

CHAPTER 4

A “FREE CHOICE” FOR ALL? ON MARKETISATION AND COMPETITION IN THE NORWEGIAN SCHOOL SYSTEM, AND POSSIBLE ALTERNATIVES

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Introduction

In the post-war decades, a prominent American scholar and later president of the neoliberal Mont Pèlerin Society, Gary Becker, developed his theories on ‘human capital’. His concern was with how individuals could increase their productivity and competitiveness in the labour market through educational choices. Competition in all areas of life, neoliberal economists believed, would foster motivation. On the other side of the Atlantic, in the Nordic region, influential intellectuals at the time had very different aims. In Norway, social-democratic thinkers promoted a vision of an educational system that would serve democracy by creating social cohesion, mutual respect, and good education for all. Social-democratic ideology, in this era, focused not on the individual but on the collective, and the aim was to foster solidarity, justice, and equality through cooperation rather than competition.

The Norwegian post-war consensus, which included parties in the political centre, was to expand and strengthen the education system

based on the principle of comprehensive schools (*enhetsskole*). This principle implies that children are taught together, independent of differences in abilities or background. The educational reforms of the post-war era were not without opposition from the right; however, the Norwegian right was weak (Sass, 2022). As a result, the Norwegian school system became one of the most equality-oriented, social-democratic school systems in the world, with a comparatively low percentage of private schools and a comprehensive public school system.

From the late 1970s onwards, this vision of an egalitarian education system gradually came under attack. Neoliberal ideology began to gain political influence and penetrate school policy and pedagogy, with the result of increasing marketisation, segregation, competition, and individualisation. Today, growing numbers of Norwegian youth experience school-related stress and anxiety (Ungdata, 2022) in a system that increasingly sets them up to compete and personalises their failures.

The story below relates how neoliberal ideas of a competitive school for a competitive economy gradually hollowed out the social democratic school system from within, and how, despite resistance and institutional inertia, these ideas threatened schooling for equality and democracy. In what follows, we will show how ideas of selection based on grades, of competition, and of ‘free’ individual choice gained a foothold and undermined the idea of comprehensive education in Norway. We will focus on a limited part of this story, that is, on the transition from lower- to upper-secondary schooling, on the debate over grades in lower-secondary school, and on how the admissions system to upper-secondary school was developed over time in line with neoliberal ideological tenets.

This story adds to our knowledge of the development in Europe, where social democracy was once strong, but now has become an appendix to neoliberal power structures. Traces of progressive reform ideas can still be found on the Norwegian left. A revival of such ideas could possibly challenge the status quo in the future, but this would require a radical break with neoliberal thinking about education.

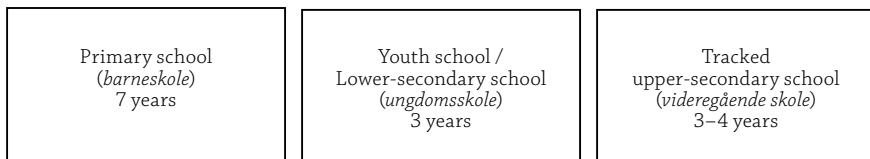
The Norwegian school system: A brief sketch

Today, the Norwegian school system is composed of a seven-year primary school and a three-year youth school (or lower-secondary school). Primary schools and youth schools recruit students based on catchment areas and place of residence, and are comprehensive. That means that the ability to pay, class, ethnic background, or other social criteria are not considered acceptable admission requirements. Primary schools and youth schools are owned by the municipalities, but subject to national laws and regulations, which ensure common standards. Ninety-five per cent of students attend municipal primary and youth schools; the rest attend one of the few, mostly faith-based, private schools or special schools owned by counties or the state (UDIR, 2025a). Upper-secondary schools are owned by the counties (*fylker*). Upper-secondary schools can offer general or vocational tracks or combine different tracks. About 9.1 per cent of upper-secondary students attend private schools (UDIR, 2025b). Private schools make their own admission rules and will not be considered further.

In urban areas, public upper-secondary schools recruit students based primarily on grade competition. This means that students compete for spaces at schools based on their grades from youth school, and schools compete for the best students. The counties can reduce the number of eligible applicants by introducing catchment areas within the county, so that place of residence becomes a criterion for eligibility. However, in all urban areas in Norway, there is competition between schools and students based on grades.

