



# Quality in distance learning

Findings based on observations in lessons and interviews with students, teachers and principals in ten compulsory (9-year comprehensive) and upper secondary schools.

## Summary

In spring 2021, the Swedish Schools Inspectorate carried out a remote inspection of ten schools in the form of an in-depth case study. Of these, five were compulsory schools with upper schools, and five were upper secondary schools. The review mainly focused on observing lessons given virtually based on a number of central teaching-related aspects: variation and clarity in teaching, social interaction, how the teachers follow up active participation by the students, and the individual support given during the lessons. The review has been based on Ordinance (2020:115) on Education in the School area and Other Educational Activities in the Event of the Spread of Certain Infections.

The background to the review is the experience of the authority as well as that of others from the previous review of remote/distance education. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the Swedish Schools Inspectorate has carried out several different remote inspections in compulsory and upper secondary schools. In these, the Swedish Schools Inspectorate has seen active work in many schools to implement appropriate changes in remote/distance education. Many challenges have also emerged; including difficulties in supporting students and maintaining their involvement in the teaching, and that the teaching tends to become monotonous. The students have also regularly expressed that they lack a social community. The Schools Inspectorate in the Netherlands has carried out an equivalent review of remote and distance education with observations in lessons. Among other things, the review focused on aspects of structure and clarity in the teaching, an active presence among the students, as well as social interaction. The results of the review reveal a significant variation in the quality of the remote/distance education, and that the best lessons are those that include social interaction.

This is a translated and abridged version of the published memorandum *Quality in distance learning* (The Swedish Schools Inspectorate, 2021). Firstly, a summary of the results from the review is presented. This is followed by a description of the methodology and selection used for the review. The results are based on a qualitative analysis of the written feedback that the establishments received from the Swedish Schools Inspectorate on completion of the review. The results cannot be generalised but only relate to the ten establishments examined within this case study. The Swedish Schools Inspectorate's findings can nevertheless provide an understanding of how the school situation is affected, and what challenges the establishments face, given the situation in remote/distance education.

## The results in brief

### **The most common aspects of the sudden transition between contact teaching and distance learning in the schools examined.**

At the time of the review, all of the participating schools provided distance learning, albeit to a varying extent. In most of the schools examined, the students are provided with distance learning on one or several days a week, and the remaining

days are on site at school for contact teaching. At one school, the students are provided with distance learning for two weeks at a time and contact teaching every third week. Another school alternates every other week. One school uses a format whereby half of the class participates in the lessons in the classroom, and half of the class participates in the lessons remotely. The students then alternate between contact teaching and distance learning every other day.

Most of the students participate in the remote/distance education from home, but at a couple of schools there are students who participate in the distance learning on the school's premises. In the latter case, the students have been able to sit in the same or different rooms, and the teacher or other staff has been able to be in the same room or move between rooms during the lessons. The teachers are usually at the school when they teach remotely, but they can also be at some other location.

### **The distance learning is often clear, but rarely varied**

The results of the case study show that the remote lessons at the schools examined often maintain a clear structure and follow a logical flow that is predictable for students. Teachers often describe how they adopt a common approach at school in order to create clarity regarding the structure of their teaching. In many cases, the students experience that the presentation of the teaching, the lesson structure and the assignment instructions given by the teachers are clear. On the other hand, relatively many state that this may vary between subjects and teachers. In some cases there are no common structures, and there are instances where it is less clear to students what they should do during the lessons, which means they lose concentration and motivation for the schoolwork. In some cases the review also reveals that there are no common working methods and routines for which digital tools to use for the lessons and to provide information to the students. The teachers in one school describe how they use different digital tools to give the lessons, to provide information to the students, and to contact them.

Common lesson structures can create clarity and predictability for the students. At the same time, the teaching needs to contain variety and alternate between different types of assignment and examination, and between ways of working in order to meet the needs of students and to maintain their interest in schoolwork. However, in many cases, the case study shows that there appears to be relatively little variety in the distance learning. The lesson observations show that most lessons have a similar structure that often consists of the following: introduction to the lesson, teacher-led reviews of the subject content and instructions for individual assignments, followed by individual work on the assignment by the students, and a closing reassembly of the whole class. There are instances where teachers and principals describe how the students experience variety when they are given contact teaching instead. Teachers state that they often choose to implement more complex content and hold group discussions when the students are on site at school, while simpler and individual assignments are carried out in the distance learning.

