day administration, of mass communication, and the first language of most of the population. The government of Sint Maarten uses Dutch when communicating with the Dutch government and continues to produce official documents in the Dutch language.<sup>46</sup>



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## 2.2 Policy vision and ambitions related to education

*What ambitions have been formulated for education, where and by whom?*

The general objective of the Inspection Division, as laid down in the Organizational Act Education, Culture, Youth and Sports (AB 2010, No 6), states:

*"The efficient and effective supervision (control and inspection) bear on the implementation of laws and regulations of the policy in the field of education and the promotion of and to ensure that education on St. Maarten is carried out in accordance with internationally recognized standards and regulations."<sup>47</sup> In 2015 the Inspectorate added the following objective: "To make the Inspectorate a dynamic, effective and efficient organization that has the quality of education and customer service as its main priorities."*

The Inspectorate also formulated a vision:

*"To provide for all citizens and residents, quality strategic leadership in the process of preparing an individual to become an independent, thinking, productive, wholesome, useful and valued member of society through the provision of quality life-long education, training and cultural development, which will enable individuals to develop and achieve their full potential, so that they can make meaningful contributions to National Development of this country."*

The mission of the Inspectorate is to execute the vision as described above by providing and ensuring the implementation of effective and efficient systems and policies which promote and secure equal opportunities and access to quality education [...] for all the people of Sint Maarten.<sup>48</sup>

Neither the Inspectorate of Education nor the Department of Education can present a more recent overview of ambitions related to education, nor can they state how these ambitions are being safeguarded. Part of the ambitions and goals date from 2015-2016. MECYS devised a 2016-2020 strategic plan with the following priorities:

- I. Implement education legislation and policies, and finalize pending legislation e.g., ECD, tertiary education, policy on behavior, health, wellness and safety within the schools, extension of school hours and after-school programs.
- II. Improve the quality of primary and secondary schools, standardize, and subsidize the ECD curriculum and programs (0-3 years).
- III. Improve the quality and accessibility of education (provide more accessible special needs education, ensure continued upgrading of skills for teachers, managers, assistants, and school board members).
- IV. Improve the quality of educators (ensure teachers meet the required standards and qualifications to function optimally in the classroom).
- V. Establish tertiary and professional education as a vital pillar for Sint Maarten's economy (expand the University of Sint Maarten campus and ensure accreditation of the degree programs it offers).
- VI. Stimulate life-long learning (adopt the UNESCO Global Network of Learning Cities approach).
- VII. Reduce repetitions and decrease dropout rates (evaluate and execute the social formation program (*sociale vormingsplicht*) to reduce the number of dropouts and invest in extra guidance programs with homework and tutoring sessions).



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In addition, the ambitions for the education sector are detailed in the 2016–2026 Strategic Plan with the following priorities:

- I. Transform, monitor, and evaluate the education system so that students leaving the formal education sector possess the required knowledge for continued education, employment, or entrepreneurship
- II. Digitalize the education system in accordance with the changing technology in the world so that students can learn through big data, social media, and digital teaching methods (e-learning)
- III. Ensure that teachers and staff have the competences to teach and coach in accordance with innovative and digital teaching methods
- IV. Provide support to students to assist them in achieving their full potential and develop the required knowledge and competences
- V. Provide the required infrastructure and resources to support the educational process and students in their learning process.

These ambitions have been further worked out in a multi annual framework for the Ministry and is operationalized in annual plans of each of the respective departments considering the Governing Program.

Since the launch of this plan, MECYS has made steady progress despite the pursuit of these outcomes being interrupted by the September 2017 hurricanes.<sup>49</sup>

The ministry also stipulated the comprehensive Early Childhood Development (ECD) Policy Plan. Ensuring a great beginning through providing high-quality early childhood services for all Sint Maarten children from preconception to age six. This Policy Plan is linked with the Integrated Youth Policy and taken together they will enable Sint Maarten to support children and parents effectively from infancy to adulthood.

Not having requirements for enrolment and admission to the primary school, makes it easier to deprive children from equal access to primary education, which is against the Convention of the Rights of the Child.

## **2.3 Laws and regulations**

### *Legislation*

The legislative framework for education on Sint Maarten is based on the legislation of the former Netherlands Antilles. Each sector has its own rules and laws, known as National Ordinances (*Landsverordeningen*). The Minister is entrusted with the supervision of education, which is carried out on his behalf by the Inspectorate of Education.<sup>50</sup>

Compulsory education exists on Sint Maarten for children from 4 to 18 years of age.<sup>51</sup> The Inspectorate is permitted to grant an exemption from compulsory attendance at school.<sup>52</sup> It also seeks to reduce absenteeism by holding consultations with schools. Pursuant to Section 6 of the law governing compulsory education, the Inspection Division does not have the legal basis to supervise compulsory education on behalf of the Minister.

The National Ordinance for Primary Education (*Landsverordening funderend onderwijs*) applies to primary education. This legislation states that every school needs to have a school development plan (*schoolontwikkelingsplan*). This document, which can be compared with a school plan (*schoolplan*) in the Netherlands, is required to set out the vision of the school, in addition to covering policy areas such as Human Resources, curriculum and teaching. A new plan must be drawn up every



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four years. A school guide, renewed on an annual basis, is another compulsory document.<sup>53</sup>

There is also a National Ordinance for Secondary Education (*Landsverordening voortgezet onderwijs*), in which, for example, the duration and global content of vwo, havo and vsbo (in the Netherlands: vmbo) are described. Basic secondary education (*basisvorming*) covers a period of two years. The content of profiles and choice of subjects are also covered in this legislation.<sup>54</sup> Lessons should last 45 minutes, and a maximum class size has been set by law: for havo and vwo it is 30 students, for vsbo-basis 16 and for vsbo-kader 24.<sup>55</sup> There is also a *Landsverordening Secundair Beroeps Onderwijs (SBO)*.

The financial management of the education subsidy provided by MECYS lies with the competent authority, the respective school boards, and is subject to the conditions anchored in the relevant ministerial decrees. By law, the school boards are obliged to submit an audited financial report at the end of the fiscal year, as stipulated in the National Decree on Education Funding (*Landsbesluit bekostiging onderwijs*).<sup>56</sup>

Section 3 of the draft ordinance on the supervision of education (*LOT-Landsverordening Onderwijs Toezicht*) states that the Inspectorate is tasked with investigating several areas: the lawful acquisition of funding, the audit reports of the auditor appointed by the competent authority, the lawfulness of expenditure and the legality of the financial management. It is also tasked with the assessment and promotion of financial efficiency and the promotion of financial continuity of the educational establishments that receive funding.<sup>57</sup>

#### *Language and language of instruction*

The National Ordinance for Primary Education (*Landsverordening funderend onderwijs*) states that it is up to the competent authority (*bevoegd gezag*) to determine which language or languages of instruction are used at a school in primary education: the supervisory board can only choose between Dutch and English.<sup>58</sup> In secondary education, the language of instruction depends on the system of examination adopted by the school.<sup>59</sup>

#### *Examinations*

The country of Sint Maarten uses several types of examinations. Schools which have Dutch as their language of instruction use exams developed by the Netherlands-based *College voor Toetsen en Examens (CvTE)* for some subjects (e.g., the exact sciences, mathematics, English, French), and exams developed by the Curaçao-based *Expertisecentrum voor Toetsen en Examens (ETE)* for others (e.g., Dutch, geography, history).

Schools that have adopted English as their language of instruction use examinations developed by the Caribbean Examinations Council (CXC) for levels including CSEC and CAPE.<sup>60</sup> St. Dominic High School follows the Caribbean CXC education system and offers CSEC and IB.<sup>61</sup>

#### *School fees and parental contribution*

In funded primary education, parents are requested to pay a contribution of approximately 300 NAFL and in secondary education the amount of 850 NAFL. Families with more than one child at the same school pay a lower amount. Annual costs for participation in the IB program (International Baccalaureate) are around 2900 NAFL. The annual contribution charged by private schools differs per school.<sup>62</sup>



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Eight organizations received funding to facilitate after-school programs in 2017. After-school programs provide a safe learning environment after regular school hours for children aged 4 to 12, as well as offering homework guidance and supervision that would otherwise be limited at home. Eighty percent of these programs charged an attendance fee.<sup>63</sup>

## **2.4 Demographic characteristics of society and school population**

### *Social-economic factors*

The economy of Sint Maarten depends heavily on tourism. Due to its small size and lack of diversification, Sint Maarten is vulnerable to uncontrollable external factors and economic developments, such as hurricanes, the COVID-19 pandemic and worldwide economic recession. In the aftermath of the September 2017 hurricanes, for example, damages and losses amounted to an estimated 260% of GDP while the country's economy contracted by about 12.5% compared to its 2016 level during the 2017-2018 period. The World Bank expected growth to rebound in 2019 and to reach pre-hurricane levels by 2025.<sup>64</sup>

UNESCO data shows that in 2018 the GDP of Sint Maarten was 1,185 billion US dollars, a decline compared to previous years. The GDP declined by 5.8% in 2017 and by as much as 6.6% in 2018. In the period 2014-2016, the GDP showed an annual growth of between 0.5% and 1.6%. More recent data is not available.<sup>65</sup>

The percentage of youth aged 15 to 24 who are not in employment, education or training is exceedingly high: 31%.<sup>66</sup> Around 30% of the population is not insured for health care, among them undocumented families with children who are not eligible for public health insurance. Not being insured prevents access to health care. Obesity is also an increasing problem, also among children. Fruit and vegetables became 2.5 times more expensive between 2006 and 2016 and food in general doubled in price over the same period. Most of the country's food is imported from abroad, which increases the price of food for the people.<sup>67</sup>

### *Labor force*

The labor force participation rate in 2017 was 55%, slightly down from 2013 (58%) and 2011 (57%). According to the Labor Force Survey conducted in March 2017, the sectors employing the highest number of workers are retail (1,913), hotels and restaurants (1,806), and public administration and defense (1,548). Prior to the hurricanes of 2017, unemployment rates were in decline, dropping from 12.6% in 2009 to 6.2% in 2017. However, the hurricanes caused the unemployment rate to rise to 9.9% in 2018.<sup>68</sup>

In the field of education, 90% of primary school teachers were female in 2012. Figures from the same year show that almost 96% of the total number of teachers in primary education were qualified. In 2014 almost 58% of teachers in secondary education were female and approximately 93% of the total workforce was qualified. In tertiary education, exactly 50% of the teachers were female in 2015.<sup>69</sup> In 2016-2017, only 77% of teachers at tertiary level were qualified.<sup>70</sup>

### *Demographics*

UNESCO statistics provide some relevant data as regards demographic indicators. Life expectancy at birth was 78 years in 2016. According to figures from 2020, around 8000 children were aged 14 or younger, 6000 persons were aged between 15-24, 24,000 were aged between 25-64 and 4000 were 65 or older. For the years 2014-2016, annual population growth was around 3%. This growth rate fell to 1.5%



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in 2017, with further declines of 0.2% each year from 2018 to 2020. In 2020, Sint Maarten was home to a total population of approximately 43,000.<sup>71</sup>

The most recent data published on the UNESCO website give an impression of the demographics of Sint Maarten in relation to education. In September 2020, there were 3512 children registered in the age group for early childhood education, 3146 for primary education and 2453 for secondary education. The total population of school-age children in 2020 was 7312.<sup>72</sup> It should be added that the UNESCO web page does not include a lot of relevant data on education and demographics such as illiteracy rates, out-of-school children, government expenditure on education, and repetition rates.