In past decades, social, ethnic, and gender segregation of students within upper-secondary schools has grown. The admissions system

Figure 4.1: The Norwegian public school system today



has contributed to this development because grades are correlated with class, ethnicity, and gender (Serediak & Helland, 2020; Lødding, 2004; Lødding & Helland, 2007). Growing housing segregation is another likely culprit for increasing ethnic and social segregation in schools (Lorentzen et al., 2025; Inntaksutvalget, 2020; Hansen, 2017). The admissions system and the role of grades as a tool for selection have long been controversial political issues in Norway, dividing the political left and right.

The political economy of education: Comprehensive education and selection based on grades as matters of left-right ‘class struggle’

Historically, social democrats and socialists in many countries have criticised capitalist education systems and demanded far-reaching educational reforms. The ideal of comprehensive education was developed as an alternative socialist conception of schooling, meant to combat class differences and give access to education for all, while at the same time socialising youths into solidarity and cooperation rather than competition. Ideas of education as human capital also impacted post-war social-democratic thinking, but mostly on the macro-level, in the sense that educational expansion was considered necessary for the success of the nation (Karlsen, 2006:136). Conservatives and (neo)liberals, on the other hand, have tended to emphasise the need for selection, competition, marketisation, and restrictions in access to especially valuable types of education. They have often supported socialisation into the status quo as a main educational aim, rather than viewing schools as instruments of social change (Gingrich & Guidici, 2022; Sass, 2022; Telhaug et al., 1999; Österman, 2017). From this point of view, the ongoing social reproduction in the school system is a fact of life that cannot and need not be avoided, but is considered natural (Sass, 2022:112, 133–134).

Grades as a tool of selection have played an important role in such conflicts. As stated by the Norwegian social democrat Einar Førde in a debate in the Norwegian parliament in 1974, social democrats at

the time viewed grades as “the currency in the capitalist education system” (Stortinget, 1974a:3133). Social democrats tried to tone down the importance of grades, arguing that grades create losers, foster a competitive mentality, and destroy motivation. They pointed to the strong empirical connection between grades and class background, using this as an argument for a lack of meritocratic fairness. For conservatives, grades have long been considered an important measuring scale, suitable as a tool of meritocratic selection (Telhaug et al., 1999:92, 194–199). Competition over grades has been viewed as a source of motivation for students to work harder, and as a possibility for individuals to shape their own fate.

Political sociological theories, such as power resource theory or Rokkianian cleavage theory, can serve to conceptualise such struggles over school policy as left-right conflicts or expressions of class cleavage, rooted in the unequal distribution of economic and educational resources in capitalist societies (Sass, 2022). This chapter also draws on historical institutionalist theory, which emphasises the importance of studying policy processes from a historical perspective. Outcomes of previous critical junctures and reform phases condition possibilities for change at any given time (Thelen, 1999). Next, the struggle over grades in youth school and admission rules to upper-secondary schooling in Norway is analysed as an example of a left-right class struggle. What is explored is how the power balance in the politics of upper-secondary education changed over time and what consequences this had for policymaking, leading to the current neoliberal status quo.

The 1960s and 1970s: Decades of educational reforms

After the Second World War, Norwegian education policy, like many other policy fields, was marked by a strong desire to ‘build up the country’. Education policy became an important part of the post-war programme for social change. Not only social democracy, but also representatives of the geographical and cultural periphery, aimed to

give more young people access to better education. Up until the 1970s, this desire for educational expansion shaped the development of the system. While conservatives were concerned about safeguarding the quality of education for the upper classes, their resistance to reforms was weak during this period (Sass, 2022).

Between 1954 and 1969, obligatory schooling was prolonged to nine years. Different lower-secondary school types were merged into the new youth school, which became a comprehensive school type serving the entire youth cohort, without segmentation. Previously, children of the upper (middle) classes often attended the academic lower-secondary *realskole*, while others went straight to work or attended the more vocationally oriented *framhaldsskole*. The latter did not provide access to upper-secondary schooling. Henceforth, all youths were given a chance to acquire a lower-secondary education at the level of the old *realskole*. By 1972, grades had been gradually abolished throughout the schooling system. The leading pedagogical views were progressive, based on ideals of emancipation, cooperation, equality, and justice (Telhaug et al., 1999:123–126).

