STUDIEN

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KATRIN SCHÄFGEN (ED.)

EUROPEAN EDUCATION BETWEEN JUSTICE AND SELECTIVITY

GERMANY IN COMPARISON WITH ESTONIA, SPAIN, AND FINLAND

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Study commissioned by the Rosa-Luxemburg-Stiftung

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INHALT

ABSTRACT

Germany's education policy has faced scrutiny ever since the results of the very first PISA survey were released in 2000. The report revealed that academic success in Germany fell below the OECD average and was more strongly contingent upon a student's socio-economic and family background than was the case in any other participating country.

Since then, a series of measures has been implemented with regard to education policy, including the expansion of childcare facilities, the proliferation of full-day schooling, and, most recently, the Startchancen Programme, which provides specialized support for educationally disadvantaged students.

However, the improvements that were anticipated as a result of these endeavours have yet to come to fruition — neither with regard to improving students' basic competencies (reading, writing, numeracy) nor eradicating the growing degree of educational inequality.

With this in mind, the present study seeks to broaden the perspective, analysing any potential differences in terms of funding, structure, and allocation of authority in each country's national education system and how these may explain the disparity in academic success and educational inequality between countries. Spain (which, like Germany, falls below the OECD average in both fields) and Estonia and Finland (which both exceed the OECD average) were selected to provide points of comparison to Germany.

The study indicates that adequate funding for education is a necessary but not solely sufficient criterion for ensuring a quality education experience. Finland is the only one of the four countries analysed that exceeds the OECD average in terms of education funding; Spain's expenditure is equivalent to the average, while Germany and even Estonia, the PISA leader, fall below the average. It would seem that early childhood education (which was admittedly not a focus of this particular study) and longer periods of shared learning are guarantors of success in terms of ensuring a high standard of education that balances and overcomes inequalities — Estonia and Finland are clearly ahead of Germany and Spain in this regard. The level of privatization of a country's education system also has some bearing on academic success and educational equity; countries with a comparatively high degree of privatization (which is even more prevalent in Spain than it is in Germany) tend to perform significantly less well in this respect than countries in which educational institutions are state-owned or municipally owned (Estonia and Finland).

The study revealed some significant commonalities between the four countries analysed in terms of teacher training, which is typically obtained through a Master's-level university degree. However, there are marked differences when it comes to training for preschool teachers: while specialization as an early childhood educator in Finland and Estonia generally necessitates a BA-level university qualification, the same is not mandatory in Germany. The standing of teachers also varies dramatically between the four countries under analysis: it is highest in Finland and Estonia, significantly lower in Spain, and very low in Germany.

Accordingly, the challenges faced by each country with regard to education policy differ; the key requirements for ensuring a viable education policy in Germany in the long term are outlined in the conclusion of this study.

Katrin Schäfgen

LOOKING BEYOND OUR OWN BACKYARD

THE GERMAN EDUCATION SYSTEM IN COMPARISON WITH OTHER EUROPEAN COUNTRIES

INTRODUCTION

The findings of the first ever international study of academic performance in OECD countries (Artelt et al., 2001) sent shockwaves throughout Germany that continue to be felt to this day. One utterly unexpected finding from the study indicated that German grade nine students fell below the OECD performance average in the areas of reading, maths, and science. Even more alarming was the revelation that the correlation between academic success and a child's socio-economic background was more pronounced in Germany than in any other OECD country. Numerous subsequent international comparative studies, such as IGLU[1] (2001, 2006, 2011, 2016, 2021), TIMSS[2] (2020), further PISA studies (2003, 2006, 2009, 2012, 2015, 2018, 2022), and the national educational standards assessment studies IQB-Bildungstrend[3] have come to similar conclusions. Although the competency of German students in the areas of reading, maths, and science did improve in the years that followed the shock of the first PISA report, ultimately climbing to above the OECD average, the correlation between socio-economic background and academic success has neither been overcome nor mitigated. The most recent PISA report (2022) dealt another devastating blow, indicating that the competency of German students in the areas of reading, maths, and science had fallen to the lowest level ever recorded in Germany within the framework of PISA and, with the exception of science, had once again fallen below the OECD average. Currently, 30 percent of 15-year-old students do not meet the minimum requirements in maths to achieve their school-leaving qualifications and pursue further education, and 25 percent do not meet the minimum requirements with regard to reading skills. Moreover, Germany has the highest proportion of "at-risk groups" — in other words, students whose educational competencies do not extend beyond the primary-school level. And the correlation between students' backgrounds (socio-economic situation and family history of migration) and their academic success remains higher in Germany than average.

In short, Germany not only has a problem when it comes to the competency of its students in terms of basic developmental skills, it also has a pronounced equity problem that is very much at odds with the values of a democratic society.

However, these insights and analyses are hardly a new development and have been the subject of heated debate in the field of educational science and education policy for many years. There is no lack of shrewd analyses of the underlying causes of this glaring equity gap, and no shortage of proposed potential solutions for bridging it. In Germany, however, the starting conditions are especially complex. Although the school system is subject to the oversight of the federal government,[4] responsibility for education policy rests with the 16 individual *Bundesländer* (German states). This was upheld by a verdict handed down by the Federal Constitutional Court in 2006, which confirmed the transfer of responsibility for the domains of education, culture, and public broadcasting to the Bundesländer as part of Germany's reform of its federalist system. This reform also meant a de facto ban on cooperation between state and federal governments in the area of scholastic education.