World Bank data on Sint Maarten's education system are somewhat fragmented and outdated. However, some data can be found which provide more information on the education system. In the years 2012 and 2014, between 11% and 13.2% of female pupils at primary schools were over-aged, while only 0.5% were under-aged (in 2012). For male pupils, the percentage of over-aged pupils was higher: between 15.5% and 17.3%, while only 0.3% were under-aged in 2012.<sup>73</sup> This could indicate being kept back a year or postponed participation in education, occurring more frequently among boys than girls.

According to the UNICEF report (2020), the number of unregistered people residing on Sint Maarten could be as high as 20% of the official population. Sint Maarten has approximately 10,000 children under the age of 18, one fifth of whom are aged 5 or under. Some estimates indicate that the country is home to an additional 20% of children (i.e., on top of the 10,000 total) who are not properly registered in the Civil Registry.<sup>74</sup> With regard to background, language and faith, Sint Maarten fits the sub-regional trend of heterogeneity. This speaks to the need for cultural sensitivity in designing programs for children and their families.<sup>75</sup>

The Sint Maarten Public Expenditure Review shows that the country has one of the youngest populations in the Caribbean region, but also one of the most rapidly ageing. The size of the older age cohorts is increasing more rapidly than that of the working age cohorts, while net emigration among those in the 20-29 age range – mainly due to studying abroad – has led to a fall in the size of this cohort. These underlying demographic trends have potentially profound and long-term implications for social security, pension, and public health systems.<sup>76</sup>

### *Migration*

UNESCO provides data on inbound and outbound student numbers. In 2014 there were 77 inbound students<sup>77</sup>, while in 2015 (most recent data) 70 students came to Sint Maarten to study in tertiary education. In 2019, 154 registered students left the country to study abroad. In the years before 2019, on average approximately 120 students a year left the country.<sup>78</sup>

Sint Maarten is a country characterized by its multicultural identity. It has a high immigrant population and for many of its non-native inhabitants the country offers opportunities for employment in the tourism and construction sectors, or the prospect of obtaining a Dutch passport and the chance to emigrate to Europe or the United States more easily. The available information from the Civil Registry of Sint Maarten indicates that the country is currently home to over 104 legally settled nationalities.<sup>79</sup>

The country has a high percentage of undocumented migrants, just as the other Caribbean parts of the Kingdom. Undocumented residents are more difficult for the



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government to reach in terms of offering the information and support they may need to obtain health insurance, welfare benefits or to enroll their children in school. Undocumented children are vulnerable, as they do not have equal access to public services, despite government measures aimed at making such services, including education, available to undocumented children. Education is a universal right for every child.<sup>80</sup>

Hurricanes Irma and Maria had a major impact on immigration and emigration. In September 2017 and the months that followed, emigration was much higher than it had been in previous years. Immigration dropped to almost zero in September 2017, and although there was a slight rise during the last three months of that year, levels remained far lower than before.<sup>81</sup>

## **2.5 Structural and incidental context factors affecting the quality of education**

The State of Education report 2017-2018 refers to 'post Irma challenges' in education. There are still school buildings in need of repair and funding to repair such facilities remains an issue.<sup>82</sup> The total damage caused by Hurricane Irma was estimated at USD 1.38 billion. Government spending on education is relatively high and the Ministry of Education accounts for the highest percentage of total government expenditure: in 2017 spending on education, culture, youth, and sports made up almost 28% of the government total.<sup>83</sup> Education spending represents 93% of the MECYS budget and about two-thirds of this spending takes the form of subsidies to non-profit schools. The country's public spending on education as a share of GDP is 5.7%, significantly higher than the average OECS expenditure of 4.1%.<sup>84</sup>

The funded educational system consists of two languages of instruction. Dutch programs are generally modeled after the Dutch Education system and English programs are generally modelled after the CXC qualifications except for IB. This can make the system less efficient than it should be. The relatively high repetition rates also have an adverse effect on the system's efficiency. On Sint Maarten, early tracking at secondary level (around the age of 12) may come too soon for many children, especially in a system with more than one language of instruction.<sup>85</sup> Having more than one language of instruction can be beneficial to society and in terms of child development.

Since 10 October 2010, Sint Maarten has had ten consecutive governments<sup>86</sup> and this is clearly not conducive to stable and consistent policymaking. Scandals involving corruption among government ministers over the past decade have also distracted from proper policymaking.

The unexplained gaps in enrolment between primary and secondary education and the lack of clarity about the number of undocumented children attending school represent a considerable problem for Sint Maarten's education system and society. In the period 2012-2017, approximately 4700 children were registered in primary schools and around 3000 in secondary education. A similar problematic gap can be seen each year.<sup>87</sup> Structural and up-to-date data collection on educational indicators suffered a setback in the aftermath of the 2017 hurricanes and badly needs to be re-established.

In a related issue, some vital data is simply not available. For example, The State of Education report does not provide data on completion rates (based on longitudinal tracking of each cohort of students who start a particular cycle/program at the same



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time). Nor has Sint Maarten participated in any international assessments of learning, such as the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) or the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS). The fragmentation in secondary education (curricula, examinations) also makes it hard to compare and measure results. Furthermore, the FBE examination only tells us how Sint Maarten's sixth graders in different schools perform relative to each other. In other words, MECYS does not know how its students are performing relative to the system's learning goals.<sup>88</sup>

The UNICEF report states that 85% of adult interviewees mentioned violence as a major issue facing children, adolescents, and women on Sint Maarten, while 50% think child sexual abuse is a 'common' occurrence. Looking at the health of adolescents and issues specific to them, a 2013 survey on adolescent mental health reported alarmingly high rates of attempted suicide and suicidal thoughts: almost 30% of young people aged 13 to 19 had contemplated suicide and 13% had attempted suicide. In 2018, the Court of Guardianship received a total of 199 cases of neglect and 39 of abuse. Between 2015-2018, some improvements were made to strengthen the protection of children. In 2015, a protocol for reporting child abuse was approved and a Penal Code was drafted which contains a legal definition of child abuse. In 2018, an action plan and policy on preventing child abuse were drafted.<sup>89</sup> At present, it is unclear whether they have been approved by the government and parliament of Sint Maarten. The reopening of the Miss Lalie Centre in 2019, after a two-year closure caused by the hurricanes, means that juvenile offenders can once again receive support, a program of daytime activities and some sort of education.<sup>90</sup>

As in the rest of the world, the COVID-19 pandemic caused major problems on Sint Maarten from early 2020. As an economy that is largely dependent on tourism, Sint Maarten's GDP suffered considerably, and it is expected to take several years for the economy to recover. This economic decline can also have implications for government expenditure on education and an adverse effect on the quality of the education system.

More generally, Sint Maarten suffers from the effects of a brain drain and an ageing population. Highly educated youngsters leaving the island can only have a detrimental effect, while an ageing population will necessitate higher expenditure on health care, something that has become even more difficult to fund in a post-COVID-19 and post-Irma economy.

In October 2020, the Child Resilience and Protection Project was approved. This 5 million USD project was funded by the Sint Maarten Recovery, Reconstruction and Resilience Trust Fund, financed by the Government of the Netherlands, and managed by the World Bank. This project is aimed at the resilience of students and staff to the emotional and physical impacts of natural disasters, the child protection systems, and services to improve preparation and response to natural disasters. Two other main projects financed by the Trust Fund are the Emergency Recovery Project 1, which focuses on school repairs, and the Fostering Resilient Learning Project, which is under preparation with the project development objectives to (1) restore access to a safe education, learning and cultural environment; and (2) improve the resilience of Sint Maarten's education system. These projects were developed under the leadership of the Ministry of Education, Culture, Youth and Sport (MECYS) and were implemented with the support of UNICEF Netherlands.<sup>91</sup>



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## **PART II: Problem analysis and recommendations**

The previous section presented the purpose of the review and related research questions and provided a description of the Sint Maarten education system. From this starting point, the inspectorates went on to carry out desk research, visit several schools, observe lessons, and conduct on-site interviews with school principals, teachers, students, and other stakeholders. The findings of this research are described below in the form of substantiated recommendations, thematically grouped under the headings 'Data registration system', 'Improving education' and 'Strengthening the education system'.



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### 3 Data registration system

#### **Recommendation 1: Establish a reliable and sustainable data registration system**

*Effective policy requires a clear and complete view of the quality of the education system. For example, what are the figures for student admission, progress, and graduation for each type of education? How do test and examination results develop over time? Is there enough qualified staff? And how does the country compare to other countries? Currently, this view is not complete, and this limits policy makers, school boards and other stakeholders in their efforts to effectively manage quality promotion. We recommend that this problem be addressed by setting up a reliable and sustainable data registration system. To this end, we propose a list of key figures that should be incorporated to support the realization of this ambition.*

#### **Problem analysis**

##### *The significance of data*

Striving for better educational quality starts with establishing the current situation and determining the target situation. This requires a reliable and continuous source of data based on which comparisons can be made, for example over time or in relation to reference countries. As such, data is an essential tool for policy makers, school boards and other stakeholders. Data help not only in identifying deficits and setting priorities and goals, but also in measuring progress and evaluating chosen policies or interventions. Measurable and time-bound goals lend themselves to management, control, and adjustment when necessary.