For social democracy, the development of a comprehensive nine-year obligatory schooling system was a priority during this period. However, the format of upper-secondary schooling was also debated from the start, and gradually reformed. Already in 1952, a committee that had been put in place to discuss the development of the education system in 1947 (*Samordningsnemnda for skoleverket*) suggested that the laws for the different types of general and vocational upper-secondary education should be merged, with the aim of developing a common upper-secondary school for all Norwegian youths. The regional school administration was expanded and charged with planning the expansion of upper-secondary schooling (Sælen, 1989).

Various forms of upper-secondary education were tested during the 1960s and early 1970s. The number of students applying to and attending the general upper-secondary school (*gymnas*) grew rapidly, as the first cohorts of students were graduating from the new youth school in many cities. The *gymnas* was popular because it was the only entry to higher education. The number of students in vocational

education was also rising, but there was a lack of vocational schools (Sælen, 1989:27). In 1962 and 1965, two committees were tasked with discussing the pedagogical foundations, content, and structural development of upper-secondary schooling (*Gymnasutvalget* and *Skolekomitéen*).

In 1970, the majority of the school committee of 1965, including its chairman, Reiulf Steen, a longtime leader of the Labour Party, declared that, ideologically, the new upper-secondary school should aim to “create justice and peace in the world, to reduce the differences between poor and rich nations, to even out social and economic inequality, to get rid of all class divides and build a society based on economic equality, social equality, and cooperation” (Sælen, 1989:44). The development of solidarity should be one of the most important aims. Knowledge was also considered important, but within cooperative relations. The school had to ensure that ‘chasing status’ by way of ‘swatting’ should not be encouraged, and that competitive mentalities should be kept at bay. Ideological indoctrination was to be avoided, and students should learn to respect factual arguments and develop their own opinions, with the aim of solving problems together (Sælen, 1989:45–46).

Important representatives of the Labour Party now aimed at a comprehensive upper-secondary school that should combine general and vocational tracks and recruit students based on geographical catchment areas (Sælen, 1989:39). From 1963 to 1977, the political programmes of the Labour Party consistently demanded that upper-secondary schools be “comprehensive school[s]”, and that vocational and general education should be put on a par with each other (Telhaug et al., 1999:78). Combined schools with general and vocational tracks were considered a good solution, especially for rural areas. One of the arguments against such combined upper-secondary schools was that they would be too large. In 1971, the parliamentary education committee agreed on a compromise which entailed that, in the future, combined upper-secondary schools, with vocational and general tracks, and schools with only one track, should be made possible (Sælen, 1989:74–80). After a lengthy debate, a law on upper-secondary education was passed in 1974 (Stortinget, 1974b). The law applied to general and vocational upper-

secondary schools alike, and it was now possible to establish combined schools offering general and vocational tracks.

The introduction of youth schools meant that a much higher share of each cohort could apply for general upper-secondary education. At the same time, there was a massive lack of school spaces. While it was a political goal for social democracy to expand upper-secondary schooling so that the entire cohort could attend, this goal was still far from being achieved. Competition for school spaces became quite fierce throughout the 1970s and 1980s, and admission rules to upper-secondary school became a topic of debate (Lysne, 2004).

At this point, the Labour Party still wanted to abolish grades in youth schools and to make admission to upper-secondary schooling entirely independent of grades. In place of grades, the Labour Party wanted to establish age as the main admission criterion for upper-secondary schools. This was also called the “wait your turn” principle (*vente på tur prinsippet*). The idea was that everyone had equal rights to upper-secondary education, and that older students, who had waited the longest, should be taken up first. Grades, it was argued, were not a good way to measure motivation, and motivation was more important for success in upper-secondary education than grades (Stortinget, 1979:9). To understand this position, one must keep in mind that, back then, it was not uncommon for youths to enter the labour market after lower-secondary schooling and work for some time before possibly re-entering upper-secondary schooling. In the longer run, the Labour Party wanted to expand upper-secondary schooling sufficiently so that all students could attend, without favouritism towards any group. Because the lack of spaces necessitated regulating the distribution of spaces somehow, age was considered a fairer criterion than grades. The conservatives, the rurally based Centre Party, and the Christian Democrats, on the other hand, emphasised that grades should be the main admission criterion wherever space was scarce (Stortinget, 1979:8–10).