In order to at least establish a common framework for education, define standards of quality, ensure that school qualifications are comparable and consistent throughout the education system, and that they are reciprocally recognized, the ministers of education and cultural affairs of the different Bundesländer work together in the Kultusministerkonferenz (KMK, Secretariat of the Standing Conference of the Ministers of Education and Cultural Affairs of the Länder in the Federal Republic of Germany). However, as a voluntary coordinating committee of the multiple Bundesländer, the KMK is not authorized to adopt resolutions or pass legislation. Furthermore, the principle of unanimity renders the KMK cumbersome and inefficient in its functioning, and the committee is consequently not equipped to counteract or impede the vastly different developmental trends in the education policies of the individual Bundesländer. For example, in 2021, expenditure per school student ranged from 13,300 euros in the state of Berlin to 8,200 euros in the state of Mecklenburg-Vorpommern (Bocksch, 2023) — which means that it is essentially impossible to speak of "equal living conditions", as stipulated by German's constitution, the *Grundgesetz* ("Basic Law").

Regardless of the disparity in expenditure between the Bundesländer, education spending in Germany as a whole lies below the OECD average. In 2021, the OECD average amounted to 4.5 percent of gross domestic product (GDP), whereas spending in Germany totalled a mere 4.0 percent (OECD, 2024). The commitment made by Merkel and Schavan at the 2008 Dresdner Bildungsgipfel (Dresden Education Summit) to in-

1 Evaluation of reading skills at the end of grade four. **2** Evaluation of basic skills in maths and science in children at the end of grades four and eight. **3** Performance in German, maths, and science is tested at the end of grade nine. **4** "The entire school system shall be under the supervision of the state." Art. 7, para. 1, Basic Law for the Federal Republic of Germany.

crease public spending on education to seven percent by 2015 has still yet to be implemented.

In the meantime, an investment backlog of 45.6 billion euros has accumulated in educational institutions throughout Germany, partly as a result of this underfunding (KfW, 2022).

Irrespective of the insufficient funding of Germany's education system as a whole, the competencies acquired by students in the different Bundesländer vary considerably. In a recent comparative study of the Bundesländer, the states of Saxony and Bavaria came out on top, with Brandenburg and Bremen trailing behind (statista, 2024). The state school structures have diverged considerably since the end of the 1960s from the Prussian three-tier system,[5] and one of the few remaining similarities between the various Bundesländer is their continued adherence to the *Gymnasium* (selective grammar school). Even the duration of shared primary school education varies between four and six years according to each individual state, with the extended period of primary school education legislated in Berlin and Brandenburg not surprisingly resulting in a greater degree of educational equity, as demonstrated by a recent study conducted by the Ifo Institute for Economic Research (Wößmann et al., 2024).

In response to these international comparative studies, the topic of early childhood education has become more of a central focus of policy action in Germany. In the old West German states in particular, substantial measures have been taken in recent years to increase the number of available childcare places — although this expansion has been carried out primarily under the premise of reconciling work and family life. The opportunities that early childhood *education* offers, however, particularly in terms of overcoming individual disadvantages related to a child's personal, familial, or socio-economic background, are still not given sufficient consideration. Although the childcare rate for children under the age of three in Germany increased from 15.5 to 36.4 percent between 2007 and 2023 and from 89 to 90.9 percent for three- to six-year-olds, these rates vary considerably between the Bundesländer,[6] and demand continues to far exceed supply (BMFSFJ, 2022).

In addition to the renewed rise in competency issues among students and the entrenched educational inequality in Germany, a range of other challenges has arisen in recent years that further impacts both findings. One particularly concerning factor is the persistent and growing shortage of school teachers and early childhood educators in Germany, with the teacher shortage set to increase to 81,000 by 2035 (Klemm, 2022). This figure does not even take into account the additional demand that will be created when the legal right to full-day childcare comes into effect in 2026, nor does it factor in inclusivity measures and special support for children from disadvantaged backgrounds. And while there is already a shortage of 125,000 early childhood educators in German KiTas (*Kindertagesstätte,* day-care centres) today (Colbasevici, 2024), this shortfall will increase significantly once the right to full-day childcare comes into effect.

In view of this woeful predicament for German education policy, which is only expected to worsen in the coming years, it is no wonder that those parents who have the means to do so are opting to send their children to private day-care centres and schools. Nearly one in ten children in Germany is now enrolled in a private school, which generally charge tuition fees. While Germany's Basic Law (Article 7, Paragraph 4) does allow for the establishment of private schools in principle, it couples this allowance with a *Sonderungsverbot* — a ban on educational segregation on the basis of a child's or a family's material circumstances. However, the individual state governments do not generally monitor or audit this, which means that violations of the Basic Law are more or less inevitable (Helbig & Wrase, 2017).

Without valiant political action (especially from the federal government), without the allocation of additional funding, and without structural changes to the school system as a whole and to how teachers and educators are recruited and trained, it will be impossible to overcome the challenges outlined in this report.

If we are to find tangible solutions to the problems we face, it might be helpful to look beyond our own backyard. We might ask ourselves: What do the education systems of other European countries look like? How are responsibilities and authority allocated and arranged in the field of education policy? How is the education system funded? What structures and systems have emerged in schools? What do competency acquisition and educational equity look like? How are teachers trained, and how is school life structured?

In addition to Germany, three other European countries were selected for analysis, and a call for tenders was issued for the drafting of national studies. Estonia, Spain, and Finland were selected for a number of reasons: they fall either above (Estonia and Finland) or below (Germany and Spain) the OECD average in terms of acquired competencies; they have varying school structures and regulations regarding the allocation of responsibilities and authority; they invest different percentages of their GDP into education; have varying rates of childcare in the pre-primary sector; and have different proportions of private educational institutions.