##### *State of Education Reports*

Since 2012, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Youth and Sport (MECYS) has produced a State of Education Report (SER) on an annual basis. This report is addressed to the Minister of Education but is not openly accessible to all stakeholders in the field: "A decision on publicizing the report has yet to be made" (2017-2018 SER). Data presented in this report are collated from several documents collected from each school on a regular basis. These documents include (1) the monthly statements (*maandstaten*) that keep track of the number of school days each month (or reasons for closure), student and teacher absenteeism and registration of students, and (2) the quarterly statements (*toestandsformulieren*) that provide teacher information (e.g. on qualification) and the spread of students across classes and years (i.e. student numbers), as well as an overview of student progress (*doorstroomformulier*), years repeated and placement in secondary schools at the end of the academic year. In addition, these reports draw on exam documentation, annual school reports and qualitative information (e.g., obtained through meetings with relevant stakeholders, interviews, or surveys at schools, and observing lessons).

The latest SER reports on the 2017-2018 academic year include comparisons with 2016-2017 and 2015-2016. The data presented are broken down by type of education: primary education (PE), secondary education (SE), advanced secondary vocational education (ASVE). Specifically, the report provides an overview of school boards and schools, and communicates data on student count (PE, SE: per school board and per school; ASVE: per program), student absenteeism (PE, SE, ASVE: percentage per school), promotion and retention rates (PE: per school and broken down by gender; SE: per school and broken down by type of education; ASVE: not



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included), output results (PE: FBE Exit Exam results per subject per school board; SE: proportion of students per exam program and 5-year pass rate per school and per program; ASVE: output numbers of students), advised flow from primary education (per school board) to secondary education (per program per school), flow from primary to secondary education (percentage per program, per school board and in total), teacher count (PE, SE, ASVE: proportion per school board and gender ratio), age of teachers (PE, SE, ASVE: proportion per age range; PE: per school and per school board), nationality of teachers (PE, SE, ASVE) teacher qualification (PE: type of qualification per school board; SE, ASVE: proportion of teachers qualified to teach vs. requested dispensation per school), teacher turnover per school board (PE, SE, ASVE) and teacher absenteeism (PE: per school; SE: per school board; ASVE: per month).

Furthermore, there is a section on private schools that shows the number of teachers and the number of students broken down into level of education, gender, age group, number graduated, and number promoted. The number of requests made and granted regarding the homeschooling of children are also presented over a 5-year period. Finally, there are sections on inspections regarding the safety and health requirements that school buildings must meet, challenges in education due to Hurricane Irma in 2017 (status and damage repair), approved subsidy amounts per school board (over a 3-year period), and an overview of costs related to examination and school bus transportation. The report ends with a section on conclusions and recommendations.

#### *Study Financing Division Reports*

For 2013, 2014 and 2016, annual reports on study financing were published on an open access basis by the Study Financing Division to inform "the Ministry of Education, Culture, Youth and Sport Affairs and the general public". The report includes an overview of requests for study financing by destination country; the proportion of applicants attending high school/vocational/higher education and not in education (working); the proportion of positive and negative recommendations given by the study finance committee, including the main reasons for negative recommendations; the proportion of scholarships granted and denied as decided by the minister per destination country and per degree type (including a 7-year overview of percentages of approved requests); the number of decisions appealed by applicants; an overview of active (former) recipients per country, by year started, per area of study major, academic performance of (former) recipients; the number of warning letters issued due to students for not meeting academic performance requirements; the number of dropouts; the number of graduates; the number of requests for study change and the number of unauthorized study changes; the number of fraud cases; and an overview of all costs involved.

#### *Data analysis by the Division of Examinations (MECYS)*

The Division of Examinations is primarily charged with developing, determining, and distributing valid tests and exams. Another of its core tasks is researching and assessing specified tests, exams, and instruments of quality control. For example, the FBE Exit Exam results are published on an open access basis, presented per class, per school, per board and on a national level, including comparisons with previous years. Furthermore, item analyses are performed on these data, aimed at determining whether the level of questions is appropriate and whether items discriminate adequately between high and low performing students. If required, exams are adjusted accordingly. Additional analyses focus on matters such as the relation between exam duration and level of performance, and the relation between FBE Exit Exam results and subsequent education success are students allocated adequately, are they promoted to the next grade, and do they complete their



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studies within the prescribed duration (i.e., without an additional year). Regarding secondary education, central exam and school exam data are collected and communicated, for example to the Inspectorate of Education.

#### *Current situation*

The above analysis shows that while some relevant information is documented, very little is made accessible to the public. Notably, there is often a time lag of several school years in the data made publicly available, which limits stakeholders in their opportunities to benefit from its publication. Ostensibly undocumented information relates for the most part to allocation (admission, progress, and graduation of pupils/students) and leaves key questions unanswered. For example, what proportion of students entering a general vocational program or preparatory secondary vocational education (PSVE) progress to advanced secondary vocational education (ASVE)? What proportion drop out, enter the work force or transfer from PSVE to havo? What proportion of students entering havo, vwo, or CSEC end up progressing to higher professional education or university? What proportion of students entering higher professional education come from ASVE or havo or vwo, for example? The lack of such data impedes a clear analysis of school careers, study success and matching problems. It further impedes an analysis of how the system is performing, both relative to its own standards and relative to other countries, as highlighted in the Sint Maarten Public Expenditure Review.<sup>92</sup> Data on qualification (e.g., weighted average exam results) and socialization (e.g., social competence results) are also lacking at present. Furthermore, although the 2017-2018 State of Education Report does include financial data on approved school subsidies and some expenses (e.g., exam costs), it does recognize that a thorough understanding of the impact of educational spending is missing: "It continues to be a challenge to get the school boards to give proper accountability of the subsidy received." (p. 100) 1. This information gap was recognized in the Sint Maarten Public Expenditure Review<sup>93</sup> and the Situation Analysis on Children and Adolescents on Sint Maarten, conducted by UNICEF in 2020.<sup>94</sup>

#### **Recommendation**

Several stakeholders expressed their need for data and a central registration system (e.g., schools indicating a need for insight into the continued success of their students). Of particular importance in this regard are the current efforts being made by the Sint Maarten government. As part of a program to build back the country following the devastation caused by Hurricane Irma (2017), the National Recovery and Resilience Bureau has started (through the Fostering Resilient Learning Project) to invest in educational needs. One of the pillars of this project is an initiative to design and build a Ministry Management Information System. The stated aim of this data registration system is ultimately to "strengthen MECYS's management capacities"<sup>2</sup>.

In line with this initiative, the working group emphasizes the importance of establishing a reliable and sustainable data registration system for key figures. We further emphasize the need to make these data openly accessible to all relevant stakeholders (e.g., through open access publishing). Data only becomes meaningful when stakeholders can take note of it. Part III and Appendix B of this interim report elaborate on the type of data that needs to be incorporated to support the realization of this ambition.

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1 According to the Department of Education, as per 2021, 7 of 9 subsidized entities provided audited financial reports to the Ministry of ECYS.

2 [Fostering Resilient Learning – National Recovery Program Bureau \(nrpbxsm.org\)](https://nrpbxsm.org)



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## 4 Improving education

This chapter contains a series of recommendations concerning the improvement of education, subdivided into improving (i) the educational process, (ii) the transition between educational levels and (iii) the fit between education and the labor market. The recommendations are tentative and contain suggestions for further research. Part III of this Interim Report therefore elaborates on how to translate some of these recommendations into implementation agendas, including suggestions for further explorative research in phase 2.

### **Recommendation 2: Improve the educational process**

*Good education is characterized by effective lessons in which students are enabled to use their capacities optimally in a safe learning environment. This starts with organizing the 'basic' conditions such as adequate school buildings and accurate methods. This further requires a shared vision of effective pedagogical-didactical practices appropriate to the target group(s), effective and sustainable implementation of improvement measures, structural attention to competence development of teachers and instructors, and explicit educational leadership. In the context of our limited observations, it was noticeable that the educational process at several schools on Sint Maarten falls short in a number of these areas. The working group considers the development of a good system of quality assurance and the promotion of a good quality culture to be of great importance.*

### **Problem analysis**

In the section below, we tentatively address a range of factors directly associated with the quality of the educational process, related to both primary and secondary education. Note that basic conditions such as housing and the quality of teachers and materials are given equal prominence. They are discussed in more detail under the recommendations for strengthening the education system.

#### *1. A safe learning environment*

The lack of basic resources in the support for students with extra educational needs (as further elaborated under Recommendation 3) can be felt in the climate at some schools. When students with social problems receive insufficient support, this can have consequences for the safe learning environment at a school. Many primary schools organize breakfast for their pupils to ensure a good start to the day. Also, many schools find themselves dealing with issues relating to poverty or the socio-emotional background of students and pupils on an ongoing basis. For 1 or 2 schools that we visited at the lowest level - AGO(LOE) of Sint Maarten Vocational Training School, drug and gang-related problems mean the school has insufficient means to ensure security and offer students appropriate support and care. Some schools' high fences and camera surveillance to ensure safety. Occasionally, social problems are therefore having a serious impact on the school climate. Teachers are committed to creating a calm and safe environment, and this sometimes comes at the expense of their ability to apply effective teaching strategies and implement educational innovations.

#### *2. The educational process in the classroom*

During the limited number of observations, it carried out, the working group found large differences in the quality of the lessons within and between schools. We certainly saw examples of good teaching practices, but in some cases, lessons were insufficiently effective. In some lessons, we observed students learning to work together, learning an inquiry-based attitude, and learning to present and collaborate



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in projects. However, in most schools that we visited the instruction given was clear but not always tailored to the students' needs, knowledge, and skills. We sometimes observed teachers presenting information without truly conveying their message to their students. In those cases, there was little functional interaction between teacher and student to increase motivation levels. Teachers sometimes applied 'whole-class teaching' without checking whether all the students understood the information given and without sufficiently investigating the problems that students were experiencing.

Some teachers said they were aware that some students (e.g., due to behavioral or language problems) had not fully understood their explanation but did not always see an opportunity to do something about it. They sometimes found the different levels among the students in a class too large and the needs of students too specific, while lacking the material that might meet the students' needs. Some are of the opinion that even this would not be of much help. These schools lack an overall approach (and sufficient personnel) to identify and tackle learning disadvantages. It should be noted that this observation is not exemplary for all school levels and all school types necessarily.