While the abolition of grades in primary school happened without major opposition, the idea that grades should be abolished in youth school became a topic of massive debate during the second half of the 1970s. A committee (*Evalueringsutvalget*, EVA) was charged with

discussing alternatives for evaluation, and published two radical reports, suggesting that grades in youth school should be replaced with informal feedback (EVA I and EVA II). A minority of the committee wanted to abolish grades in upper-secondary school as well. This was met with increasing resistance from the right towards the end of the 1970s.

From around 1979, the political centre joined the right in insisting that grades in lower-secondary school were necessary for selection to upper-secondary school. In parliament, several politicians representing centrist parties stated that grades in youth schools could potentially be abolished when there were enough spaces in upper-secondary schools for all. It was maintained that as long as spaces were scarce, grades were the only fair way of selection, giving individuals the opportunity to shape their own futures (Sass, 2022:106–111). The organisation of primary school teachers (*Lærerlaget*), which had previously supported the Labour Party's attempts to abolish grades in primary and lower-secondary schools, was now hesitant and internally split on the issue (Sass, 2022:110). While many Labour Party politicians still emphasised their critical views on grades, this led to a standstill, and grades in youth school were kept.

Before the 1981 elections, the Labour Party made a final attempt to make admission to upper-secondary entirely dependent on age, and to make grades almost irrelevant. New national regulations for admission emphasised that those who had waited the longest for access to upper-secondary education should always be taken up first. The new regulations also stated that any county that wished to implement different rules would need to apply to the ministry for permission to do so. This was an attempt to reduce the counties' influence on regulations (Lysne, 2004:196).

The 1980s and 1990s: Neoliberal ideology on the rise, but social democracy soldiers on

In 1981, the conservatives won the elections. Kåre Willoch now led a conservative minority government. From 1983, the Centre Party and the Christian Democrats also joined the conservative coalition.

Overall, Willoch's government did not make any far-reaching changes in school policy. The structural reforms of the 1970s, which had radically reshaped the Norwegian school system, were not reversed. When asked about why a reversal had not been attempted, the conservative politician Lars Roar Langslet explained that the conservatives did not have a majority on their own, and that a complete reversal would not have been supported by the parties of the centre (Sass, 2022:115). However, the conservatives ensured that reform processes came to a halt. Restorative pedagogy made a comeback, with increased emphasis on productivity, efficiency, schooling content, and technical-cognitive competencies. Social democracy's older pedagogical views, focused on redistributing economic and educational resources and on fostering critical thinking and cooperative abilities, now received less attention (Telhaug et al., 1999:124–125). While the idea of more individual freedom appealed to many, the increasing focus on the individual challenged formerly hegemonic ideas of community and solidarity in schools (Lysne, 2004:181).

Policy areas in which the conservative government of the 1980s did achieve a significant change of direction were grading and admission to upper-secondary school. One of the first actions of the new conservative government was to withdraw the regulations for admission to upper-secondary school the Labour Party had introduced in 1981, and to reinstate older regulations. From 1983, new regulations for admission to upper-secondary school emphasised admission based on grades and only included the option to give a few extra points for work experience (Lysne, 2004:191–196).

The debate on grades in youth school was now considered “dead” by the conservatives, not least because public opinion was on their side (Lysne, 2004:275). Most Norwegians did not support the abolishment of grades in youth school (Lysne, 2004:109–110). During this phase, the Labour Party was most concerned with protecting the comprehensive primary and youth schools. Faced with unfavourable public opinion and increasingly fierce attacks from the right, the Labour Party ended up on the defensive in the grading debate. It now chose less definitive formulations in its manifestos, for example, demanding “new forms

of evaluation that can support and inspire students” in 1981 and 1985 (Lysne, 2004:355). In 1985, the party also suggested that grades should be abolished in the youth school *in the long run*.

In 1986, the Labour Party was elected into government again. It was now argued that grades in lower-secondary school would lose their importance once upper-secondary schooling was fully expanded. Then, one returns to the question of whether grades in youth school should be abolished (Lysne, 2004:275–276). In the early 1980s, lack of spaces in upper-secondary schools was still an issue, but expansion continued.