The aim of comparing these four national studies is to discern what factors lead to educational disadvantages and inequality as well as better or worse performance, and also to identify what recommendations should be made with regard to German education policy.

5 See the article by Heinemann in this publication. **6** For children under the age of three, between 30.7 percent (Bremen) and 59.2 percent (Mecklenburg-Vorpommern), and for children between the ages of three and six, between 86 percent (Bremen) and 94.5 percent (Mecklenburg-Vorpommern) (Statistisches Bundesamt, 2024).

KEY FINDINGS FROM THE NATIONAL REPORTS

Given that quality of education is *also* determined by the amount of money that is allocated to a country's education system, the authors of the study were asked to specify what percentage of each country's GDP was designated to public spending on education. The comparison of the four countries is surprising in this regard in that it reveals that Germany (4.0 percent) and Estonia (4.2 percent) fall below the OECD average of 4.6 percent, while Spain (4.6 percent) corresponds exactly to the average and Finland (4.7 percent) only slightly exceeds it (Education at a Glance 2023 OECD Indicators, p. 310). Although money alone cannot guarantee a decent education system, the provision of free, quality education for ALL will not be achieved without the allocation of adequate (financial and human) resources.

There are also considerable differences between the four countries analysed in terms of who is responsible for education policy and who is granted authority: in Finland and Estonia, the federal government determines the scope of education policy, while here in Germany, the parliament makes decisions pertaining to education legislation, funding, and policy (see Kupiainen & Ouakrim-Soivio in this volume). In both Finland and Estonia, the national government allocates funds to local governments based on the number of students and their age. In both countries, there is a compulsory national curriculum, which in Finland is determined by the Finnish National Agency for Education, and in Estonia has been defined by the district governments since 2017.

In Estonia, the municipal governments administer and fund local schools and kindergartens, enforce families' compliance with mandatory school attendance, and ensure that children have access to all the necessary school-related supplies, to transport, medical care, and school meals (see Kitsing in this volume). The situation is similar in Finland, where the municipalities develop their curricula according to the national core curricula and finance the day-to-day operation of their schools, including all teaching and study materials, laptops, and school lunches, using government funds.

In both countries, schools and their administrative bodies have a considerable degree of autonomy when it comes to implementing education guidelines: they manage their own budgets, select their own textbooks and materials, and make decisions about what curriculum content and teaching methods they wish to employ.

In Estonia, a standardized school system with combined primary and secondary schools emerged during the Soviet era. When the country's education system underwent a series of reforms in 2012, primary schools were separated from secondary schools, and "pure *Gymnasiums*" (grades 1–12) were established alongside primary schools (grades 1–9) (ibid.). Over the last ten years, many centres for early childhood education have been merged with primary schools and brought under the same management. Full-day school programmes are offered in many primary schools, and attendance is free of charge.

In 1968, Finland's two-tier education system was replaced by a model in which a six-year period of primary schooling was followed by a three-year period of secondary schooling, either general (academic) or vocational. In 1998, the distinction between these two streams was abolished, and now grades one through nine are taught in primary schools and up to grade 12 is taught in comprehensive schools. In 2020, compulsory education was expanded to include the upper secondary level, which means that all Finnish children learn together until grade nine; it is only then that they are separated into one of two streams and given the opportunity to pursue either vocational or academic qualifications (school leaving certificate) (see Kupiainen & Ouakrim-Soivio in this volume).

The school structure in Germany and Spain, on the other hand, is markedly different.

In Germany, primary school generally only comprises grades one through four (with the exception of Berlin and Brandenburg, where it goes up to grade six); from the age of ten, students and parents are expected to decide on a particular secondary school model (and thus on the child's future professional path). The secondary schools in each of the Bundesländer not only have different names, but also offer their students varying qualifications.[7] The *Gemeinschaftsschule* ("community school"), for example, only exists in Berlin; it comprises grades 1–10, or in some cases grades 1–13, and was introduced in 2008–2009 as a pilot project before becoming a standard school model in 2018 alongside the primary school and integrated secondary school models.

In Spain, primary school comprises grades one through six; this is followed by four years of compulsory secondary schooling, which either qualifies students to pursue intermediate vocational training at the end of the four-year period or, following an additional two (non-compulsory) years of secondary education, leads to the Spanish Baccalaureate, or higher school leaving certificate (see Melcón in this volume).

While children in Germany are generally forced to make decisions about their future education trajectory (what types of schools and qualifications they wish to pursue) after grade four, this "streaming" process only takes place in Spain after grade six, and in Finland and Estonia after grade nine. This has a major impact on children's educational trajectories and outcomes and is *one* of the factors that motivates the disparity between the findings of international studies into students' competencies and into the entrenched educational inequality in Germany.

The varying degrees of competency between the students in the countries analysed may also be attrib-

7 For instance, a Hauptschule, Realschule, and Gymnasium may in some cases operate as individual schools, and in other cases may be grouped together as a Gesamtschule (comprehensive school), Sekundarschule (secondary school), or Stadtteilschule (district school) and provide students with two or three school-leaving certificate options.

uted to class size; the smaller classes are, the more students can be provided with individualized support and tools for learning. All of the countries analysed here fall below the OECD average of 16 children per teacher: in Finland, an average of 14 children are taught by one teacher, in Spain the number is 13, and in Estonia and Germany it is only 11 (Education at a Glance 2024 OECD Indicators, p. 373). This ratio would therefore appear to have scarcely any bearing on educational outcomes for students.

The situation changes, however, when we consider the duration of shared learning. As international comparative studies (PISA, TIMSS, and others) have consistently demonstrated, countries in which students engage in shared learning for longer periods of time tend to achieve better outcomes in terms of acquiring competencies compared to countries in which students are streamed very early on in their school life into different educational programmes.