### *3. A quality assurance system*

A quality assurance system that gives the school management insights into the quality of the educational process and a concerted effort to use such insights to implement and evaluate improvement measures were rarely observed. Some school managers gained an insight into the quality of lessons through class visits, through team discussions about innovations or problems, by discussing the plans for the coming year or by using incidents – sometimes with input from the care team – as the basis for a broader discussion about the pedagogical approach. Within the classroom, an adequate system for teachers to monitor the cognitive development and socio-emotional well-being of their students and to attune teaching to the needs of these students was often lacking. Outside the classroom, we did not observe a standard cycle of appraisal interviews and performance reviews geared towards discussing the development of teachers and giving them the opportunity to formulate development objectives in line with the school's ambitions.

### *4. Quality culture*

A culture in which teachers work to improve education based on a shared idea of educational quality was only partially developed at some of the schools we visited. There was little focus on (or support for) such a result-oriented approach or educational leadership. A plan for the professionalization of teachers was often lacking. Even though little structural attention was paid to the development of teachers and their training opportunities, the dedication, effort, and motivation we observed among teachers to educate their students under these circumstances was impressive. For example, some teachers made their own teaching materials or purchased new educational materials out of their own pockets if official channels took too long, illustrating their desire to give their students high quality material.

### *5. Scope and budget for capacity building and increasing expertise*

Schools deal with students who have various extra educational needs and socio-economic backgrounds. To effectively cater for the needs of the students, in-service training of teachers is needed and this in turn requires sufficient resources. The working group encountered some good practices in this regard. For instance, one school had created a separate class with a specially trained teacher who accommodated and taught students of different ages who were experiencing learning or behavioral difficulties in the regular classes. Because it was only a small class, the teacher was able to give each student the individual attention they



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needed. Some students improved so much because of this method that they were able to stream back into their regular class at a higher level.

### **Sub-recommendations**

Translating the above observations into practical recommendations requires further research to be executed in phase 2 of the current study. In Part III of this interim report, we set out an approach to conducting this further research. In the short term, the working group recommends providing direct support to teachers, for example by appointing additional remedial teachers. This will quickly produce several beneficial effects. First, it will enable schools to provide appropriate assistance to pupils with learning disabilities or behavioral disorders, giving them a better chance to use their talents and participate in their current school, with better prospects of moving on to a suitable level of further education. Second, it reduces the flow of pupils to schools for special education, which are usually under-resourced in any case. Third, it enables teachers to focus on other educational tasks. For the long term, the working group recommends identifying and solving possible inefficiencies in the education system. For instance, inefficiencies related to staffing at schools and professional development of personnel (see also recommendation 10, Analyze inefficiencies in the education system).

### **Recommendation 3: Provide a continuous learning path**

*Effective education in which students are challenged to develop their talents requires a smooth transition between several types of education. The transfer between the schools on Sint Maarten needs extra attention. Schools could benefit from starting a structural dialogue about the match between what is being learned at one school and what students need to successfully progress to the next school. At the same time, schools should monitor the success of their students in further education or in the labor market. This type of information can be used to prepare students for their next step in education or working life and can result in schools receiving valuable feedback as to its success in preparing students for the work force.*

### **Problem analysis and sub-recommendations**

At several points in the learning path of a child and student, we have identified several factors that are a threat to continuity. We discuss some of these factors below and formulate recommendations to provide a continuous learning path.

#### *1. Pupils and students with special educational needs do not always get the support they need*

When pupils have serious special educational needs, schools on Sint Maarten can consult the MECYS Student Support Services Division (SSSD) for psychological testing. Sometimes the SSSD remarks broader social problems and tries – if necessary – to help the family of the pupil to organize support from relevant social or medical services. The SSSD can advise schoolteachers on how to help the pupil. In some cases, the school can use the test of the SSSD to advise the pupil continuing education at a school for special education. Furthermore, the SSSD provides support and offers training for teachers. A lot of the schools the research team spoke with were positive about the quality of the services of SSSD, but they also found that SSSD often could not help them as fast and as thoroughly as desired. Their analysis was that the SSSD is overloaded and hence cannot guarantee advice and assistance for each child in the short term. In schools, the working group encountered some good practices, for example care teams that are readily accessible to students and advise teachers. However, according to most schools, the existing in-house care teams are too small to accommodate all pupils who need help. There is often a lack of both knowledge and professionals to support teachers and pupils. As a result, schools are less inclusive than what is desirable.



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The Prins Willem Alexander School (PWAS) is the only school on Sint Maarten for special (primary) education, predominantly catering for pupils with wide-ranging learning problems. Due to the very diverse student population, teachers at PWAS unfortunately fail to provide children with all the help they need. It is therefore advisable to find ways to provide greater differentiation in education, to distinguish between children with varying degrees and types of learning difficulties.

Our sub-recommendation is to strengthen the structure for pupils and students with special educational needs. This includes addressing the urgent need for secondary education for students with special needs, once they complete PWAS, as the current solution of only placing these students in the St. Maarten Vocational Training school could be improved.

## *2. Mismatch between native and language of instruction in schools*

**Increase in share of students with a foreign language.** In education on Sint Maarten, English is the dominant language of instruction. This corresponds with the native language of most pupils and proficiency in English is usually sufficient to benefit from education. However, some schools mentioned that before the pandemic, the number of English-as-a-second language (ESL) students in their schools was increasing. This group includes undocumented refugees and pupils, many of whom speak little to no English.

When these undocumented pupils enter primary education, they typically attend a public school, as subsidized schools require legal residency documents and a detailed registration form from the Civil Registry before a pupil can be admitted. There are also fewer places available at subsidized schools, while public schools often have space. Due to the legal requirements of compulsory education, public schools are not permitted to deny entry to any child if there is space. In addition, public schools do not charge a parental contribution and do not require entrance tests.

Teachers at these schools feel insufficiently equipped to meet the educational needs of pupils who are not proficient in English. As a result, these pupils benefit too little from education. Not understanding the language of instruction can lead to educational deficiencies in a wide range of subjects and to problems with social interaction. Most schools do not have a language policy or specific approach for dealing with these pupils. Teachers in various schools use different approaches: translating instructions themselves, having pupils solve problems together in another language, or just speaking English in the hope that the pupil will gradually pick up the language and understand at least some of what is being taught. When these pupils move on to secondary education, the language problem shifts from the primary school to the secondary school. These pupils are often placed in an inappropriate stream of secondary education based on their language barrier rather than their academic capabilities.

**Mismatch between native language and Dutch-language education.** Although most schools on Sint Maarten have English as the language of instruction, there are some schools where the language of instruction is Dutch. This can give rise to another mismatch between native language and language of instruction in schools. According to these schools, they have a high enrollment of students who do not speak Dutch at home but who opt for a Dutch education because the school has a good reputation, because their parents want to prepare them for further education in the Netherlands, or simply because the child has a Dutch passport. The influx of students whose mother tongue is not Dutch, however, can cause specific problems.



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Students may not understand enough of the instruction in Dutch and fall behind in their learning, while parents may be unable to help their children with schoolwork because they do not speak Dutch themselves. Due to the language barrier, parents may also feel less of a connection with the school in general.

**Schools' own choice for Dutch as the language of instruction.** Apart from the variety of reasons relating to enrollment, schools may have various reasons for using Dutch as their language of instruction. Schools often mentioned a lack of an adequate language policy and for some a lack of space and classrooms means that they cannot offer students the chance to switch back to the English track if their command of Dutch turns out to be insufficient. Both the St Maarten Public Expenditure Review<sup>95</sup> and the UNICEF Situation Analysis St Maarten 2020<sup>96</sup> noted that the co-existence of two languages of instruction on Sint Maarten leads to several matching problems. According to these reports, not all teachers have adequate (Dutch) language skills and many students in secondary education – although exact numbers are lacking – have difficulties coping in the Dutch language.<sup>97, 98</sup>

Our sub-recommendation considers the variation in native languages of pupils and students when developing school language policies, by at least taking the following points into consideration:

- a) Meet the needs of the increasing number of students being taught in a language that is not their mother tongue. To realize equal opportunities and a strong start for these students, we recommend developing an appropriate structure for those who have not yet mastered the English language, for example in the form of a bridging year for non-natives. Furthermore, we recommend that all schools should have a policy for dealing with students with a foreign native language.
- b) Improve the process for parents choosing either the Dutch or English stream for their child by providing better information about the consequences and requirements.
- c) Create commitment and the necessary facilities when demanding that schools provide Dutch streams as part of a national language policy. This deserves extra attention when a Dutch stream becomes mandatory for certain schools. For the stream to be successful, the facilities (classroom and class size) should be able to accommodate students who need to change streams during the year.

### *3. The vocational track often lacks vocational orientation and adequate allocation of students*

**Vocational value and allocation of students.** Many students that attend VSBO and later SBO are motivated by vocational ambitions. However, some students enter vocational training due to a lack of other options. They often cannot enroll elsewhere because they do not meet the academic requirements or have specific educational needs or learning disadvantages. As pointed out in the Situation Analysis conducted by UNICEF in 2020<sup>99</sup> there is a lack of alternatives for these students, resulting in a diverse and low-motivated student population, and contributing to unfavorable attitudes (of parents) towards vocational education. The working group was able to verify this image with the SMVTS and intends to verify this image more broadly – i.e., with other schools providing (V)SBO – towards the final report.

Given that interests and needs of children at VSBO and SBO varies, it proves challenging to make the curriculum sufficiently oriented towards up-to-date vocational skills. The working group encountered that some schools must improvise because of the lack of facilities to simulate the professional environment in its practical classrooms. Sometimes the number of available internships does not match



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the number of students. As a result, students who are motivated to work in professional practice do not get the most out of their education.

Our sub-recommendation is to improve the vocational track by:

- a) Emphasizing vocational value: This can be done by putting an educational emphasis on learning a trade as something a student should be proud of. If practical subjects are less broad and more craft-based, this may increase motivation. A more motivated student population also increases the attractiveness of vocational education for potential students.
- b) Emphasize and develop the elements in the curriculum that meet current labor market requirements: This can be done in terms of content, internships, and by simulating the professional environment.

#### *4. Systematic tracking of alumni and a structural dialogue between schools about what is learned at one school and what is necessary to progress to the next school are lacking.*

At present, educational institutions do not systematically keep track of their alumni's progress in further education or whether they have found suitable employment, directly after graduation or after a few more years. Systematically monitoring alumni enables institutions to adjust the curriculum to facilitate the transition to further education. What educational skills are needed to ensure a good start at the next level and how are these incorporated in the curriculum of the supplying school? A structural dialogue between schools about these matters can provide valuable information about the current curriculum.

Our sub-recommendation is therefore to systematically track students and monitor alumni. This gives the opportunity to adapt the curriculum to facilitate the transition to further education.