## **Student motivation and involvement are affected when the interaction is saved for contact teaching.**

The case study shows that distance learning rarely includes opportunities for students to meet, collaborate and learn from each other. Students describe how they feel socially isolated and that they need the social context to absorb the remote/distance education. The absence of interaction and community is one reason why they find distance learning dull. Students often take the initiative themselves to collaborate, both during and after class hours. The teacher interviews show that many of them choose to implement elements that contain interaction on the days when contact teaching is given, instead of implementing them during distance learning.

In the schools examined where the distance learning includes interaction, the teachers often use digital solutions, such as digital group rooms, to allow the students to interact, collaborate and have the opportunity for social community. Among other things, the group rooms allow the students to practice dialogues, work on group assignments, or carry out peer assessments.

## **Students often lose concentration during remote lessons**

Several students in the case study describe how they often engage in activities other than schoolwork when they log out of the lesson to carry out individual assignments. They also describe how they easily lose focus during the remote lessons. At the same time, it is difficult for the teachers to detect whether or not the students are active and involved in the teaching. The teachers often have methods to monitor that the students are active and keep up with the distance learning. One common way is to monitor the student documentation in the digital platform while the students are working individually on their assignments. Relatively many teachers also use digital quizzes or digital forms to find out whether or not the students are keeping up with the teaching. However, in some cases, the students experience that the assignments they work with during the lessons are primarily aimed at checking that they have been active and have worked on the lessons, rather than being designed to motivate them to learn.

## **Individual support is often available, but students nevertheless find it difficult to seek help**

Despite the fact that the students in the case study often remark how they find it more difficult to get help remotely, the observations, teachers and principals contend that the efforts to provide access to support appear to work in the schools examined. The observations show that a teacher normally uses different methods in the digital tools in order to talk individually or in groups with students who want to get help with the individual assignments they are working on. The teachers often inform the students about which channels they should use to get in touch with them for individual support. Several teachers describe how they have gradually learned more ways to communicate with and provide feedback to the students. Principals also agree and state that the past year has been an ongoing

educational journey, and that members of staff have learned to use several different digital tools as facilitators.

However, some observations show that teachers only seek out individual students to a limited extent in order to check how things are going for them. Several student and teacher interviews also show that it is often up to the students themselves to take the initiative to ask for help. Some teachers describe how the individual needs of students are primarily catered for in contact teaching.

When it comes to feedback to the students, a common approach is to monitor the work of the students via the digital documents that they share with the teacher, and the teacher communicates and responds directly within the document during the lesson. Students sometimes find that they need to take the initiative themselves in order to obtain feedback. Principals reveal that the alternating contact teaching provides opportunities for feedback that is sometimes given remotely to a lesser extent.

## **The Swedish Schools Inspectorate's comments on the results of the case study**

In many of the schools examined, the teachers work actively to create the best education possible in the prevailing situation. Many have developed their skills in digital tools, among other things. Some show how, in an admirable way, they succeed in teaching students on site in the classroom and other students remotely at the same time. However, in the schools examined, the quality of some parts of the distance learning is affected. On the one hand it's a question of the teaching being rarely varied. Students will primarily encounter whole-class teaching and engage in individual written assignments remotely. On the other hand the teaching includes few opportunities for the students to discuss, meet and collaborate. This implies a risk that the distance learning will become monotonous and not stimulate learning by student. There are indications that the distance learning has not been developed to the fullest extent. Instead, contact teaching is used to handle the parts experienced as more difficult remotely. Of course, there may be good reasons to adapt the teaching to the fact that it is given remotely, and to perform the elements better suited to contact teaching on site at school. But periods of remote and distance education should not just bridge the gap while waiting for the next opportunity for contact teaching. Then the potential of remote and distance education would not be utilised, and the students would risk missing out on good teaching.

Furthermore, the results of the case study highlight the importance of schools utilising the opportunities offered by the digital tools. The Swedish Schools Inspectorate notes that in the schools where technical solutions are used in a diligent and strategic way, this benefits several parts of the distance learning. The availability of tools is fundamental to this. Access to adequate technical solutions seems to constantly vary between schools, which can lead to unequal education for students.