Finland has been an international leader in competencies related to reading, maths, and science since the very first PISA study was conducted in 2000. However, Finland's performance in these areas has been on the decline since 2009 — a trend that was especially evident in the PISA study released in 2022. But educational inequality is also on the rise: while the introduction of the comprehensive school in Finland in the 1970s had an extremely positive impact in terms of reducing educational inequality, the social inheritance of higher education has long been evidenced in students' decisions to pursue either an academic or a vocational course of secondary study (see Kupiainen & Ouakrim-Soivio in this volume). And the performance gap between students who come from migrant backgrounds and those who do not has also widened substantially in recent years (ibid.).

It is nevertheless important to emphasize that, thanks to the 1998 Basic Education Act, Finland is home to a robust and comprehensive support system that ensures that every student, including children with severe intellectual disabilities, has the opportunity to pursue their education at the upper secondary level (ibid.). To this end, there is a three-tier support system in place that aims to ensure that all students are provided with the support they need. Despite this, complete integration has not yet been achieved; even in Finland, children with severe disabilities are taught in separate small classes, albeit in the same school.

Unlike Germany, the analyses of the first international comparative studies heralded some positive surprises for Estonia: to this day, the country has performed well above the OECD average in every one of the PISA studies and in all areas of competency analysed, making it one of the top countries surveyed overall. The impact of socio-economic background on academic success was also found to be negligible here; this has changed since the 2000s (see Kitsing in this volume), but the degree of correlation remains lower than the OECD average to this day.

The situation in Spain and Germany, however, is quite different. In Germany, the results of the 2000 PISA study caused shockwaves and resulted in the implementation of a series of education policy measures.[8] The results of the study placed Germany below the OECD average in terms of overall competencies and ranked the country last in terms of educational equity.

Spain has likewise ranked below the OECD average in international comparative studies, but has shown some improvement in recent years, particularly in the areas of reading and science. However, the correlation between a student's social background (in particular socio-economic standing) and their academic success is also strongly pronounced in Spain, with the country now performing worse than Germany in this regard (see Melcón in this volume). This is further exacerbated by the increasing level of privatization of education in both countries. High-income families are able to send their children to private schools and can support their children's performance at school by paying for additional private tuition (ibid.; Heinemann in this volume). In Germany, nine percent of students now attend a private school; in Spain, this figure is 8.6 percent, with a further 24.5 percent of students enrolled in semi-private schools (see Melcón in this volume).

There are some commonalities between the four countries analysed, especially in the area of teacher training. In all four countries, a university degree is compulsory for aspiring teachers; similarly, a distinction is made in all places between degree programmes for primary school teaching (with varying durations) and secondary school teaching, and in Germany there is even an additional separate qualification for prospective *Gymnasium* teachers. However, there are some differences in terms of how primary school teachers are trained: while the focus in Germany is on the study of one's specialist *subject,* and a teacher's training in that subject is generally carried out in the relevant subject-specific faculty of the university rather than in an overarching faculty of education, the teacher training programmes in Spain, Estonia, and Finland all provide prospective teachers with specialized skills in the fields of pedagogy and didactics.

In all four countries, secondary school teacher training is predominantly subject-related, and in Germany, Finland, and Spain it is undertaken at the respective subject-specific university faculty. In Spain, subject-specific training is followed by a Master's degree in teaching, which encompasses pedagogy and didactics. In Finland, too, the subject-specific degree course is followed by a one-year teacher training programme in the teacher training department of a university, which also comprises periods of practical training. For a prospective teacher to undergo a dedicated practical phase of teacher training (*Referendariat,* or teach-

8 Among these are the large-scale expansion of early childhood education, the phasing out of the Hauptschule (school for lower secondary education) in most German Bundesländer, and the establishment of Gesamtschulen (comprehensive schools).

er traineeship or placement) after completing their university degree programme is something of a novelty in Germany.

As similar as the teacher training trajectories in these four countries may be, the standing of teachers in all places varies dramatically. In Finland, teachers are extremely highly regarded, with a mere 15 percent of those who apply for teaching degrees offered a university place. Teachers in Estonia also enjoy a high degree of prestige. The situation in Germany and Spain, however, is rather different: Although the standing of German teachers improved between 2013 and 2018, the nation still occupies the bottom rung in EU-wide rankings (Varkey Foundation, 2018, p. 22), despite the fact that teachers in Germany were found to earn higher-than-average wages in an international comparison. The status of teachers in Spain is even poorer and has in fact worsened since 2013 (ibid.).

Despite the many disparities and handful of commonalities between the four nations, all of the countries analysed in this study face challenges with regard to education policy that will determine whether and to what extent students will be able to acquire and develop general competencies, as well as influence the progression of educational inequality. While Spain is primarily concerned with boosting educational equity, providing better teacher training, and making the teaching profession more appealing to prospective teachers, Estonia's main concerns are the country's shortage of teachers, implementing a restructuring of the school system that has been necessitated by the decline in student numbers, and providing classes in the Estonian language. In Finland, on the other hand (as in Germany, though at a markedly different level), the key challenges faced are the decline in basic competencies, the rise in educational inequality, and the expansion of early childhood education.

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Karl-Heinz Heinemann

THE EDUCATION SYSTEM IN GERMANY

INTRODUCTION

The significance Germans place on a robust education system could hardly be any higher. In an Allensbach survey from August 2024 commissioned by the Deutsche Telekom Stiftung, 90 percent of respondents indicated that they regard a strong education system as vital to maintaining a functioning democracy. A total of 77 percent stated that the country's future well-being actually depends on it. Respondents in East Germany were slightly more inclined to agree with that statement than those in the West. At the same time, a majority reported being unhappy with the conditions in day-care centres and schools and feel that there is a lack of political will in this regard: 80 percent of respondents are of the opinion that policymakers are not concerned enough with education.

