Recognising and solving the teacher crisis in Norway

By Ann Mari Milo Lorentzen



Photo: UEN/Facebook

For years, we have fought for the recognition of the teacher crisis in Norway. A new multi-stakeholder strategy brings hope for change from early childhood to higher levels of education.

The lack of qualified teachers is a global challenge. UNESCO estimates a shortage of a whopping 44 million primary and secondary teachers worldwide.

As a response to this, the United Nations High-Level Panel on the Teaching Profession has formulated 59 landmark recommendations on how to solve the problem. Naturally, these recommendations must be adjusted to the context and situation in different countries, but they provide an important blueprint for action.

So does the Education International (EI) campaign Go Public! Fund Education, which is important and timely against this backdrop. Education International and its member organisations are working together across borders to leverage the 59 recommendations, in order to secure financing, prevent austerity and guarantee every student's right to a well-supported, qualified teacher and a quality learning environment.

Admitting the problem is the first step

In order to find a solution to the teacher crisis, all stakeholders must first agree that we have a problem.

One of the highest priorities of my organisation, the Union of Education Norway, has been advocating for students' right to be taught by a qualified teacher.

For a long time, the Norwegian municipal employers' organisation did not express serious concern about the fact that one in five teachers in Norwegian schools are in fact not qualified teachers. As a union, we confronted an employer's organisation

that has repeatedly used tactics of obscuring the statistical facts and undermining the importance of teachers' qualifications.

This became particularly evident during Norway's longest ever teachers' strike in 2022, which lasted for four long months – and which was forcefully brought to an end by the government. The Union of Education Norway has filed a formal complaint to the International Labour Organisation (ILO), on the grounds that the forced wage settlement was brought about on insufficient grounds and we are eagerly awaiting the ILO's decision.

The national multistakeholder strategy: an important step forward

However, recently, it seems that something has shifted.

In 2023, the government and 11 other education organisations – including the teachers' unions, Norwegian Association of Local and Regional Authorities and the university and college sector – signed a unified strategy that recognises that the lack of qualified teachers in Norway is a serious and unsustainable situation.

There is now agreement across the board on the right of all pupils to be taught by a qualified teacher and that the current situation must change.

The strategy outlines four main goals towards 2030:

- A teaching career becomes an attractive choice for students.
- The various teacher education programs are high quality and relevant for the profession.
- All newly qualified teachers experience a positive transition from their studies into the profession, through support and guidance.
- Early childhood education institutions and schools are attractive places of work that recruit and retain teachers.

A multi-dimensional crisis

With the right resources and the right framework, being a teacher is indeed the best job in the world. It is also one of society's most important jobs.

Therefore, I am very pleased that we finally have a shared understanding of the teacher crisis in Norway. It's time to develop a common strategy that commits the entire education sector
to action.

The teacher shortage is a crisis that is felt across several parameters. It involves a dramatic decline in the number of applicants to teacher education programs. In the last five years, the number of students applying to university to become teachers almost halved.

All across Norway, municipalities are struggling to recruit teachers with teaching qualifications. Children in early childhood education and students in upper secondary schools are most affected by the lack of qualified teachers.

And the number of teachers leaving their jobs in early childhood and higher levels of education is alarmingly high, even though they love their profession.

Looking forward to action

Now it is up to the various stakeholders to take responsibility for implementing the strategy. Naturally, I am impatient and would like to see more concrete measures quickly. Yet, we know that the situation is a challenging one and none of us can solve the teacher crisis alone.

The Union of Education Norway will do everything we can to make the teaching profession more attractive. We know that better pay and working conditions are important. The salary development for teachers must be brought up to the same level as for professional groups with comparable higher education requirements and the salary level for early childhood education teachers must also be raised.

Young students entering university have observed their teachers in the classroom for at least 13 years. It seems obvious that what they have seen is not appealing. Therefore, we urgently need a coordinated effort to improve working conditions for teachers. I'm glad that this challenge is an integrated part of the strategy.

In line with the strategy, the Union of Education Norway will also work to ensure that all municipalities implement programs for mentoring newly-qualified teachers, in addition to providing good and relevant training opportunities.

We will also contribute to strengthening professional communities in workplaces and advocate for teachers' voices to be

heard in all decision-making processes regarding education.

There are plenty of challenges left on the horizon, but with a common starting point, we are one step closer to finding solutions.

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