### **Few differences between the compulsory schools upper and secondary schools inspected**

A total of ten compulsory schools and upper secondary schools are included in the review, conducted in the form of a case study, and comparisons between the

school types should therefore be made with caution. Differences, or lack of differences, may be due to precisely these ten schools being included in the review. However, it did not reveal any significant differences between the school types. Possibly just weak evidence that students in upper secondary school need to take a bit more of their own responsibility to keep up with the teaching, and that the school does not investigate to the same extent whether they are keeping up with the teaching. The fact that the case study does not reveal any major differences between the school types is perhaps somewhat surprising, since the upper secondary school has used remote and distance education to a much greater extent than the compulsory school, and should therefore have made more progress in its development. It is also clear that no more adaptations seem to be made in the compulsory school with regard to the lower age of its upper school students. Nor have any differences emerged in connection with how the schools arrange the remote/distance education. Most of the schools examined alternate between contact teaching and remote education during the week, while only two schools alternate every two or three weeks.

The Swedish Schools Inspectorate has made the following comments on the results of the case study.

- **Develop the distance learning and do not wait for periods of contact teaching.** There are indications that the distance learning has not been developed to the fullest extent. Instead, contact teaching is used to handle the parts experienced as more difficult remotely. If the distance learning is not of good quality, there is a risk that student learning will be affected. The distance learning instead needs to be developed and include more educational aspects in order to counteract students not acquiring the knowledge and skills they otherwise would have acquired.
- **Develop models for students to have the opportunity to meet, collaborate and learn from each other in the distance learning.** Social interaction and community are key factors for strengthening motivation and learning in distance learning. It is therefore important that the remote/distance education includes good educational strategies that take into account needs of students for interaction, feedback and social community with the help of the solutions provided by the digital tools. The absence of interaction may have consequences for the motivation and learning opportunities of students. There is also a risk that some students will be excluded if it is left up to them to initiate social contacts in the education. It is the responsibility of the school to create collaboration opportunities for the students.
- **Arrange good access to digital tools/aids and work in order to increase the technical skills held by teachers.** The Swedish Schools Inspectorate has only seen a variety of digital tools used in the teaching in a few of the schools included in this review. As well as a variety within a school in isolated cases. Additionally, the competence level of teachers varies when it comes to the ability to use the tools and utilise them to their full potential. For students, this leads to a risk of unequal access to quality education. It is therefore important to secure access to digital tools and for teachers to receive support and guidance in the use of technical aids that support distance learning. This is work that needs guidance from the accountable authority and principal in order to avoid placing too great a responsibility on individual teachers.

# Methodology and selection

## The Swedish Schools Inspectorate's remote inspections

Due to the prevailing COVID-19 pandemic, the Swedish Schools Inspectorate carries out so-called remote inspections in order to contribute to improved quality in the establishments inspected, and to create a picture of the current school situation. This remote inspection is part of a government commission with the final report due in December 2021.<sup>1</sup> Unlike previous remote inspections, the inspections are restricted within the government commission to any differences in quality, and the consequences that can be linked to remote/distance education, not to the pandemic at large.

It is important to emphasise that the implementation differs from the authority's normal inspection activities. The authority's so-called remote inspection takes the form of a learning and forward-looking review. One major difference is also that the remote inspections are precisely that, carried out remotely. The reason that these inspections are not as in-depth and investigative as a normal inspection is because the authority does not want to impose a burden the establishments and their staff in the difficult situation brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic.

On completion of the remote inspection, all establishments examined receive written feedback and, where appropriate, recommendations from the Swedish Schools Inspectorate. The establishments choose themselves how to work with the recommendations, so there is therefore no follow-up. The authority hopes that the feedback will provide guidance to the establishments examined for their future work. This feedback is also the basis for this general memorandum (memo). The results in the memo cannot be generalised but refer to the establishments examined. At the same time, there is a value in being able to share the experiences of principals, teachers and students, as well as the findings of the Swedish Schools Inspectorate regarding remote/distance education. They may constitute essential input and highlight both challenges and successful ways of working in a situation where part of the education is given as remote/distance education. By sharing experiences and examples, the Swedish Schools Inspectorate hopes to be able to also contribute with lessons to establishments not included in the remote inspection.