According to the survey, respondents were unanimous in their judgement of what a good education system must accomplish, with 91 percent of the view that equal educational opportunities must be guaranteed for all. Reality hardly holds up to this requirement in respondents' estimation, however: only 25 percent believe that this is currently the case in Germany (Telekom-Stiftung, 2024).

WHAT IS THE AIM OF EDUCATION?

Should the primary focus be on preparing to enter a particular profession or on being able to determine one's own life path? It is impossible to separate the two. Education can only be manifested in connections, and every person defines themselves through their social relationships — from their family to their profession to the possibility of helping to shape society. Criticism levelled at a conception of education that reduces it to qualifications is justified. Yet if we desire more — preparation for a self-determined life, the possibility of seeing oneself as a subject — then we need certain basic skills. These include the ability to compose texts and to express oneself in both spoken and written form, which is also necessary for professional success. Conversely, reading, writing, and numeracy skills are no longer sufficient to ensure professional advancement or to enable a person to find their path in society. Young people who lack these basic skills will find life extremely challenging. Imparting these abilities to all young people, regardless of their social position or their parents' educational background, is the basic function of schooling and education.

Education is not practised for its own sake; degrees, references, and credentials are necessary components when it comes to finding one's place in society and in professional life. Even general education is not without purpose, but rather comprises cultural capital that is imparted to individuals by their families and schools, for example, and which they use to determine their position, not only on the job market, but in society in general. Education, qualifications, and degrees can all be considered "human resources", or human capital, for the economy.

HOW IS EDUCATION POLICY STRUCTURED?

Federalism

Education policy, particularly as it relates to primary and secondary schools, is a domain that is closely guarded by the *Bundesländer* (Germany's federal states). In the context of the German education system, "the state" refers primarily to the individual states, rather than the nation. Expenditures for primary and secondary schools and especially for personnel, i.e. teachers, form a large part of each state's budget. This traditional federalist structure is also meant to act as a bulwark against a return to fascism. The GDR had no states, and its school system therefore did not have this federalist structure. With German reunification, the East was forced to adopt features of both the content and structure of the West German system.

The education system is therefore not a sector that is entirely separate from the state and can be left up to the free play of the market (Hepp, 2013).

Basic commonalities between the Bundesländer, such as similarities in school structure, are agreed and formalized by the *Kultusministerkonferenz* (KMK; Conference of Ministers of Education). Over the decades, however, substantial differences have evolved between the school systems of various Bundesländer, especially in lower secondary education. Here, two, three, four, or more parallel education trajectories, as well as various names for different types and structures of schools and courses of study, come together to create a system of peerless complexity. Furthermore, the starting point and length of compulsory schooling, curricula, timetables, and regulations governing school marks and transfers all differ. There are also substantial differences in terms of how the policies known as G8 (in which students complete their *Abitur,* the secondary school leaving certificate that qualifies them to apply for university, after 12 years of schooling or 8 years of secondary school) and G9 (*Abitur* after 13 years of schooling or 9 years of secondary school) are implemented. Additional discrepancies exist in the expansion of preschool facilities, special education facilities, and full-day schools. Finally, there are contrasting regulations enabling or restricting parental consent in the transition to further secondary schooling, as well as considerable differences in terms of how quality, equity, and performance standards are maintained.

These discrepancies constitute an obstacle to the mobility of anyone looking to move from one state to another within Germany. Switching from one school system to another is complicated.

Germany's 2006 federalism reform introduced a policy known as the "cooperation ban", which prohibits the federal government from granting financial assistance directly to the Bundesländer for the purpose of primary or secondary education. The aim of this ban was to promote the states' own cultural autonomy and to create a clear division of responsibility.

The Bundesländer, and especially local municipalities, are overburdened by the task of financing the most urgent educational needs. For this reason, the federal government has launched numerous special programmes in the years since 2006 that have been eagerly implemented by the states and municipalities: programmes aimed at expanding full-day school facilities, broadening participation in day-care centres, bolstering digital infrastructure in schools, and supporting schools with a high percentage of marginalized students. At the same time, these federal programmes raise concerns that states and municipalities may lose their powers and responsibilities, creating a situation ripe for conflict.

Output-Oriented Governance[1] Instead of a Unified Education Plan

Until its dissolution in 2008, the Federal and State Commission for Education Planning and Research Promotion (BLK) was an important part of national education planning. It was responsible for the General Education Plan of 1973, which set out as goals the introduction of the *Gesamtschule* (a school that combines the three secondary school tiers into one institution), a two-year orientation period to bridge the primary and secondary school levels, and a single-phase teacher training programme (rather than the existing two phases, which comprise a course of university study followed by on-the-ground teaching practise). Yet this plan, which was put forward in the heyday of social-liberal reform, was never implemented. The turn to neoliberalism put paid to all attempts at unified national education planning, especially given that any attempt to challenge the selective secondary school system, with the *Gymnasium* (grammar school) at the top preparing selected students for university, was met with fierce resistance from conservative forces. The states' interest in protecting their autonomy in such an important area was also at play.

Rather than school structure, the profile and quality of individual schools became the decisive criteria for judging quality of education. Rather than education planning for the long term, it would all boil down to measuring, evaluating, and rating individual schools, teachers, and lesson plans. "Input-oriented governance" was to make way for "output-oriented governance" (Edelstein and Veith, 2017).

