

# Plug In

SWEDEN'S LARGEST COLLABORATIVE PROJECT IN COMBATING  
EARLY SCHOOL LEAVING

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# Discontinuation of studies – a priority issue

Sweden has a large number of students with high levels of absenteeism and who leave upper secondary school without a diploma providing basic qualifications. The difference between the academic performance of boys and girls is relatively high. 72 percent of the girls, five years after starting upper secondary school, have completed their education and achieved basic eligibility, while only 63 percent of boys have done so.<sup>1</sup>



*Basic qualification*

*No basic qualification*

*No upper secondary diploma*

*Study results 5 years after starting school for students who started upper secondary school in 2007*

Combating dropout is an important part of the work on preventing exclusion. Young people who do not complete upper secondary school risk social exclusion with either a tenuous or no connection to the job market.

Discontinuation of studies is a priority issue in Sweden's municipalities. Against this background, Sveriges Kommuner och Landsting - SKL (the Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions - SALAR) together with five regions initiated the methodology and structure influencing project, Plug In, which began in February 2012 and ended in June 2015.

Research shows that the group of students who drop out of higher secondary education is extremely heterogeneous and that the causes are often a combination of individual and structural factors. To reduce the rate of failure to complete studies, therefore requires action at both school level and in society at large.

Plug In has built upon this knowledge by involving stakeholders at local, regional and national level. The target group has been students at risk of abandoning their studies and young adults who have already discontinued their high school education. In eighty so-called local methodology workshops in 47

<sup>11</sup> Source: The Swedish National Agency for Education, all students who were enrolled in an upper secondary school programme - nationally or individually in 2007

municipalities, various approaches and methods have been tested in order to reduce the rate of dropout from studies.

Together, over three years, the parties in Plug In have identified challenges, contributed to solutions and increased knowledge of the school dropout issue. New ways of working and forms of collaboration that reduce school dropout rates have emerged. The parties have jointly created opportunities for improved work with the target group and continued dissemination of experience and knowledge of the dropout issue.

Plug In is funded by the European Social Fund and by the participating parties. In total, the project has amounted to SEK 130 million.

# Plug In

Sweden's largest collaborative project in preventing early school leaving at upper secondary level.

Plug In is organized in a successful multi-level system with SALAR as the central project owner, five regional sub-projects and about eighty methodology workshops at municipal level.<sup>2</sup>

The aim was to help reduce the dropout rate in upper secondary school and to get more young people to complete their studies with pass grades. The target group was individuals, 16 and older, at risk of interrupting their studies in compulsory school/upper secondary school or who had already abandoned their studies.

With approximately 80 methodology workshops in 47 Swedish municipalities, Plug In is to date, the country's largest project for supporting young people to complete upper secondary school. Over 7700 young people who dropped out of their upper secondary school studies or were at risk of doing so, have participated in one of Plug In's methodology workshops. 75 percent of the methodology workshops have to some extent, been implemented in the participating municipalities.

## Participating regions and municipalities:

**The Göteborg Region Association of Local Authorities:** Göteborg, Kungälv, Alingsås, Stenungsund, Partille, Härryda and Mölndal.

**Region Västerbotten:** Lycksele, Skellefteå, Storuman, Vännäs, Norsjö, Vilhelmina and Umeå.

**Kalmar County and Southern Småland:** Älmhult, Oskarshamn, Lessebo, Högsby, Markaryd, Borgholm, Kalmar, Mörbylånga, Torsås, Växjö, Mönsterås, Hultsfred, Vimmerby, Västervik, Tingsryd, Ljungby and Haganäs.

**Östsmåland:** Motala, Norrköping, Finspång, Linköping, Valdemarsvik, Söderköping, Kinda, Ödeshög, Boxholm, Ydre and Tranås.

**Jämtland:** Östersund, Strömsund, Åre, Berg and Krokom

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<sup>2</sup> Following the conclusion of Plug In, Southern Småland, Östsmåland and Jämtland have changed name to Region Kronoberg, Region Östergötland and Region Jämtland-Härjedalen.

## PlugInnovation.se

PlugInnovation.se is a digital platform focusing on the school dropout issue. The website was initiated and built up within the framework of Plug In and will continue to be a hub for the early school leaving issue in Sweden.

Here, the methods which have been developed and tested in the participating municipalities have been coordinated. Research in the area has also been made available.