By 1989, the Labour Party no longer mentioned the demand to abolish grades in youth schools in its manifesto. During the 1980s, the Conservative Party and the far-right Progress Party strongly emphasised that grades and exams in the youth school should be maintained and be the main admission criterion for upper-secondary school (Telhaug et al., 1999:195–199).

In 1990, the Labour Party politician Gudmund Hernes became the minister of education. Hernes pushed for a significant reform of upper-secondary education. His reform, called Reform 94, was based on several years of preparatory committee work and entailed a radical change in vocational education (Lysne, 2004:381–432; Stortinget, 1992a). The number of upper-secondary options or tracks was reduced from 113 to 13, with the aim of making the system easier to navigate for young people. All pathways through upper-secondary education were to lead to a formal qualification. Not least, all youths now had the *right* to upper-secondary education, meaning the regional school administration was obliged to offer places to all applicants. The system had been expanded massively, and the aim of providing placement to the entire cohort was now within reach. In theory, this change could have made admission to upper-secondary schooling based on grades unnecessary.

However, in the law proposal for Reform 94, the question of grade-based admission, or alternative admission criteria, was not taken up at all (Stortinget, 1992a). The term ‘comprehensive school’ was no longer applied to upper-secondary school, at least not by the Labour Party. The only reference to the term was made by the representatives of the conservatives and the far-right Progress Party.

In the parliamentary education committee's statement on the law, these representatives emphasised that upper-secondary school should under no circumstances be turned into a 'comprehensive school' with the aim of uniting as many students as possible in the same type of school. The Progress Party, which had been founded in 1973 and which had received 13 per cent of the vote in 1989, also underlined the need for "discipline" and "more exams" in school (Stortinget, 1992b:8).

Politicians of the left now believed that the right to upper-secondary schooling would lessen grading pressure on students in lower-secondary school (Lysne, 2004:416; Stortinget, 1995). As far as the admissions system for upper-secondary schools was concerned, it seems that the Labour Party's strategy became delegating this issue to the counties. The documents for Reform 94 emphasised repeatedly that decisions should, to a greater extent, be taken locally or regionally, in line with the principle of "management by objectives" (*målstyring*), an important New Public Management (NPM) governance tool (Stortinget, 1992a:24). The discourse on education began to show greater similarities to economic discourse, with a focus on productivity and competitiveness of the national society in a globalised capitalist economy. Market logics began to infiltrate how education was governed (Karlsen, 2006:134–137).

Grading in youth school was debated again in connection with the other major reform of the time, Reform 97. This reform prolonged primary schooling by one year by lowering the school enrolment age. During the debates on this reform, a coalition of the Labour Party, the Socialist Left Party, and of the smaller centre parties, the Centre Party and the Christian Democrats, suggested a reform of the evaluation system in primary and youth schools, emphasising that evaluation should create motivation. The current evaluation system was criticised for producing a "competition society" and for contributing to exclusion (Lysne, 2004:417; Stortinget, 1995). This can be seen as an echo of earlier grading debates, and as a final protest against the rise of neoliberal educational thinking.

However, the parties did not suggest that grades in youth school should be abolished, only that the ranking of students should receive

less attention and encouraging experimentation with alternative forms of exams and evaluation (Stortinget, 1995:26–27). Somewhat surprisingly, Hernes went on to introduce a new grading scale to youth schools. Until then, youth schools had used a five-step grading scale, while upper-secondary schools applied a six-step scale. This 1-to-6 scale was now also introduced to youth schools, against the protests of the primary school teacher organisation (*Lærerlaget*). Previously, the Labour Party had argued for simpler scales with fewer grades to avoid too much ranking of and competition among students. Hernes instead argued that a six-point grading scale would be more nuanced and could help motivate students. This was a clear break with previous social-democratic pedagogical convictions (Lysne, 2004:418). Abolishing grades in youth school was no longer a social-democratic reform aim.