The Illusion of Scholastic Autonomy

Under the auspices of "scholastic autonomy", the legal scope of schools across all Bundesländer was expanded with regard to personnel and budget decisions, the content of curricula, the format of lessons, and much more. In exchange for their increased freedom to make decisions, however, the schools were also made more accountable. From this point on, they were faced with regular external evaluations such as performance assessments and comparisons.

In reality, the greater freedom that this policy shift was supposed to achieve is experienced by teachers and school administrators as a kind of bureaucratic paternalism (Klein, 2024).

Municipalities

Whereas the Bundesländer are responsible for personnel, scholastic content, and educational degrees, municipalities bear responsibility for the local school environment. They are responsible for building, maintaining, renovating, and refurbishing school buildings. Given the municipalities' lack of funds, school buildings are noticeably deteriorating. In their Municipal Panel 2024, the state-owned development bank Kreditanstalt für Wiederaufbau (KfW) estimated the investment backlog for school buildings to be 54.76 billion euros (Raffer & Scheller, 2024, 14).

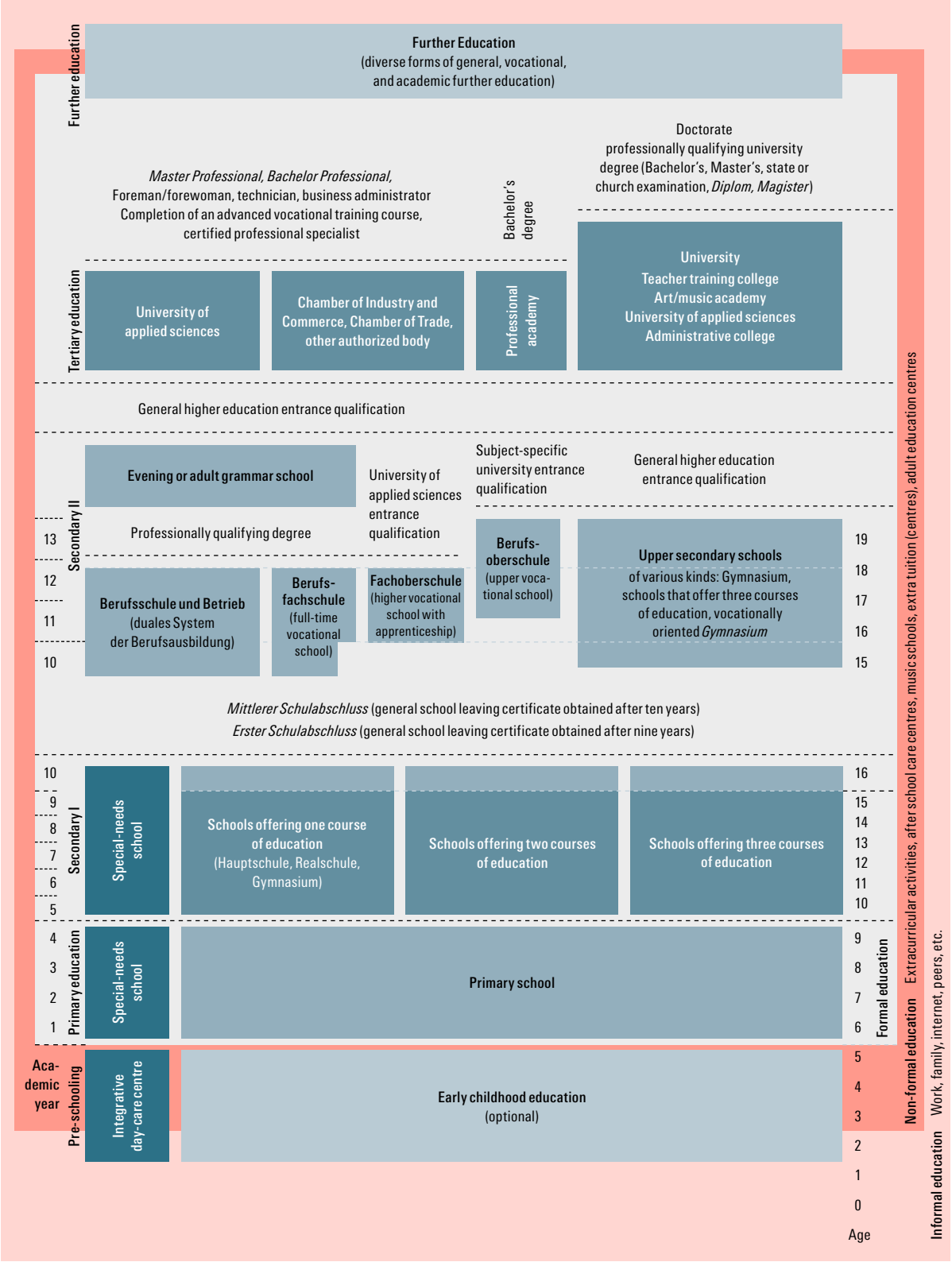
The municipalities also provide necessary equipment, such as furniture, teaching materials, textbooks, and technical equipment (like computers and smartboards). In the context of digitalization, municipalities are also expected to furnish schools with the infrastructure to provide students with digital learning tools as well as access to the internet. In schools with lunch programmes, municipalities take care of providing and organizing school meals. School offices, caretakers, school transport, and above all the organization of full-day school programmes also rest with local governments.

Choice of schools is an important factor when it comes to drawing tax-paying businesses and residents to a locality. Municipalities are in charge of planning for school development, meaning that they make long-term plans regarding the number and size of schools in their region. They are largely accountable for establishing and shutting down schools. School psychologists and social workers are employed by local governments.