### Terminology

The remote inspection refers to the remote/distance education conducted in accordance with Ordinance (2020:115) on Education in the School area and Other Educational Activities in the Event of the Spread of Certain Infections. The remote inspection therefore covers all teaching given remotely, both teaching where teachers and students are separated in terms of location but not in time (remote education) and teaching where they are separated in both location and time

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<sup>1</sup> *The consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic on the conditions for students to achieve the objectives and for student health.* The Ministry of Education and Research 2020-12-17, appropriations directive for the financial year 2021 regarding the Swedish Schools Inspectorate, p. 3.

(distance education). The review interviewees rarely make a clear distinction between remote and distance education, and often used the concept of distance education to denote both remote and distance education. For this reason, no distinction is made between these forms in this memo. This memo generally uses the concepts of *remote/distance education* and *distance learning* as generic terms for teaching with remote and/or distance elements. The term *contact teaching* means teaching on school premises with both students and teachers present.

## Selection and implementation

During April and May, weeks 14-18, the Swedish Schools Inspectorate carried out a remote inspection of five compulsory (9-year comprehensive) schools and five upper secondary schools. The focus of the inspection was to observe remote/distance education based on a selection of core education-related aspects<sup>2</sup>, as well as acquire the understanding held by principals, teachers and students of the remote/distance education given. The selection of schools was aimed at including a variety of schools in the country, and a key selection criterion was that parts of the teaching should be carried out remotely at the time of implementation. Of the ten schools that were monitored, four schools were run by private accountable authorities and six schools by public accountable authorities. Seven of the schools are located in municipalities that are defined as "large cities and municipalities close to large cities"<sup>3</sup>, two of the schools are located in municipalities in the group "smaller cities/conurbations and rural municipalities", and one school is located in a municipality in the group "larger cities and municipalities close to a large city".

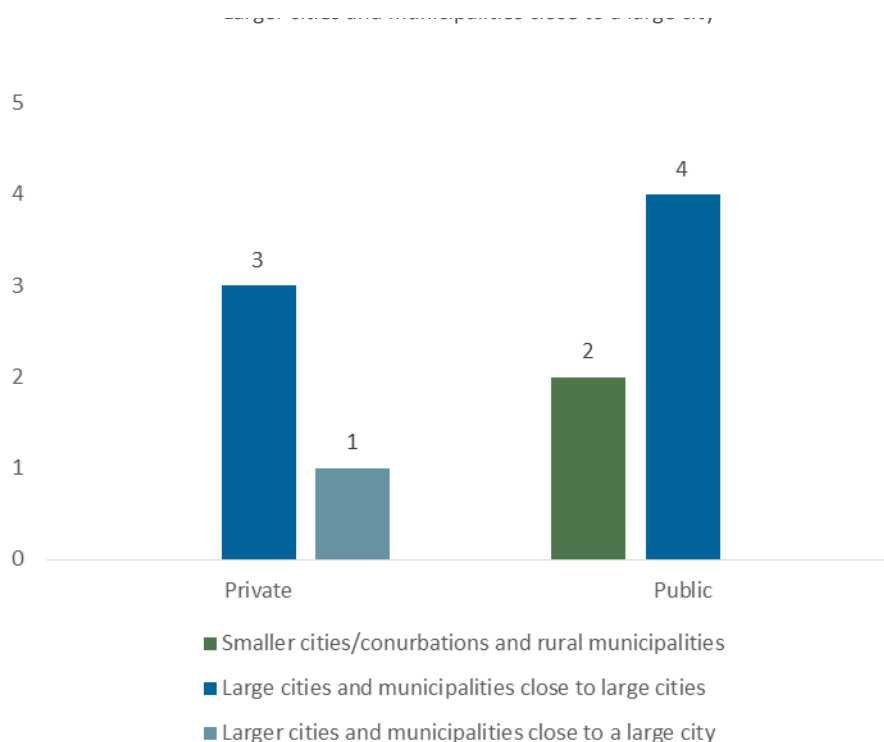
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<sup>2</sup> This review is intended to identify how well the teacher plans and implements remote/distance education that is structured, varied, where the content is communicated in a clear manner, and where there are opportunities for interaction, which gives students a clarity and which creates commitment to the schoolwork. In addition, the review also covers the individual support and the contact that the teacher has with the students and how far the teacher succeeds in identifying and giving support to individual students during remote/distance education.