Nevertheless, Hernes's reforms ensured more continuity in school politics and fewer neoliberal changes than in neighbouring Sweden, where large-scale privatisation and marketisation of the school system took place during the 1990s – today seen as the source of increasing segregation in that Nordic country. After all, Hernes believed in the comprehensive public school system and in educational expansion, and Reform 94 ensured access to upper-secondary education for the entire cohort. In this sense, it was clearly a social-democratic reform. Still, Reform 94 did not turn upper-secondary schools into 'comprehensive schools' as had been envisaged by the Labour Party in the 1970s, and grades continued to be the main admission criterion. Conservative and neoliberal ideas on schooling were on the rise and traditional social-democratic reform ideology was under pressure (Volckmar, 2008). It was only a matter of time until ideas of 'free choice' and 'competition' would re-interpret the older social-democratic reform aims more fundamentally.

The 2000s and onwards: A further shift to the right

The 2000s started off with an electoral victory for the right, and the conservative Kristin Clemet became the minister of education in a conservative minority government with the Liberal Party and the Christian Democrats. Clemet had been vice-CEO of the Confederation

of Norwegian Enterprise (*Næringslivets Hovedorganisasjon*, NHO), an employers' organisation. Her approach to education marked a break with all previous traditions, normalising the neoliberal framing of education. Clemet's main legacy became the so-called 'knowledge boost' (*Kunnskapsløftet*). This reform involved a reshaping of curricula for the entire school system with an increased focus on basic competencies, as well as the introduction of a quality evaluation system based on nationwide tests. Test scores and other statistical indicators for individual schools were published on a website called 'school portal' (*Skoleporten*) from 2004, which allowed direct comparisons of schools with respect to students' results. A market- and competition-oriented logic and language now infiltrated education policy, as schools were increasingly compared to businesses catering to 'clients' or 'users'. Management by objectives became the main governance principle. The term 'comprehensive school' was replaced by Clemet with terms like 'knowledge school', in line with Clemet's orientation towards higher performance requirements, individualisation, and competition (Thuen, 2017:204–209).

The far-right Progress Party had now turned the so-called 'free school choice' of upper-secondary schools into one of their main aims in school policy. Between 2001 and 2006, the party introduced three motions on the topic in parliament, all suggesting that counties should no longer have a say, and that grade-based admission should become the rule in the entire country. Except for the motion of 2004, these were supported by the Conservative Party (Stortinget, 2001, 2004, 2006). In 2006, the Liberal Party representative in the parliamentary education committee also declared that he supported free school choice (Stortinget, 2006). The smaller Christian Democrats did not support these motions, and they did not receive majorities.

Rhetorically, the Progress Party and its allies insisted on the individual's right to 'choose' a school. Spaces in upper-secondary schools were to be distributed exclusively based on grades. 'Free' competition over school spaces would lead to increased motivation, because students would be able to determine their chances individually. This, it was claimed, could counteract housing segregation and increase

social mobility (Stortinget, 2006:2). In 2004, the representatives of the Progress Party argued that

[f]ree school choice could help to raise the level of quality in schools, as schools experience increased competition and must strive to provide a good offer in order to have an operational basis. Together with unit-price financing – i.e. the state pays school fees and these follow the student – these members believe that this will contribute to increased competition between schools and increased quality of the education provided. (Stortinget, 2004:2)

The main argument of the Labour Party and other political parties that opposed these motions was that upper-secondary schooling should be administered by the counties because different geographical conditions required different solutions. While some counties had opted for free school choice in the entire county, others chose to operate with catchment areas to ensure the survival of neighbourhood schools in more sparsely populated areas (Stortinget, 2001). It was also pointed out that free school choice could lead to increased segregation and that it would not be free for students with poor grades, who could be forced to attend schools far from their place of residence or to move away from home (Stortinget, 2006).

Of course, the status quo was such that grade-based admission was already present in most urban areas, while place of residence mostly mattered in more rural areas. In the largest city, Oslo, free school choice was introduced in 1997. From 2004–2008, a combined model was implemented in Oslo, in which place of residence counted in addition to grades, but from 2008, admission was again purely grade-based (and has remained so in the present day). From 2004, free school choice was introduced by a conservative coalition in the second-largest city, Bergen, which had previously operated with a quota system to ensure social mixing (Fylkestinget, 2004; Hordaland fylkeskommune, 2004).