This division of responsibilities between the Bundersländer and municipalities is sometimes falsely described as a division between "internal and external school affairs". But the posited split between lesson-related and "external" school affairs is irrelevant and out of touch with reality. This can be clearly seen in the digitalization of schools and the development of full-day offerings, both of which are then no longer the province of the Bundesländer, but must instead be managed by the municipalities.

1 Output-oriented governance refers to a form of governance guided primarily by objectives, outcomes of administrative action (output), and desired effects.

Figure 1: The Education System in Germany



Source: Author group: Education reporting 2024, p. XVI (CC BY-SA 3.0 DE)

WHAT DOES THE COUNTRY'S SCHOOL SYSTEM LOOK LIKE?

Germany's education system is divided into pre-schooling (which is not counted as part of the school system), primary education (administered through primary schools), secondary education (administered through a variety of subsequent schools), and tertiary education (which includes vocational training and further education).

Pre-schooling

The pre-schooling sector, which includes crèches, preschools, day-care centres, and day nurseries, as well as kindergartens and *Vorklassen* (between kindergarten and primary school), encompasses the various care and education offerings for children from a few months of age until they start school. Attending these institutions is voluntary. Since 2013, every child of at least one year of age has a legal right to a spot in one of these day-care facilities. While around 13.6 percent of one- to three-year-old children was cared for in a preschool or day-care centre in 2006, that number had risen to over 36 percent in 2023. For children over the age of three, that figure is now over 90 percent, and more than 93 percent in former East Germany (Statistisches Bundesamt [Destatis], 2023).

Yet there are roughly 385,900 too few day care spots in the West German states to fulfil parents' childcare needs, while the East German states require an additional 44,700 spots, according to findings from the Bertelsmann Stiftung's Country Monitoring programme (Klemm, 2023).

Day-care centres are generally not free of charge. However, some states (such as Berlin) abstain from charging fees in order to enable ALL children to attend day care. Fees for publicly funded day-care facilities are usually income-based. Even so, more highly educated families use day-care centres earlier and more often than families with a lower level of education ("So ungleich sind die Kita-Plätze", 2021). In addition, higher-income families tend to send their children to private, more expensive institutions, leading to inequality in the usage and quality of day-care offerings.

Children with a family history of migration are less likely to attend day-care centres than other children. This is despite the fact that, in view of established deficits in their knowledge of German, the language of instruction, these children would benefit disproportionally from attending day care.

Primary Education

Children generally enter school at six years of age. Primary school encompasses grades one through four, and in Berlin and Brandenburg one through six. In 2008, a coalition of conservatives and Greens attempted to extend Hamburg's primary schooling period to six years — a measure that failed due to a referendum in which the majority of the state's population came out in favour of keeping the period of shared learning at four years.

In the first two years of school, children receive verbal learning development reports rather than marks in a school report. Instead of separating children into age-based classes, some primary schools put children of different age groups together in lessons for two or four academic years in order to meet diverse needs and developmental stages, which are not always so easy to categorize based on school year alone. In addition to traditional teacher-up-front lessons, many primary schools also employ more open-ended lesson formats such as independent work, learning stations, and project work in order to encourage independent learning.

Primary school is the only common education institution that all children attend. Most states, however, have abolished binding school catchment areas. This means that parents have a free choice of primary school for their child — leading to social segregation, with "education-conscious" parents opting for a longer route in order to prevent their children from having to go to school with local children who come from migrant families. North Rhine-Westphalia is the sole German state that offers Catholic primary schools in addition to non-denominational ones. These are public schools operated by the church, preferably with religiously affiliated staff and a denominational selection of students. One third of North Rhine-Westphalia's primary schools are Catholic; there are hardly any Protestant schools.

Many primary schools accept children with special education needs. In line with principles of inclusion, these children are accompanied in their lessons by additional teachers; children with learning difficulties may receive additional special support sessions. While the city states of Bremen and Hamburg, alongside Mecklenburg-Vorpommern, Schleswig-Holstein, and Thuringia, exhibit a very low rate of enrolment in special-education schools, the rates in Southern Germany are higher than average at over four percent (Bildung in Deutschland 2024, 124).

Multilingualism

More and more children are growing up in families in which German is not the primary spoken language. The war in Ukraine forced many mothers with school-aged children to flee their homeland and seek refuge in Germany.

In Bremen, 43 percent of children enrolled in school have a heritage language other than German; that number is 37 percent in Berlin and 35 percent in Hesse. In the East German states, the number does not exceed 10 percent, whereas there are neighbourhoods and primary schools in the major cities whose share of children from immigrant families lies over 90 percent. This is a challenge that primary schools are not prepared for, and a cause of Germany's poor performance in international comparative studies.

Full-day Education Options

All states now offer full-day schooling. "Full-day" options include seven full hours of teaching or super-

vised time, at least three days per week. According to KMK statistics, 73 percent of primary schools offered a full-day option as of 2022. These are generally open full-day schools, meaning that participation in afternoon activities and school lunch is optional. Parents in most states must pay for both the full-day school programmes and the school lunch. Full-day programmes are usually organized by independent, municipal-level, or ecclesiastical providers. Trained social education workers are only sometimes employed, and staff may have no relevant qualifications. This means that full-day schooling serves more of a childcare function than an explicitly educational one, in order to reconcile family and career. As such, it loses out on making as much of an impact as it could.

During the 2022–2023 school year, 56 percent of children were in full-day care provided either by full-day schools or by child and youth services. Participation varies greatly between East and West Germany, however. In West Germany, 13 percent of primary school children were in full-day care in 2006–2007; in East Germany, that number was 63 percent (ibid.).