#### *5. Students are not well prepared for tertiary education*

Students in Sint Maarten who want to follow a program in higher education can go to the University of St Martin or The American University of the Caribbean School of Medicine, a private institution of higher education. Instead of higher education at Sint Maarten, sometimes students choose to continue their educational career abroad, for example in Aruba, the United States or in Europe. In discussions with institutions, it was indicated that some students go abroad to broaden their horizons, while others choose to do so due to a lack of choice on the island itself. The scale of Sint Maarten limits a wide range of study programs.

**Preparation** We asked secondary schools and the University of St Martin how successful student in higher education are. The University of St Martin was reasonably satisfied with the success rates of their students. However, they also indicated that the match between secondary and higher education is open for improvement, amongst other things with respect to mastery of the Dutch language and 21st-century skills. Additionally, schools in Sint Maarten generally do not systematically track the success of their students abroad. Also, the recently published research by ResearchNed on the success of Caribbean students in the Netherlands, only includes a limited number of students and institutions from St. Maarten and European Netherlands. Nevertheless, we saw some of the problems identified in this research reflected during our visit to Sint Maarten. For example, we discussed the study attitude of Caribbean students with schools and students in Sint Maarten. Apart from some positive exceptions, in several schools an appropriate study attitude for higher education receives limited attention. In many schools we visited, a classroom approach is common, with relatively little practice in working independently, in learning to plan and organize, and in digital skills. Students



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confirmed that such aspects were given little attention in education, sometimes also due to a lack of digital resources. The University of St Martin also indicated that it needs to pay a lot of attention to the study attitude of beginning students, as this is not sufficiently developed in secondary education. The university also mentioned that the knowledge of the Dutch language often leads to problems in study programs at their institution. According to the university, the Dutch language that students receive in secondary education does not connect well with contemporary language use. Outdated teaching materials in secondary education may be the cause of this.

**Information and motivation.** Many students we spoke to indicated that friends and family were the main source of information when it came to choosing a higher education program. On top of that, their motivation to study outside Sint Maarten had less to do with the choice for a specific study program and more to do with a desire to leave the island and seek their future elsewhere. Any off-island study program therefore appeared to be the right vehicle for achieving this goal, irrespective of content. Students who pursue higher education on Sint Maarten itself are sometimes highly motivated but sometimes make their choice on financial grounds; a study abroad is more expensive than in Sint Maarten. Students who go to European Netherlands can get a scholarship or loan, to study in the United States you must pay for the whole course yourself.

Our sub-recommendation is to better prepare students for tertiary education. For the short term, we see some immediate opportunities to start improving preparation so that future cohorts will have better tertiary education prospects. We therefore recommend starting with:

- a) An increased focus by secondary schools and NIPA on personal development, 21st century skills (such as technology and social skills), orientation and preparation for higher education. These competencies should be integrated into their curriculum.

The development of an active alumni policy to ensure that students' experiences and tips are shared in previous education. An active alumni policy also provides data for improving information and making potential curriculum adjustments.



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#### **Recommendation 4: Enhance the connection between education and the labor market**

*Effective education also requires a good match between the curriculum and the labor market. A structural dialogue between the labor market, the Ministry of Labor, the Ministry of Education, and education institutions (including vocational training) is necessary to ensure effective alignment between the education sector and the labor market. To make this future proof, a long-term vision is needed.*

##### **Problem analysis**

The relationship between the education sector (including teacher training) and the labor market is often limited and incoherent. Except for internship contracts, it is frequently characterized by a lack of structural consultation between vocational education and the business community regarding final attainment levels and course curricula. Topics that could be put on the agenda for such a consultation include the availability of traineeships, the guidance of trainees, and the alignment between final attainment levels and developments in the professional field.

**Qualitative match.** The match between education and the labor market on Sint Maarten is far from ideal at present. The working group was given several examples of shortcomings in professional preparation. For instance, the Department of Tourism and two hotels indicated that in many cases both preparatory and advanced institutions of secondary vocational education currently do not cater for the needs of the tourism sector. More specifically, they stressed that there is no curriculum that prepares students for jobs at higher levels (e.g., digital marketing skills) or that provides hospitality training. This problem is said to be compounded by a shortage of additional in-house training. Similarly, students graduating from the University of Sint Maarten also appear to lack practical professional experience. As a second example, it was mentioned during several interviews that there are not enough trainee positions in the care sector. Furthermore, several schools mentioned the lack of communication between schools and teacher training about the quality of new teachers.

**Quantitative match.** The quantitative match between education and the labor market also requires attention. High schools must recruit staff from abroad because there are not enough trained or available professionals in the country. At the same time, interviewees mentioned that the opportunities for young people to study on Sint Maarten are limited. At the time of writing, there is no independent body on Sint Maarten that keeps track of developments in the labor market and makes forecasts for the benefit of education. However, a *Raad Onderwijs Arbeidsmarkt* (ROA) is in its final stages of establishment and there are good examples such as medical professions being consistently featured on the priority list of studies and students being awarded Study Financing to pursue such career. As already stated in the PER, vocational programs could improve tracking labor market demands on a structural basis or seeking advice from employers' organizations.<sup>100</sup>

##### **Sub-recommendations**

In online meetings with Economic Affairs, the Labor Department, and the Department of Education, the working group discussed the needs of the labor market and how these needs are met by the education sector. Based on our observations and these meetings, we recognized the same needs with respect to the relation between the Sint Maarten labor market and education as there is in Aruba. We therefore formulated the same sub-recommendations to improve the relationship between education and the labor market as we did for Aruba. We also



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suggest that Sint Maarten and Aruba exchange experiences and successes in implementing the recommendations.

- a) Improve the alignment between (developments in) the labor market and programs in tertiary education;
- b) Give special attention to teacher training;
- c) Establish a system in which companies are recognized as training companies according to clear criteria, and in which professional practical supervisors are trained and certified; increase the number of trainee positions;
- d) Organize permanent consultation for each sector between representatives from the professional field and the vocational education institutions.



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## 5 Strengthening the education system

The recommendations mentioned above relate to improving the performance of the schools on Sint Maarten on the three perspectives relevant to education: qualification, allocation, and socialization. In addition, it is essential that the conditions under which education can best thrive should be optimized. This concerns both the legal context – is it clear what requirements schools are required to meet and has the government established proper rules for the education system? – and matters related to governance within the education system and the relevant financial and budgetary aspects.

### **Recommendation 5: Develop a mature governance structure**

*Good education requires sound educational institutions where teachers, school managers and school boards work together effectively. Good governance includes internal and external supervision, accountability, and participation. Currently, there are shortcomings in the governance structure of the education system on Sint Maarten. For instance, public schools do not have a fully independent school board and some school boards lack an independent and established supervisory board. We therefore recommend developing a mature governance structure in which school boards have sufficient control, in which supervisory boards support school boards and correct them where necessary, and in which employee and student participation has a full-fledged position.*

### **Problem analysis**

The education system on Sint Maarten includes government-owned public schools, government-subsidized schools, and private schools. All public schools and subsidized schools have a legally recognized competent authority.

In accordance with the National Ordinances<sup>101</sup>, subsidized schools are under the management of a foundation, association, or institution whose purpose is to provide education without making a profit. The competent authority of the subsidized school is the school board. The organization of subsidized schools includes one or more directors and a form of internal supervision. The requirements for this supervision are very limited.

At present, the operational side of public education is organized as an executing agency known as the Division Public Education. It forms part of MECYS and has no specific legal form. The competent authority regarding public education is the Minister of Education. The supervisory task is therefore formally reserved for parliament. In 2017, the government decided to start drafting an action plan to transfer the organization of public education into a public body. The process is still ongoing and a date for completing the process has yet to be set.<sup>102</sup>

### *Small-scale society*

The small-scale society has multiple effects on the delivery of education in Sint Maarten. One relevant effect regarding the governance is the way the small-scale society affects the dynamics between educational professionals. Due to the small scale of the country, people who work together in a formal and professional context are likely to know each other informally from social contexts unrelated to work. Family ties and professional roles are very much interwoven. Intentionally or unintentionally, this can lead to conflicts of personal and professional interests. The advantages of a small-scale context (e.g., short lines of communication) can also be



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a disadvantage in terms of fulfilling an independent role on a purely professional basis. The knowledge that a decision may affect individuals in your own network of friends or relations may consciously or unconsciously delay or influence the nature of the decision, perhaps creating the impression of bias if other interests are considered.

#### *Public education*

As indicated above, the operational side of public education is currently organized as an executive agency within MECYS. The national decree on the subdivision of MECYS states that it is the Ministry's task to *act on behalf of the government as a school board, aimed at establishing and maintaining a quantitatively and qualitatively optimal system of public education*.<sup>103</sup> The executing agency within the Ministry is the Division Public Education. The national decree on the subdivision of MECYS (Section 18a) lists the specific tasks of the Division:

- Planning and management of public education;
- Central coordination of student registration and administration;
- Implementing personnel policy and personnel management in public education;
- Central provision and management of conditional resources in public education;
- Supporting the school managers of publicly funded schools;
- Registration and reporting of key data on public education.

In some areas, the responsibilities of the school manager are at odds with the responsibilities of the Division Public Education. Furthermore, because the Minister of Education is the competent authority for public education, the minister currently fulfils a double role: as the 'school board' for public education and as the person responsible for the quality and funding of education. These issues have also been noted by SOAB in its report on the financial, organizational,

and operational management of public education.<sup>104</sup>

As a result, there is a risk that the Minister could inappropriately use discretionary powers to favor public education. This risk is increased by the fact that the minister's discretionary powers are subject to relatively few restrictions. It is therefore undesirable that political and managerial responsibilities are carried out by the same person. Another risk is that public schools lack a powerful school board that can function as an independent counterweight to the government, motivated solely by the need to secure and strengthen the continuity and vital functions of public education on Sint Maarten. Because the Division Public Education is a public service, it is not required to publish a separate annual report to account for its use of funds for the purpose of education.

In the past, the government has tried to corporatize public education but failed to gain sufficient political support for this strategy. One objection raised concerned the legal position of education personnel.

#### *Responsibility and control*

It is important that school managers and school boards have the freedom to decide for themselves how they implement 'what' the government expects of them. If the 'school board' of the public schools takes the form of a public service that falls directly under the authority of the minister, the school managers and the school board can only exercise limited responsibility and control. Several public schools indicated that they sometimes must wait a very long time for even simple issues to



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be addressed. Several school managers also indicated that they had little to no influence on the hiring of new teachers: they are sometimes invited to sit in on interviews with candidates but have no real say in the final decision.

