

# Sweden rules!– this year's report to the Government

## 31 March 2008 Press Release:

**“Sweden rules! Children and young people talk about their country” is the title of the Children's Ombudsman's annual report to the Government. The report describes how 1,060 pupils in the Children's Ombudsman's 190 contact classes, from the intermediate grades of compulsory school to upper secondary school, view their everyday life. They describe their country as peaceful, democratic, and safe with a beautiful natural environment. In general, they feel well and are happy with their lives.**

School is the most important social arena when growing up. When the pupils were asked to name two good things about school, they ranked teachers and other staff first, closely followed by friends and school subjects. If they were to be given the right of decision in school matters, the main things they would change would be school food and the dining room, school hours, the physical environment, teachers' pedagogical aid, planning, and school rules.

Stress is still pronounced: every other pupil feels stressed at least once a week. Almost one child in five suffers from headaches every day or several times a week. Girls suffer from headaches to a greater extent than boys but fewer pupils suffer from stomach-ache than five years ago. Preventive action and early intervention are crucial to children's well-being and mental health.

The new Education Act that is currently being drafted should make it obligatory for every school to have its own school doctor, school nurse, school counsellor, and school psychologist. Quality criteria for the tasks and scope of the pupils' health service should also be drawn up.

In answer to the question “If you had the right of decision in the whole of Sweden, what two things would you change?”, one in five answered “don't know” and 13% took up issues like “immigration, integration, and racism”. About half of those who took up immigration are positive to immigrants while the other half are negative.

– An important part of the efforts made to combat racism and xenophobia is to allow children and young people to voice their opinions and talk about their experiences. Things that adults perceive as problems or opportunities are not always perceived in the same way by younger people. We must be good role models; that is crucial to how our children will behave towards their friends, says Children's Ombudsman Lena Nyberg.

Approximately 70% of the pupils in our contact classes have never heard of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (the CRC) or are uncertain about whether they have. One in three say that they do not know of any right that is important. They have only a vague idea about the right to be heard – one of the fundamental principles of the convention.

– Children and young people need to be given much more information and knowledge about their rights. Sweden lacks a long-term strategy for making the CRC known to children and young people. This is particularly important for children in vulnerable situations, says Lena Nyberg.

It is worrying that many of our society's youngest members do not know that they have the right to be heard on issues that concern them. Clear information about the CRC should therefore be included in pre-schools' and schools' steering documents. Teacher Education programs should also contain a compulsory course in the CRC.

It is the responsibility of adults, chiefly that of the parents, to give children a good life during their growing years. But when parents are not able to be parents, society must provide the child with protection and support.

– If children and young people knew their rights better, they would hopefully dare to talk about their problems to a slightly greater extent. They would have better tools to dare to change a difficult life situation, says Lena Nyberg.

School must treat everyone equally. But in answer to the question "Is the principle of children's and young people's equal value respected in school?" only 44% of the pupils in our contact classes answered 'yes' while 32% answered 'no'. It is chiefly other pupils who consider that others in their school are inferior; a quarter of the pupils answered that both pupils and teachers consider that others are inferior.

Many do not know what school should do about everyone's value not being respected and others say that it is impossible to change anything. The pupils who put forward suggestions feel that school must work harder to combat prejudices and injustice, that there must be more – and more visible – adults in school, and that the pupils themselves must take responsibility for treating each other well. They also want better communication between pupils and teachers, and more discussions, theme days, and co-operation practice than today.

43% of the pupils answered that bullying occurs at their school and another 23% say that it may occur. A clear majority know that an action plan against bullying exists, but many say that they have not been involved in deciding its content.

– We would like to see a study of what possibilities exist to fine schools' principals if they do not fulfil the requirement that a complete equal treatment plan must exist, says Lena Nyberg. The children's and pupils' representative at the National Agency for Education should be given more resources so that all children and young people in need of help can be given it in time.

Almost half say that they have been punished for something that someone else did in school. They have experience of detention, cancelled breaks, withdrawn privileges, money being taken from the class fund, and collective reprimands, and of computer rooms, libraries, and cafés being closed.

– Collective punishment occurs in Swedish schools despite the fact that an important fundamental principle of Swedish law is that a person need only be accountable for his or her own actions. We feel that the new Education Act should contain a rule clearly prohibiting collective punishment. Adults would never accept being punished at their place of work for something a colleague did, says Lena Nyberg.

**Lena Nyberg**

Children's Ombudsman