From 2005 to 2013, Norway was again governed by the Labour Party, in a coalition with the Socialist Left and the Centre Party. During this

period, the Ministry of Education was continually in the hands of the Socialist Left Party. However, no changes took place on the national level with respect to grading in primary schooling or admission to upper-secondary schools. This illustrates the extent to which neoliberal ideology had penetrated educational policy at this stage. The red-green government did introduce a couple of experimental programmes on ‘better evaluation practice’ and ‘evaluation for learning’. The latter programme involved experiments with evaluation in approximately 500 primary schools (Stortinget, 2011:62), but they did not lead to any significant adjustment in the grading system. Significantly, towards the end of the period, a white paper was passed on “quality and diversity in the common school”, which did not discuss grading and admission to upper-secondary schools at all (Stortinget, 2013). The term ‘comprehensive school’ was now officially out of use, even in the rhetoric of the left. The white paper included some remarks on the necessity to mix students across achievement levels in primary schools, and against the tendency towards increasing organisational differentiation (Stortinget, 2013:91–94). Besides this, few traces of the radical reform ideas of the 1970s remained. In 2007, a digital admissions system was introduced (VIGO), which centralised and bureaucratised the admissions process, leading to a loss of local “wiggle room” with respect to the allocation of students to schools (Skavhellen, 2024).

The lack of any radical reform attempts stands in stark contrast to the political manifestos of the Socialist Left, in which the social-democratic school ideology of the 1970s still featured. According to its political manifesto (2005–2009), the Socialist Left Party wanted to abolish grades in youth school, because “today’s grading system encourages memorisation rather than learning, and creates competitive pressure rather than collaboration” (Socialist Left Party, 2005). The manifesto also stated that the party “wants place of residence to be the most important criterion for admission to upper-secondary education, and work for good upper-secondary education offers in the districts, [...] to counteract young people having to move” (Socialist Left Party, 2005). However, just four years later, the party’s

2009 to 2013 manifesto was less categorical. It no longer stated the party's goal to abolish grades in youth school, but only that one should "examine changes to the assessment system in youth schools and upper-secondary schools with the aim to ameliorate today's evaluation system", and that the party was against a "purely grade-based" admissions system to upper-secondary school (Socialist Left Party, 2009). The Labour Party's manifestos of the period contained no remarks on grading in youth school. With respect to admission to upper-secondary schools, the manifestos only stated admissions rules design should be left to the counties. This was also the position of the Centre Party. It is uncertain why the Socialist Left Party did not use its control of the Ministry of Education to make any significant changes in this regard. It seems that radical educational reform ideas no longer received much attention within the parties of the left.

From 2013 to 2021, the conservatives again took over the government. In 2019, the conservative government proposed the introduction of free school choice based on grade competition across Norway. The Ministry of Education conducted a hearing on two different options: (1) either to force all counties to abolish catchment areas altogether *or* (2) to reduce the number of possible catchment areas. Both suggestions were met with criticism from the county governments, opposition politicians, and various organisations, including unions and even the employer organisation (NHO, 2019; LO, 2019; Utdanningsforbundet, 2019a; Stortinget, 2020). Nevertheless, in June 2021, the government decided to introduce a model which would force all counties to either implement grade-based competition across the entire county, or to implement a model with a maximum of six catchment areas within the county (Norwegian Ministry of Education, 2021a).

This became a hot topic before the elections of September 2021. In this debate, conservative and liberal supporters of free school choice were pitted against social democratic and leftist critics of what the left called 'grade-based school choice'. Shortly after the elections, the new Labour Party/Centre Party government abolished the regulations of June 2021, thereby returning to the former practice of letting the

counties decide on their admissions systems for upper-secondary schools (Norwegian Ministry of Education, 2021b). Based on the debate before the elections, during which competition based on grades was problematised as a source of social inequality and injustice, one could have expected a more radical reform of the admissions system. However, the current government has not taken further steps to reduce the importance of grades for upper-secondary school choice in urban areas.

Today: Social-democratic dreams, neoliberal realities

Egalitarian, comprehensive school ideals still enjoy broad support in the Norwegian population, at least in theory. For example, majorities among students in upper-secondary schools support statements claiming that rich and poor students, students with different grades, and students with different mother tongues should attend school together (Sass et al., 2024). Politicians of the left sometimes use the term ‘comprehensive school’ with a positive connotation, albeit only vaguely. The introductory part of the current curricula still emphasises progressive pedagogy and socialisation into cooperation, equality, and solidarity (UDIR, 2025c). The social-democratic ideal of a democratic, open education system that teaches mutual respect and community and mixes students of different backgrounds, seems to live on as an undercurrent and a textual reminder.