*On the website, you can read about the success factors and research in the field. Get inspired by how municipalities work on reducing school dropout, find effective study paths for new arrivals and support young people who have abandoned school to return to their studies.*

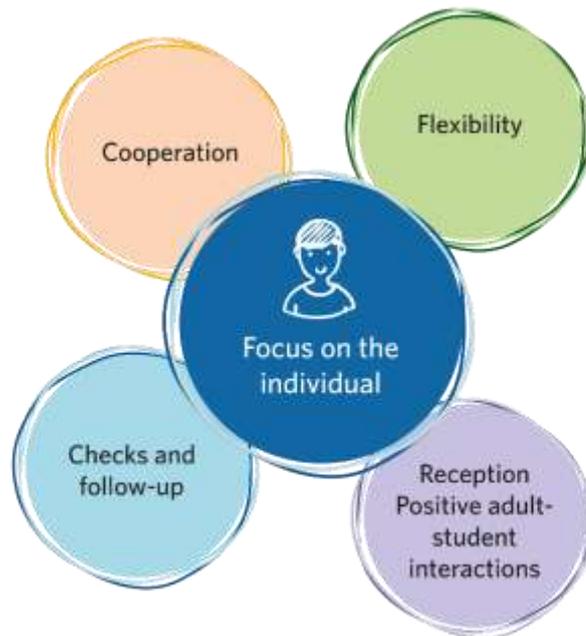
Together with PlugInnovation, the regional project offices have contributed to the development of the work and focus of the workshops. It is in the workshops that the main development work has taken place, in activities aimed directly at the target group. The methodology workshops have varied greatly in content and design. The most common types of interventions have been categorised as follows by PlugInnovation.

- Mentorship/coaching
- Identification and mapping of risk groups
- Outreach activities
- Transfer from compulsory school to upper secondary school
- Student health

## Success factors

During the final phase of the project, PlugInnovation, with a qualitative research approach, conducted in-depth studies in ten of the participating methodology workshops. The aim was to further examine the models used and clarify how different interventions work and why they work. But also to illustrate how methods and programmes, which in international research have proved to be successful in combating school dropout rates, are working in a Swedish contemporary context.

Five important dimensions emerged as particularly central in the work.



### **Focus on the individual**

The in-depth studies show that the very basis for successfully supporting students at risk of failing to complete their education, is an individual-centred approach which takes into account the student's overall needs. It involves, on the basis of a broad perspective, investigating what prevents students from coming to school, attending class and succeeding in their studies as well as taking into consideration the needs which extend beyond educational support.

### **Checks and follow-up**

To "keep track" of the students is a decisive success factor in combating dropout. Schools that systematically identify and follow up factors that indicate a distancing from school and learning, are more successful in identifying those at risk of abandoning their studies and thus also increase the possibilities of intervening in the dropout process. The workshops in Plug In have been involved with various types of monitoring. New procedures for transfer between compulsory and upper secondary school, early follow-up discussions with new students as well as the design of new structures and functions with the mandate to capture and support students in need of support such as student coaches, extended mentoring time and changing team structures.

But of course it's not enough to have good systems and procedures for identifying students at risk of dropping out of school. It's necessary to develop strategies to meet the needs of identified students with adaptations and various initiatives as part of the preventative work.

### **Reception and positive adult-student interaction**

For young people at risk of interrupting their studies, strong relationships with adults at school are especially important. This is because the relationships

strengthen the individual's ties to the school. Systematic relationship-building efforts help to create a good basis for the students' connection to the school. Many activities within Plug In have worked very successfully with e.g. school coaches, enhanced student health teams in supporting the pedagogues in their social work.

### **Flexibility**

Many young people in the Plug In target group have a history of poor results, low attendance and "school failure" behind them. To reach these young people requires a free and less tradition-bound way of thinking. It is important that the school develops a flexible approach in order to meet the needs of young people. Through sensitivity and occasional minor changes, the individual's prerequisites can be altered in a positive way. Several of the participating ventures in Plug In have focused on finding solutions in the form of flexible study pace, block learning and new methods of identifying and seeking out young adults who have already discontinued their high school education.

### **Cooperation**

Students who have already interrupted their studies or who are at risk of dropping out often find themselves in complex situations and need the support of several different professions and agencies in the community. For the individual, the contact areas can be perceived as difficult to comprehend and it might be unclear with whom, how and why various contacts are made. Through clear collaboration, within the school as well as outside, the number of contacts may be reduced and the individual frameworks rather than those of the organisation, focused upon. In Plug In, improved and enhanced collaboration has been an important point of focus. Schools and other activities have developed structures, forums, procedures, working methods and new features to enable productive collaboration around students and young people in need of different types of support. The work has revolved around systems for sharing information and coordinating efforts.