Within subsidized schools, it is also important that school managers and school boards have proper responsibilities and control. The school board should determine who has the authority to make spending decisions, such as determining the kind of expenditure that comes under the remit of the school manager. This can be formalized in a management statute.

Currently, the prioritization of expenditure is not always appropriate and effective. The working group identified several situations where school management was unable to make spending decisions, resulting in inefficiencies. For example, in one case there was no budget for workbooks, but funds were available for a smartboard, even though teachers did not have the necessary expertise to use it. The purchase of expensive learning materials makes little sense if they cannot be put to good use due to insufficient classroom space.

#### *Independent internal supervision*

Internal supervision is not regulated by law. No specific legislation or regulations have been established regarding the organization of internal supervision for school boards. The National Ordinances<sup>105</sup> state that a school board must ensure proper management but do not regulate what constitutes proper management or which conditions must be met. This means that some school boards have a functioning supervisory board, while others have no regulated form of internal supervision or supervision which is insufficiently effective or insufficiently independent.

In addition to internal supervision, there are no formalized participation councils at educational institutions. Parental involvement is present when it comes to issues that directly affect the parents' own child, such as grades and disputes, but not regarding school policies. There is no law which states that teachers, parents, and students should be represented in determining school policies.

#### **Sub-recommendations**

- Separate the administrative responsibilities of the Minister from the political responsibilities. Create a clear legal framework for any specific intervention by the Minister in the form of a clearly formulated discretionary power.
- Transfer the organization of public education to a public body that can function as an independent counterweight to the government and that has an independent supervisory board. A public body will be able to focus more on educational processes and less on governmental processes. An action plan to this effect has already been drafted by the government but has met with resistance, partly due to its implications for the legal position of education personnel. In the implementation agenda for the system recommendations proposed in Part III, we will include talks with trade unions to explore ways of removing these obstacles.
- Set up a system which regulates critical, independent, and expert supervision of the day-to-day management of schools by both an internal and external supervisor and provide the necessary legal guarantees.
- Formalize the competencies of both the independent (internal) supervisor and the school board, enforcing principles of good governance/supervision. Design a Governance Code for Education that sets out what may be expected of an adequately functioning school board.
- Formalize the establishment of a joint participation council in which teachers, parents and students are represented and give it legal status.



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## **Recommendation 6: Ensure up-to-date and adequate legislation**

*It is important to have adequate laws and regulations on education, as they provide proper guidelines and rules for the education system. The education system on Sint Maarten is embedded in various National Ordinances and corresponding National Decrees. At present, the laws and regulations governing education are sometimes lacking or outdated. The same applies to regulations that enable the Inspectorate of Education on Sint Maarten to carry out supervision, which is one of the prerequisites for a systematic and comprehensive analysis of the educational process.*

### **Problem analysis**

The basis for education on Sint Maarten is enshrined in various education laws and regulations. On Sint Maarten a law is known as a National Ordinance (*landsverordening*) and contains binding regulations. National Decrees (*landsbesluiten*) encompass general measures and ministerial regulations and contain binding regulations. Legislation on education is currently laid down in the following National Ordinances and National Decrees:

- Landsverordening funderend onderwijs (AB 2013, GT no. 796)
- Landsverordening basisonderwijs (AB 2013, GT no. 735)
- Landsverordening voortgezet onderwijs (AB 2013, GT no. 794)
- Landsverordening secundair beroepsonderwijs en educatie (AB 2013, GT no. 795)
- Leerplichtlandsverordening (AB 2013, GT no. 590)
- Bezoldigingslandsbesluit onderwijs (AB 2016, GT no. 19)
- Landsbesluit bekostiging onderwijs (AB 2019, GT no. 20)

Some aspects of the above legislation are outdated. Most of these laws were already in place before the statutory reforms of 2010 and have barely been amended since. Legislation needs to reflect the changing needs of students and society over time. In addition to the general problem of outdated legislation, there are three further points we would like to emphasize.

The first point relates to higher education legislation. Sint Maarten has one government-subsidized higher education institution: the University of St. Martin. At present, however, the country has no specific legislation for higher education. Legislation relating to higher education is included in the National Ordinance on Secondary Education. A draft National Ordinance on Higher Education is being prepared but has yet to be finalized and implemented.

The second point relates to the legal position of the Inspectorate of Education. On Sint Maarten, there is currently only a draft version of the National Ordinance on Educational Supervision. Legislation on educational supervision is an important condition for the Inspectorate of Education to carry out its core tasks.

Third, many secondary school students on Sint Maarten are in the English secondary education system, namely sitting the CXC examinations, yet there is no up-to-date law regulating this.

### **Recommendations**

An important first recommendation is to evaluate the current laws and regulations governing education and to adapt them to the requirements of the present time. Attention must be paid to creating sufficient guarantees and independence for all parties involved (for instance, school boards and supervisory boards, the Inspectorate of Education, and the minister).



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In addition, it is necessary to strengthen the legal framework for higher education. As there is already a draft in progress, we recommend finalizing the development and implementation of a law specifically for higher education.

Finally, it is important that the Inspectorate of Education has a clearly formulated mandate in the form of a supervisory framework (*toezichtkader*) and has a legally anchored position. Part of this consists of clear legal standards and conditions for carrying out supervision and imposing sanctions if necessary. It is important that the Inspectorate operates as an independent entity and does not depend on feedback from the Ministry (as the inspectorate falls directly under the Minister). In this context, it is important that the National Ordinance on Educational Supervision is formalized and implemented from the beginning of next year. Additionally, development of a supervisory framework and sufficient and trained staff are necessary to further reinforce the position of the Inspectorate of Education.

### **Recommendation 7: Organize an efficient and transparent budgetary system**

*An efficient and transparent budgetary system for education is important to guarantee the continuity of good education. Government subsidizes education through a system of lump-sum financing. The lump sum system has been evaluated and improvements have been made. However, there are still several bottlenecks regarding the current budgetary system.*

#### **Problem analysis**

Before 2010, education funding on Sint Maarten was calculated by means of the Compensation and Accountability System (V&V system in Dutch). From 2010, the government decided to use the lump sum system for subsidizing education. In 2014, the subsidy system was evaluated by SOAB on behalf of the Minister of Education, Culture, Youth and Sport. SOAB also made recommendations for further improvements. The National Decree on Funding Education (*Landsbesluit bekostiging onderwijs*) was developed based on this evaluation, and several adjustments to the funding system have been made.

In its present form, the lump sum system uses the number of students per education type as the basis for its calculations. The funding is split into two separate funds: one for staff expenses and one for operating expenses. The calculation of the funding is based on the following data:

- Level of education
- Type of education
- Number of students
- Standard for class sizes
- Standard for school sizes
- Number of schools maintained by a single legal person (school board).

The National Decree on Funding Education does not currently apply to public education. As indicated earlier, the process of transferring the organization of public education to a public body is still ongoing. For public education, there will be a transition period during which this part of the sector will be evaluated and restructured.

Although the lump sum system has been evaluated and improvements have been made, we have identified several bottlenecks in the existing budgetary system.



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A first issue with the current lump sum system is that school boards which mainly focus on foundation-based education (FBE schools) are sufficiently funded overall (except for public schools, see the following issue) but school boards which mainly focus on secondary education tend to be short on funding. The shortages in secondary education are in part due to more expensive learning materials and smaller class sizes. The number of students determines the amount of funding received and this proves problematic in secondary education, where teachers are expensive, and classes are small. Funds are insufficient to cover all the expenses, as not all personnel expenses can be proportionally divided per student. SOAB also noted this issue in their report evaluating the lump sum system as used by the government of Sint Maarten.<sup>106</sup> Since then changes have been made. The norm for class sizes was adjusted based on the SOAB report and in consultation with the school boards.<sup>107</sup> This new system has not been evaluated yet. However, several school boards still indicate that they are experiencing shortages.

Another issue noted is the difference in funding between subsidized schools and public schools. In general, public schools experience a shortage of funding. As indicated under recommendation 5 above, the 'school board' for public schools takes the form of a public service that falls directly under the authority of the minister. The budget process for public schools is therefore identical to that of any department/division within the Ministry. This process is often very lengthy and sometimes the public-school budget is cut, or orders are delayed due to other priorities placed on funds by the Ministry of Finance.

The St Maarten Public Expenditure Review conducted by the World Bank in 2020 shows that public schools are less efficient than subsidized schools across several efficiency variables assessed (e.g., teacher absenteeism, repetition rates). Data published by MECYS<sup>108</sup> and highlighted in the recent St Maarten Public Expenditure Review<sup>109</sup> show that rates of repetition, social promotion (i.e., students progressing to the next year based on age and without having attained the required grades), and both student and teacher absenteeism are typically higher for public schools than for subsidized schools, while student performance in public schools is typically lower. In 2017-2018, repetition rates at public schools were at least double those at subsidized schools, both at primary level (8.6% v. 3.7%) and at secondary level (32.3% v. 13.4%). Social promotion rates showed a similar pattern. Teacher absenteeism in 2017-2018 was notably higher in public schools both at primary level (12.4% v. 5.0%) and at secondary level (23.8% v. 16.1%), with student absenteeism rates showing a similar pattern.<sup>110</sup> The PER authors infer from these data that public school systems are "less efficient".<sup>111</sup> With respect to repetition and social promotions rates, MECYS points out that "public schools are open to all students [...] and enroll more unregistered and non-English-speaking students than other schools [...]", suggesting that student population may be an explanatory factor.<sup>112</sup> Furthermore, FBE examination data from 2017-2018 show that public primary schools are associated with low performance.<sup>113</sup> Students in public schools demonstrate a poorer performance across all examination subjects – Dutch, English, Math, General Knowledge – compared to their counterparts in subsidized schools. The UNICEF Situation Analysis St Maarten 2020 underlines that availability of conditional resources may play a vital role in this regard: "Subsidized schools tend to have greater opportunities in accessing state-of-the-art technical equipment such as Digi boards, computers and Wi-Fi-based games and programs which will enhance students' interests and learning" (p. 77).

Public schools therefore typically deal with a challenging student population and have limited access to resources that boost performance. This raises the question



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whether public schools are receiving sufficient funding and whether public resources are being used efficiently.