<sup>3</sup> According to Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions - SKR's municipality categories from 2017.



**Diagram 6:** Distribution of schools examined based on accountable authority type and municipality group.



The review was conducted through remote lesson observations and remote interviews.

A total of 55 lessons (4-6 per school) were observed in the review. 29 lessons were observed in compulsory schools (upper school), and 26 lessons in upper secondary schools. The observations are not restricted to any subject, but have covered the lessons suitable according to the school's planning. This means that the review has included a range of different subjects. The lesson observations were carried out digitally by two investigators per lesson. The investigators were invited to the selected classes and participated via the digital platforms used by the schools. In cases where digital group rooms were used during the lessons, the investigators were located in different group rooms. Whenever possible, a short consultation was held with teachers prior to the observations, immediately before the lessons. In some cases, they also introduced themselves to the students prior to the lessons.

After the observations, interviews were held with teachers whose teaching was under observation, as well as a selection of students in their classes. Two interviews per school were conducted with teachers in groups of about three per interview. Similarly, there were two interviews per school with students in groups of about three per interview. A total of about 60 teachers and 60 students interviewed in the review. The principals of all schools (ten) were also interviewed. All interviews were conducted via video calls.

On completion of the remote inspection, all establishments examined receive written feedback and, where appropriate, recommendations from the Swedish Schools

Inspectorate. The establishments choose themselves how to work with the recommendations, so there is therefore no follow-up. The authority hopes that the feedback will provide guidance to the establishments examined for their future work. This feedback is also the basis for this general memorandum (memo). The results in this memo cannot be generalised but refer to the establishments examined. It may still constitute essential input and highlight both challenges and successful ways of working in a situation where a larger part of the education than usual is given as remote/distance education. By sharing experiences and examples, the Swedish Schools Inspectorate hopes to be able to also contribute with lessons to establishments not included in the remote inspection.

# Observation tool

An observation schedule is filled in for each observation.

## Background information

Municipality/accountable authority		School	Date
Class	Subject and total class hours (according to schedule)		Investigator
Number of students remotely:	Number of students in the school:	Teacher: <i>In the school/other location</i>	
Type of education: <i>(Remote/distance/when/mixed (describe))</i>			

## Check with teacher before lesson:

Number of students? Remotely? On site?
Educators/resource staff during the lesson?
Is there a lesson plan for the lesson? Have the students had access to it? How?
How is the lesson structured?
How does the lesson relate to earlier/later lessons? <i>(Is it in the middle of a range of work, for example?)</i>

**Review area:** Pedagogical leadership in the teaching situation - clarity, interaction, variety, presence/involvement, individual support in the teaching

a) **Clarity:** Here we examine how well the teacher manages to plan and implement remote and distance education that is **structured** and creates **clarity** and **predictability** for the students. This includes clarifying for the students both the **objective of the teaching** and the purpose of the different **elements**. Assignments given to students should be **clear and defined**. We also examine how well the teacher **communicates the lesson content in a clear way, which contributes to a logical flow during the lesson**. This includes giving a clear explanation of and explaining the same point in different ways, and trying out other explanation models if the student does not understand.

**Possible points to look out for:**

- The lesson consists of an introduction, an implementation, and a concluding follow-up.
- The teacher shows a list of what will be done during the lesson, and approximately how long the various activities will take.
- The teacher clarifies the purpose and objectives.
- The teacher refers back to previous lessons and work areas.
- The teacher refers back to the purpose of the lesson
- The assignments that students are given are clearly defined.
- The teacher clarifies the purpose of the elements included in the work.
- The teacher communicates the subject elements and explains in a clear way.
- The teacher explains in different ways and adapts the teaching to the students.
- The teacher is clear about the timing of the parts of the lesson.

**Notes from the observation:**

b) **Variety:** Here we will examine whether the teaching contains a **certain variety and alternates between different types of assignment and examination**, and between **different ways of working** in order to meet the needs of students and to maintain their interest.