It is important to stress that it is necessary to work with all of these success factors in parallel in order to create a school where more students can achieve the upper secondary diploma.

## **Results and examples from Plug In**

Many of the project workshops in Plug In have achieved remarkable results in their efforts to get more students to complete their studies and support the students who have already dropped out of upper secondary school to return to their studies or other activities. The fact that 75 percent of the project activities have been implemented in some form show that the municipalities value the work carried out and want to continue working towards ensuring that more students complete their studies.

At Oscar's Upper Secondary School in Oskarshamn Municipality, dropout rates from the Introduction programme (IM) fell during the academic year 2012/2013 from 8.4 percent to 1.3 percent.

During spring term 2014, attendance on the IM programme at the same school increased from 76.8 percent to 85.2 percent and on the national programme attendance increased from 86.2 percent to 88.7 percent.

In the academic year 2011/2012, the total proportion of students dropping out of all upper secondary schools in Jämtland county was approximately 13 percent. In June 2014 the dropout rate was between 2-5 percent of the upper secondary schools participating in the project in the county. This is what Strömsund in Jämtland has to say about its work in Plug In:

### **Change of attitude has resulted in fewer failing to complete their studies**

In Strömsund, a conscious effort to change attitudes has resulted in a school that does everything to hang on to its students until graduation day.

"We have been working on changing attitudes among both staff and students," says Anna Strömstedt, local project manager for Plug In and assistant principal at the school. "We want students to have realistic expectations and understanding of the consequences if they choose to drop out of school before reaching the final grade."

Among the staff, both realisation of the enormous costs youth alienation involves for society and the personal consequences for the individual, created a desire to really strive to keep the students in school.

"Since autumn term 2013, we have only had one dropout. Before that, there were considerably more but the trend has reversed," says Anna.

"To help students who are struggling to keep up with the lessons, since the Plug In project started there is a full-time student coach at the school. Her task is to capture those students who are in the risk zone. Her work is both solution-focused and motivating. The coach works together with mentors, teaching staff, the student health team as well as parents and guardians."

"Our school's strength is that we have created such close collaboration between all staff. We can see all the students and offer individual solutions based on needs."

Three of the participating regions have also directed their work toward young people who have already discontinued their studies. This is where development of the work with the municipal information /activity responsibility (KIA/KAA)<sup>3</sup> has been an important part of the efforts of the workshops and the regions.

In Göteborg, for example, a city-wide perspective on the monitoring of young people within the municipal activity responsibility, KAA, is in progress. This includes a city-wide methodology handbook. Through Plug In monitoring and mapping frequency increased from 45 percent before the project to 95 percent in the last year of the project.

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<sup>3</sup> On 1 January 2015, 3 KIA became what is now known as the municipal activity responsibility (KAA)

# Conclusion

With its size, geographical distribution and multi-level system, Plug In has taken a comprehensive approach to the problem of dropout in Sweden. The project started with the drive to reduce the dropout rate in secondary schools by developing methods and forms of cooperation that are focused on positive change for individuals, organizations and systems.

By involving relevant stakeholders at local, regional, national and international level, Plug In has tested methods and raised the problem of early school leaving and disseminated new knowledge about the project's experiences at all levels. Through decentralized management and the considerable resources allocated at local level for working directly with the target group, the project has been able to cover as large a part of the wider issue as possible.

Through the multi-level system and the project's focus, collaboration within the levels and between the levels has come about where previously this did not exist. The regions have developed a complementary and coordinating role for the municipalities within education, linked to regional skills provision and growth perspective.

## Follow the continued commitment

In the autumn of 2015 the initiative continued, now through Plug In 2.0.

The main focus of the new project is to work on and develop the areas of Plug In identified as success factors and thereby enhance the quality of schools so that more students complete their studies. The aim of spreading awareness and knowledge of the dropout problem has enabled Plug In 2.0 to widen its operations to now finally cover 8 regions.

For those of you who are interested in the dropout issue, strategic approach, method descriptions and advice on how to work to reduce dropout rates, we recommend our website [www.plugininnovation.se](http://www.plugininnovation.se). Here we have gathered all the participating project methods and research in the field. You can also read about Plug In and other projects run by SKL on school development at [www.skl.se](http://www.skl.se)

Ultimately, the focus on the dropout issue will obviously play a positive part in the development of individual young people and provide for a good start in life. In total, it is estimated that 3000 young people spread across 40 municipalities will be reached during the Plug In 2.0 project period.

## Plug In

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*Plug In*<sup>2.0</sup>



*PlugInnovation*