Lastly, drawing up a budget is often a copy-paste operation. There is no real vision behind submitting a budget. Both government and (school)board budgets seldom reflect multi-annual planning and strategies. The St Maarten Public Expenditure Review also noted that the Ministry of Finance does not manage public finances within a Medium-Term Expenditure Framework. As a result, sectoral strategies and future plans in education are not properly related to the necessary financial resources.

### **Recommendations**

In 2021, a general review of the National Decree on Education Funding is planned. This may mean that some of the issues related to the current budgetary system are already being addressed. Nevertheless, it is important to consider the following sub-recommendations:

- Analyze the effects of the (recent) changes to the lump sum subsidy system to gain insights into whether the adjustments to the calculations are adequate, and whether school boards with secondary schools are receiving sufficient funding.
- Design a procurement system to facilitate the public schools until the transfer of the organization of public education to a public body has been finalized.
- Draw up multiannual budgets and update them each year when the annual budget is determined. This should apply not only to schools and school boards but also to the government. The use of multiannual budgets will enable timely action when multiannual figures deviate from the current year's budget. Also consider the timely processing of subsidy requests which affects the budgeting process.

### **Recommendation 8: Strengthen financial accountability**

*Good governance is important within the education system. This includes the accountability of school boards regarding educational and financial policies. It is important that there is supervision of how public money is spent and that intervention takes place when necessary. In the current situation, the required financial reports – including the auditor's report – are sometimes not submitted or are submitted too late. Also, the time of our investigation, there was no consistent evidence that control and sanction options were consistently applied in practice. We therefore recommend strengthening financial accountability.*

### **Problem analysis**

According to the National Decree on Education Funding, the competent authority (i.e., the school board) is required to provide the Minister with an annual written account of the use of the funds obtained. For this purpose, the competent authority must submit a financial report for the preceding year to the Inspectorate of Education, no later than February 1 following the end of the fiscal year. The financial report must be accompanied by an audit report from a certified accountant or a chartered accountant.<sup>114</sup> The Minister may alter or suspend the amount received in funding if the school board fails to comply with regulations (e.g., by not providing the financial report). As per March 5, 2021, 10% of the calculated subsidy will be withheld annually on a cumulative basis from school boards that have failed to meet their financial reporting requirements and/or have not submitted all the mandatory documentation. However, at the time of our investigation, there was no consistent



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evidence to suggest that school boards were held accountable for failing to meet their reporting requirement on time <sup>3</sup>.

By law, the Minister has the authority to exercise control over the lawful and efficient use of education funding and demand financial accountability of the school boards.<sup>115</sup> The Minister can also request SOAB to conduct an audit. In practice, such checks are not carried out on a regular basis. Under the terms of the National Decree on Education Funding, supervision is assigned to the Inspectorate of Education.

As indicated above, although control and sanction measures are regulated to a limited extent, at the time of our investigation they were not always applied in practice. Several bottlenecks and problems have been identified in this regard:

- The supervisory and enforcement measures included in the National Ordinances were (up until recently, see below footnote) hardly ever applied in practice.
- The financial reports required by law are sometimes not submitted or are submitted too late by the school boards, and (up until recently) not all financial reports were audited (although this is mandatory). In some cases, only a compilation statement is provided.
- The financial reports submitted could serve as a guidance mechanism for the long-term budget of both school boards and government. Such a mechanism is lacking on Sint Maarten.
- At the time of our investigation, supervision of the correctness, completeness and lawfulness of the funding process and use of education funding was often lacking. Due to insufficient supervision and because not all annual reports had been audited, there was a risk of resources being used unlawfully, inefficiently, or wastefully <sup>4</sup>.
- The Inspectorate's supervisory function, as formulated in the National Ordinance, is not sufficiently fulfilled in practice. The Inspectorate lacks the staff and resources to actively carry out this task (and the relevant INSP-ECYS document does not adequately list all functions that would benefit from the supervision that the division needs to execute).

### **Recommendations**

The following sub-recommendations apply to the bottlenecks identified above:

- Enforce what has been regulated in the National Ordinance regarding accountability. This means ensuring the timeliness and completeness of the submission of financial reports, including the required auditor's report, and applying sanctions when these requirements are not met.
- Facilitate the inspectorate-function as prescribed by law with adequate financial resources and staffing. Enable a staff member of the Inspectorate to 'shadow' an SOAB consultant as a learning experience.

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<sup>3</sup> Note that with the establishment of the Lbham Bekostiging in 2019 came the possibility to sanction educational institutions that fail to meet financial accountability requirements. Cumulative withholding of subsidy was introduced and enforced with the subsidy decisions for the school year 2020-2021. Recent information suggests that as per 2020-2021 seven out of the nine school boards have submitted up to date audited financial reports.

<sup>4</sup> But see the above footnote.



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### **Recommendation 9: Guarantee the basic conditions for good education**

*The continuity of good education requires a basic level of conditions including maintenance of school buildings, up-to-date teaching materials and ICT facilities, and enough qualified personnel. Unless these conditions are fulfilled, the core functions of education – qualification, allocation, and socialization – are at risk of being compromised. We have observed that education on Sint Maarten is struggling in the face of structural deficiencies in these basic conditions. Such shortcomings permanently disrupt the education system and mean that the talents of students cannot be fully utilized. We therefore recommend realizing and maintaining basic conditions for good education on a structural basis.*

#### **Problem analysis**

During conversations with various stakeholders and during visits to schools, the working group noticed that several concerns and bottlenecks around basic conditions for good education were being raised. Bottlenecks were present at several schools, but mainly in public schools and in secondary education.

#### *Housing (maintenance/climate control)*

There seem to be major deficits regarding housing and the necessary maintenance of school buildings. Despite structural funding for ongoing maintenance of educational infrastructure and related materials, schools mention problems with the maintenance of buildings. The size and scale of these problems rapidly increased following the passing of the hurricanes in 2015. School boards are required to take care of their school buildings, but do not always have the budgetary means to do so. Damage from Hurricane Irma has created a pressing budgetary problem for the education sector.

The working group encountered several school buildings with a leaking roof, holes in the roof or even roofs that were partially missing. At some schools, several the classrooms were no longer accessible. In addition, air conditioning is not present in every school/classroom, and the space available is sometimes too small to accommodate all the students. Teachers have resorted to other means, such as donations or their own resources, to furnish the classrooms.

#### *Teaching aids and ICT facilities*

A large proportion of the teaching materials are outdated and sometimes missing altogether. We spoke some schools which were forced to copy teaching materials every year. Teachers sometimes pay the costs of making necessary copies of schoolbooks themselves. In addition, teachers sometimes must translate the learning materials into the language of instruction because there is no budget to have them translated or to purchase the appropriate learning materials.

School boards receive funding for educational materials and professional development (also related to ICT). However, a lot of schools mentioned that they receive too little funding to invest in ICT resources. It is noted that equipment is often outdated, while the overall infrastructure (such as available internet connections) also falls short of current needs. Schools sometimes receive a smartboard, but do not have the necessary expertise to use it with the result that the smartboard ends up being used as a whiteboard.

#### *Personnel investments (salary, training)*

A lot of schools mentioned that there is a shortage of (qualified) teachers, especially but not exclusively at public schools. Furthermore, some school principals indicated that it is difficult to dismiss teachers whose performance is below par. Some public-



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school principals raise the issue of teacher shortage with the government, and applications for additional staff are not always honored, sometimes resulting in large class sizes and a lack of personal attention to students' needs. The boards of subsidized schools struggle to recruit teachers as well. Not only is there a shortage of qualified teachers, but in most cases these boards can only offer a standard salary, which makes these schools unattractive, especially to foreign candidates. By way of contrast, a (costly) private school reported a waiting list for teachers because it could offer much higher salaries. Besides budget constraints, there is also an issue with hiring practices, high turnover rates, and high incidences of long-term sick leave among teachers.

Another complicating factor, especially for secondary education, is that the University of Sint Maarten (USM) does not offer a variety of educational programs to prepare teachers. The focus is on a training program for primary education and a secondary education certificate for persons qualified in certain subjects. This is an issue of scale. As a result, teachers take online courses once they have been hired to broaden their skill set while not meeting the required qualifications. In-service training of teachers is according to some schools generally too costly and recruiting teachers from abroad may be problematic due to lengthy immigration procedures, short contracts, and low salaries. Several stakeholders expressed their desire for the USM to broaden its teacher training program and to expand its internships with a view to delivering teaching graduates who already have some hands-on experience.

In general, the supply of teachers cannot meet demand. Different school principals mentioned they would like to help teachers with further training to improve their didactical possibilities, but they see limited possibilities with the budget they receive. The quality of the lessons inevitably suffers because of these obstacles.

### **Recommendations**

The failure to realize basic conditions – in all the domains mentioned above – is having a major impact on the quality of education. We therefore recommend realizing and maintaining the basic conditions for good education. One priority in this regard would be to ensure adequate housing and necessary maintenance of school buildings. Even though everyone agrees all hurricane-damaged roofs need to be repaired, this process so far is taking 5 years and counting. The obvious recommendation is for the government to accelerate this process necessary. Support for teachers by appointing (extra) remedial teachers is another quick win that was mentioned earlier in this report. Lastly, and in addition to current efforts, we recommend making the most of opportunities for cooperation and expertise sharing in the region and between the countries of the kingdom when it comes to addressing teacher shortages. Kibrahacha – Partnerschap Samen Opleiden Caribisch Gebied is a good example of such cooperation. Twinning institutions in the region and within the kingdom can also yield worthwhile results.

### **Recommendation 10: Analyze inefficiencies in the education system**

*It is important that public resources for the education sector are being used effectively and efficiently. We therefore recommend analyzing inefficiencies in the education system and channeling any resulting savings into making the necessary improvements to education on Sint Maarten.*

### **Problem analysis**

With Sint Maarten trying to rebound from 2 Category 5 hurricanes, the COVID-19 Pandemic, and related salary cuts, several school boards indicate they are experiencing shortages. The State of Education report for 2017-18 points out that



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“With funding under pressure, many School Boards face some important choices regarding how they should prioritize spending. For many areas of expenditure, little is known about their effect on the quality of education. As a result, Boards sometimes make choices that do not benefit quality and do not result in a healthy financial policy”.<sup>116</sup>

A possible consequence of emerging deficits is that school boards start working with two budgets: an internal budget that consists of third-party income (including parental contributions) and an external budget that consists of the subsidy received from the government. Subsidized schools are allowed to charge students’ families modest fees, although these are waived for families that cannot afford them. Publicly funded schools are not allowed to charge fees. There is no clear understanding of the extent to which school boards are dependent on third-party income. A strong dependence on this kind of income may result in parental contributions being made compulsory for obtaining education. However, requirements regarding parental contributions are legally established: the National Ordinance on Primary and Secondary Education (Section 20) states that school admission may not be dependent on parental contributions.