However, this social-democratic idea has become more of a dream than a reality, at least as far as upper-secondary schooling is concerned. In all urban areas of Norway, grades are the main admission criterion to upper-secondary school, and in the cities, segregation has been rising for decades (Lorentzen et al., 2025; Hansen, 2017). Everyone is acutely aware of the status hierarchy between upper-secondary schools. Some schools today are ‘elite schools’, attended almost exclusively by straight-A students. Other schools are at the bottom of the hierarchy and are termed “drug schools” or “shit schools” by the elite school students (Rong, 2025).

For the left, or what is left of it, it has been difficult to do anything about this development. A neoliberal understanding of motivation through competition has become hegemonic, and grades are, for the most part, considered a fair instrument for measuring talent and effort and for distributing benefits and disadvantages. This is also related to a strong focus on the individual and a dislike of any type of centralised policies for school admission, which could achieve more equal outcomes (Sass et al., 2024:19). The idea that the administration should have some room for discretion, and that students could be distributed through equalisation-oriented quota systems or the like, seems radical in today's context, even though such systems have existed in some countries historically (see Hordaland fylkeskommune, 1997, 2004). Today, whenever modest changes of the admissions or grading systems are suggested, conservative commentators are swift to criticise and scandalise such ideas (Bergens Tidende, 2015, 2019; Dagbladet, 2021).

The far right especially continues to push for free school choice (Stortinget, 2023). Of course, this free choice is in fact only available to privileged individuals, who are winners in the system of grade competition. Vulnerable students are the losers who do not get to choose (Lødding, 2004:18), supposedly because they haven't worked hard enough or lack talent. Neoliberal freedom is not for everyone.

This ideological shift to the right has also affected the ideology and strategies of the Labour Party. Although social democrats still see problems with increasing segregation in schools today, the party has nothing to say anymore about grading in youth schools. While some local chapters of the Labour Party in Oslo, for example, have suggested alternative admissions systems to upper-secondary schools, social democracy no longer suggests making admission completely independent of grades (Labour Party, 2025). Some chapters of the Labour Party (e.g. in Rogaland) even explicitly support neoliberal free school choice. Hardly anyone seems to remember the history of these struggles, and the original aim of post-war social democracy to abolish grades in the entire primary school system and to implement comprehensive schooling at the upper-secondary level.

It is not easy to see a way forward from the status quo, as the hegemony of the right seems ingrained in society. Still, in the two leftist parties, the Socialist Left and the Red Party, some traces of radical school ideology seem to live on (Socialist Left Party, 2025; Red Party, 2025). The Red Party (*Rødt*) is the only party that still demands that grades be abolished across the entire school system and that admission to upper-secondary schools be based primarily on place of residence and catchment areas. Within the largest teacher's union (*Utdanningsforbundet*), discussions on reducing grading and exploring alternative forms of evaluation also continue. Some youth schools experiment with such alternatives (Utdanningsforbundet, 2019b, 2023). The union has also taken a stance against grade competition in admission to upper-secondary schools and demands alternative admissions systems aim at social equalisation, ensure that students don't have to travel long distances to school, and lessen grading pressure in youth school (Utdanningsforbundet, 2019c).

A substantial change of direction would require that a larger number of actors, on the left and in the political centre, demand a serious shift away from the hegemony of market principles and individualism, and towards school policies aimed at social cohesion, community, and justice. In particular, the legitimacy of grades as an instrument of sorting and the idea of motivation through competition would have to be questioned fundamentally.

The declining wellbeing of children and young people, as well as the high levels of segregation and inequality in schools, might be turned into convincing arguments for policy change. However, this will only be possible if the Labour Party takes inspiration from the radical, well-informed debates of the 1970s, during which ideological differences between the left and the right were more stark. A change of direction would require a rediscovery of social-democratic reform ideals and a visionary alternative concept for the future development of the school system based on the ideals of democracy and cooperation.

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