**Possible points to look out for:**

- Alternating between types of work during the lesson (whole-class teaching, group work, individual work, etc.)
- The types of work alternate based teaching methods and materials.

- The teaching contains different communication/explanatory methods (review, instruction, reading aloud).
- The teaching contains different interactive methods (dialogue, discussion, debate; individually, in pairs, everyone).
- Alternative assignments are available if the technology does not work.

**Notes from the observation:**

c) **Community and social interaction in the teaching:** Here we examine how the teacher acts in the planning and implementation of the teaching to **facilitate interaction between teacher and students**, as well as the **students among themselves**. This includes how well the teacher designs **teaching that gives the students the opportunity to meet, collaborate and learn from each other**.

**Possible points to look out for:**

- The teacher gives the students the opportunity to interact and collaborate.
- The teacher uses digital solutions in order for the students to be able to collaborate (break-out rooms, etc.).
- The teacher is clear about how and with which other students the students should collaborate in a group assignment, for example.
- The teacher divides up speaking time and gives all students the opportunity to respond.
- The teacher gives the students the opportunity to interact with him/her in a variety of ways.

**Notes from the observation:**

d) **The work of the teachers to ensure that the students follow the teaching:** Here we examine how well the teacher succeeds in **identifying and creating active participation by the students**. It is partly a question of whether the teacher establishes that the **students keep up with and understand the teaching**. It is also a question of what the teacher does to **motivate the students during the lesson**. Furthermore, whether the teacher quickly **gets in touch with students who are absent from** or are inactive during lessons. It can also be a question of how the teacher concludes the lesson and follows up whether the students have kept up with the teaching and the learning that has taken place.

**Possible points to look out for:**

- All students are given the opportunity to respond.
- The teacher checks that all students are keeping up.
- The teacher stops during the lesson and checks that the students are keeping up by means of a vote or similar.
- The teacher concludes with an exercise in which the students have to answer a question about lesson content, and its purpose is to give the teacher instant feedback on whether the students have learned as intended.

**Notes from the observation:**

e) **Individual support/feedback and contact in the teaching:** Here we examine the **individual support available to the students during the lesson** - whether the teacher manages to **identify students in need of support/assistance or more stimulation in the teaching** and students get the opportunity for individual assistance and guidance.

**Possible points to look out for:**

- During the lesson, the teacher works to identify who needs support and/or more stimulation.
- The teacher actively works to be and show him/herself to be available to provide support and feedback to the students through different channels (phone, chat functions, Skype/Teams, etc.).
- The teacher continuously works during the lesson by responding and giving feedback.
- The teacher makes it clear during the lesson how the students can contact him/her individually.
- The teacher actively contacts the students (and doesn't just wait for contact from the students).
- The teacher makes it clear what the students should do if they need more of a challenge.
- The teacher gives feedback on the work of the students and/or the opportunity for reflection for the students.

**Notes from the observation:**

**Check with teacher after lesson:**

The teacher's reflections after lessons:

What does the teacher do with the students who were absent? (*How/when does the teacher contact them, etc.*)

Other:

Possible questions to ask in the interview based on the observation:

For students:

For teachers:

For principal:

## To report in Essentials (reporting tool)

Reporting per lesson

Background information

Municipality/accountable authority	School	Date
Class	Subject and total class hours (according to schedule)	Investigator
Number of students remotely:	Number of students in the school:	Teacher: <i>In the school/other location</i>
Type of education: <i>Remote/distance/when/mixed (describe)</i>		

	Yes	No	Don't know/not observable	Free text answer, please give examples of how
The lesson contains an introduction that sets up frameworks for the lesson.				
The lesson contains a summarising conclusion.				
The purpose of the lesson is clarified by the teacher.				
The purpose of assignments is clarified by the teacher.				
Students collaborate in smaller groups/pairs during the lesson.				
What types of work are used during the lesson? (Multiple choice question: <i>whole class teaching, group work, individual work, other</i> ).				
Teacher checks that all students are keeping up during the lesson.				



The teacher gives responses and feedback during the lesson.				
The teacher gives the opportunity for individual communication with the students during the lesson.				
Time lost due to technical difficulties <i>(estimate number of minutes).</i>				

**Other additions to report author if relevant.** *(Explanation: good examples available, particularly interesting findings, etc.)* **(Free text answer):**