Currently, there is also no insight into demographic projections. Does the school-age population correspond with demographic projections? If a country’s school-age population is expected to grow or decline significantly, these trends obviously affect the government’s required outlays.<sup>117</sup>

### **Recommendations**

It is important that insight is gained into budget deficits and other income (including parental contributions) for schools and school boards. It is advisable to carry out an analysis of the efficiency of spending and to set up a system in which shortages, risks, maintenance and (the state of) provisions are visible. This includes for instance an analysis of turnover rates and sick leave among teachers. As a result, the necessary fees can be determined more quickly and more accurately and can serve as a basis for a (multi-annual) budget. This should include an analysis of the number of students and a multi-year demographic projection, in relation to the number of schools and available square meters. Optimizing educational provision when student numbers start to decline (mergers, disposal of surplus buildings or classrooms) or start to increase is an interesting option that should be explored further.

Money saved by reducing inefficiencies can perhaps be used to solve bottlenecks and the financing of necessary improvements described elsewhere in this report.



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## **PART III: From policy intentions to action and change**

In this part of the report, we explain how the recommendations from Part II can be further operationalized and realized. We aim to achieve improvements in the areas of:

- data registration;
- education;
- the system within which education operates.

The working group considers Part III to be not so much a final piece of its recommendations, but as a key element. As described earlier, we have seen a long history of optimistic planning in many areas but translation into concrete action is often missing or incomplete.

In this review, the working group therefore wants to go a step further than previous exercises. More important than addressing the 'what' question (the list of recommendations described in Part II) is the matter of 'how' these improvements can be realized in the specific context on Sint Maarten. This last part of the report offers some thoughts on this and is also a prelude to the working group's follow-up activities, which will lead to our final report in mid-2022. This section concludes with a proposal for phasing and some financial considerations.

### **Data registration system**

The working group has taken note of current efforts made by the Sint Maarten government to design and build a Ministry Management Information System. To enable this project to reach its fullest potential, we recommend:

- Making the data openly accessible to all relevant stakeholders;
- Including data on qualification, allocation, socialization, and various conditional resources (see Appendix B).

### *Sustainable support*

In the period leading up to our final report, the working group will explore how the joint inspectorates can support the implementation of the registration system, the analysis of the data and support for the schools. Given the complexities of implementing such a system, we propose a program of sustainable support. Even after successful implementation, a structural working relationship with the joint inspectorates is needed to achieve support with data analysis and the exchange of good practices.

### **Implementation agendas for recommendations on education and the system**

For the education recommendations (2 to 4) and the system recommendations (5 to 10), we are setting up two implementation agendas as a follow-up to this interim report. An implementation agenda contains all the elements necessary to bring about actual change. In addition to identifying the parties responsible for implementation, it will indicate which organizations and individuals are involved in implementing improvements, what results need to be achieved and by when, what criteria are being used and the extent of the financial consequences. It will also address the speed at which implementations can be realized. All of this will be presented in well-substantiated periodic reports and, accompanied by the advice of



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the Sint Maarten Inspectorate of Education, will be forwarded to the Minister. Where points for improvement have already been identified or implemented, the working group will make agreements with the parties involved as to how these can be given a place on the agenda and can be made 'SMART' (specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and timed). In the implementation agendas, we plan to work on the assumption that the recommendations will be realized within the next four years. Working with implementation agendas may seem a touch bureaucratic, but the intention is to identify responsibilities and partial results in very concrete terms with a view to facilitating the necessary improvements. One element of the implementation agenda on education recommendations relates to a collaboration between the Sint Maarten and Dutch inspectorates in which a supervisory framework and accompanying research instruments will be developed, and staff will be trained in how to use them, for example through joint school visits in the Netherlands and by exchanging best practices.

### **Phasing and feasibility of recommendations**

The present recommendations are diverse in nature and, as indicated above, partly require translation into implementation agendas. At the same time, some recommendations can be implemented (or partly implemented) relatively quickly and help alleviate the pressure on the education system. For the time being, we see five recommendations that can be realized with a compact plan of action and targeted financing in the short term:

1. Establishing a reliable and sustainable system for key figures (recommendation 1).
2. Supporting teachers by appointing (extra) *remedial teachers* (part of recommendations 2 & 3).
3. Fixing roofs and making other overdue repairs to damage caused by Hurricane Irma (part of recommendation 10).
4. Organizing an efficient and transparent budgetary system (recommendation 7).
5. Examining inefficiencies in the education system (recommendation 9).

An important point of attention in the implementation of recommendations is the availability of the necessary people power and skill sets to achieve them. When it comes to delivering on recommendations that call for sufficient qualified personnel, the skills required for good governance and supervision, and the specialist knowledge to modernize legislation, there are limits on the expertise to hand.

In addition to phasing, it therefore makes sense to explore opportunities for cooperation and the sharing of expertise, both in the region and between the countries of the kingdom. Kibrahacha – Partnerschap Samen Opleiden Caribisch Gebied is a good example of such cooperation. Twinning institutions in the region and within the kingdom can also yield worthwhile results. The working group has already seen encouraging examples of this in its current investigation.

### **Financial consequences of recommendations**

Financial consequences of recommendations have not yet been specified in the present document. Nevertheless, several conclusions can already be drawn about the financial effects of the measures it proposes.

Firstly, not every improvement cost money. The recommendation to achieve a two-tier governance system with strong boards, good internal supervision and mature participation is a case in point. Decisions in areas such as monitoring and limiting the overhead at schools, the need to invest in the training and supervision of teachers and building maintenance are best made by a strong board that operates in



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close cooperation with its schools. This enables money to be spent much more efficiently, which would be a huge step forward for education on Sint Maarten.

Secondly, it is important that any available surplus of funds from the Country Reform Package should at least partly be channeled into making the necessary investments in education. However, this is only a good idea if the improvements proposed in this report are effectively implemented. Simply pumping money into education will not lead to the desired results.

Finally, it is important to foresee and calculate the financial effects of demographic developments (e.g., a drop in the number of students). On the one hand, this underlies recommendation 10 regarding the effect on the number of schools and required square meters. On the other hand, the funding – which is based on the number of students ( $q$ ) and the amount of money per student ( $p$ ) in the multiannual estimates – can be kept stable. A decrease in the number of students will then result in higher expenditure per student. Again, this will only prove effective if the improvements proposed in this report are implemented at the same time.



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## Appendix A – Stakeholders

The Inspectorate of Education on Sint Maarten and the Dutch Inspectorate of Education held interviews with various stakeholders, including policy makers, school boards and schools. Where possible, interviews were also held with teachers and students at the schools visited, in addition to the school management. A list of the stakeholders consulted is given below.

### School boards

- Stichting Katholiek Onderwijs St. Maarten (SKOS)
- Stichting Voortgezet Onderwijs St. Maarten (SVOBE)
- Stichting ter Bevordering van Secundair Beroeps Onderwijs en Educatie (NIPA)
- Foundation for Protestant Christian Education (SPCOBE)
- Foundation Methodist Agogic Center (FMAC)
- Charlotte Brookson Academy of the Performance Arts (CBA)
- Foundation for Academic and Vocational Education (FAVE)

### Schools

- Sundial School
- Milton Peters College
- National Institute for Professional Advancement (NIPA)
- SXM Vocational Training School
- St. Dominic High
- MAC Browlia F. Maillard Campus
- Helmich Snijders Campus
- SXM Academy CAPE
- Oranje School
- M. G. de Wever School
- Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. School
- Prins Willem-Alexander School (PWAS, special education)
- Ruby Labega School
- Learning Unlimited (private)
- Leonald Connor School
- St. Maarten SDA School
- St. Joseph School
- University of St. Maarten
- Sr. Borgia School
- Charlotte Brookson Academy

### Divisions/departments of the Government of Sint Maarten

- Division Public Education
- Department of Labor
- Department of Tourism
- Department of Youth
- Division Study Finance
- Student Support Services Division (SSSD)
- Division of Exams
- Division Education Innovations
- Department of Education
- Department of Economic Affairs

### Other

- Stichting Overheidsaccountantsbureau (SOAB)
- Sonesta Maho Resort
- Simpson Bay Resort



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## Appendix B – Key figures data registration system

This appendix provides an overview of data that could be included in a data registration system with a view to monitoring performance and working towards improvements in education.

### Allocation

Inflow characteristics per sector:

- Providing schools: school ID (e.g., BRIN), levels of secondary education (e.g., mavo/havo/vwo); zip code, denomination, etc. (merge with central database)
- Entering students: scores on national advancement test and entry level test; background characteristics (gender, age, home language, home region/zip code, etc.)
- Enrolment characteristics (data per school year): student's position (where enrolled; same course / other course / no course) \*.

\* Annual information on position of a student offers the possibility of following a cohort. Risks are divergent choices per sector and double counting.

It is advisable for the Directorate of Education and the Education Inspectorate to work together to discuss a smart approach with data experts.

### Qualification

- Weighted averages of final exam figures for secondary education
- Weighted averages of advancement test grades for primary education (objectively standardized)

### Socialization

- Suspensions and expulsions
- Data on bullying (surveys, objectively standardized)
- Social competence results (student tracking system, objectively standardized)
- Inspectorate's judgements on socialization by schools and training institutes

### Financing

- Comparison between budget and results: state contributions, personnel costs
- Key figures for educational institutions: profitability, solvency, liquidity, accommodation ratio
- Developments (both looking back and ahead) at educational institutions in areas including:
  - Depreciation
  - Housing costs
  - Personnel costs
  - Other costs (e.g., ICT/learning materials)
  - (Other) income
  - Provisions
  - Long-term and short-term liabilities
  - Equity capital
  - Liquid assets
- Distribution of income/expenditure: where funds come from (government contributions, parental contributions, other); where the money goes (staff, accommodation, other)
- Ratio of staff costs to total income (by sector)
- Ratio government subsidies/total income (by sector)
- Ratio investments/total income (per sector)
- Ratio private and public capital



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Other conditions

- Developments in staff absenteeism due to illness
- Developments in and proportions of hired, permanent and temporary staff
- Developments in numbers of education support staff
- Salary staff
- Unfilled vacancies
- Number of unauthorized persons with dispensation
- Age of textbooks and other teaching aids
- Presence of ICT facilities