Children with working mothers, those from academic households, and those without a family history of migration are more likely to make use of education and childcare offerings for primary school students. A childcare study (KiBS) by the German Youth Institute found that this social imbalance has only been exacerbated in recent years (Kayed et al., 2023).

From 2026 onward, all primary-school-aged children will have a legal right to full-day care. This legal right will be implemented incrementally for children entering their first academic year. If this entitlement is widely exercised, 600,000 to 800,000 additional spots will need to be incrementally added in full-day primary education in order to meet the demand for full-day primary care by 2029. Yet states and municipalities, especially in West Germany, have already stated that they will not be able to meet the demand.

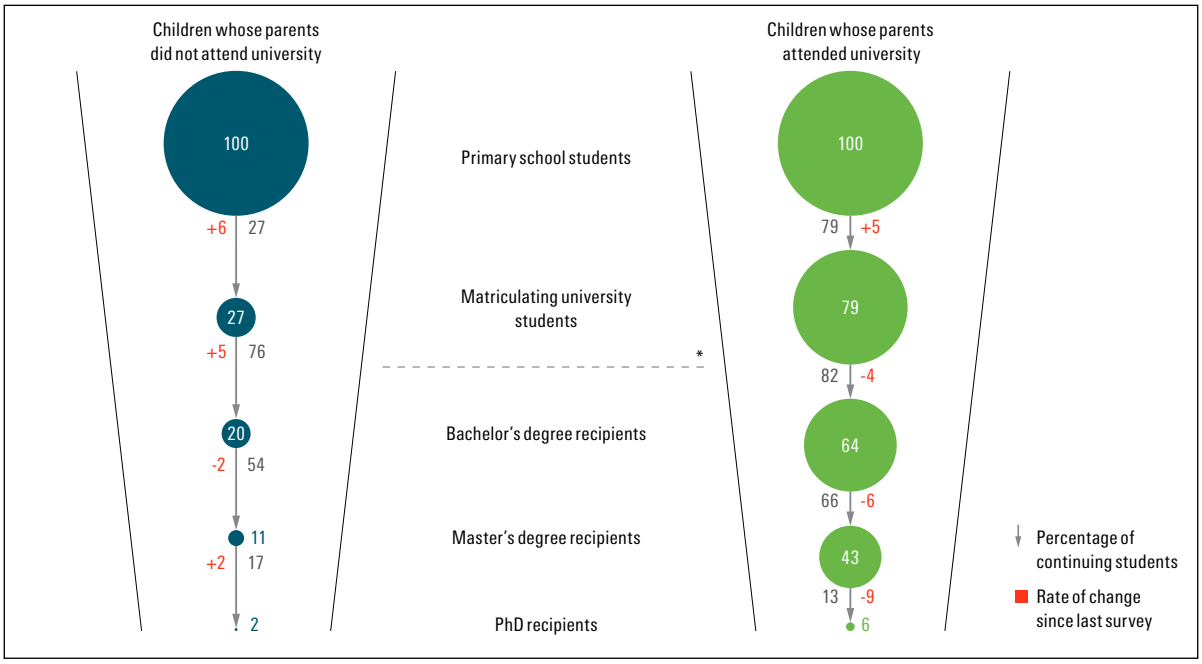
Lower Secondary Education

At the end of their primary schooling, each student receives a placement recommendation that determines which type of subsequent secondary schooling they should pursue. In most states, this recommendation is not binding.

Recent decades have seen a change in school structure at the lower secondary level in many states. While all Bundesländer initially offered a three-tier school structure consisting of *Hauptschule, Realschule,* and *Gymnasium* in addition to special education schools, a series of states consolidated two or three school types due to the low popularity of the *Hauptschule,* which conveyed the status of a school for the "leftovers". Bremen, Hamburg, Schleswig-Holstein, and all five East German states introduced two-tier school structures consisting of the *Gymnasium* as well as another secondary school.[2] Moreover, several states[3] introduced a fourth type of school in which children in grades one through ten (or one through 13) are able to obtain any of the various school-leaving qualifications.

2 Each with a different name: Stadtteilschule (district school) in Hamburg, Integrierte Sekundarschule (integrated secondary school) in Berlin, Sekundarschule (secondary school) in North Rhine-Westphalia, and Oberschule (higher school) in Saxony. **3** Baden-Württemberg, Berlin, Saxony, Saxony-Anhalt, Schleswig-Holstein, and Thuringia, among others.

Figure 2: Germany's Education Funnel 2021



Source: Donors' Association for the Promotion of Sciences and Humanities in Germany

As a result, there is only one type of school that is present in every state: the *Gymnasium.* Retaining the Gymnasium as the high road has been a fundamental motivation for these restructurings. During the 2022–2023 school year, 7.2 percent of students attended a *Hauptschule,* 17.4 percent a *Realschule,* 11 percent a school conferring both *Hauptschule* and *Realschule* leaving certificates, 19.7 percent a school with all three tiers (*Gesamtschule* or *Gemeinschaftsschule*), and 44.7 percent attended a Gymnasium (Bildung in Deutschland 2024, Table 2.2.).

The Gymnasium subsists on the legend of its being the only direct path to an *Abitur* (the school leaving certificate that qualifies those who attain it to enter university, or any other institution of tertiary education). Some 70 to 80 percent of Gymnasium students obtain this higher education entrance qualification. At the *Gesamtschule,* which has a broader base of students, about 40 percent of students obtain their Abitur.

By the time students receive their secondary education recommendations, the social rift has already begun to open: 32 percent of children from socio-economically marginalized families receive Gymnasium recommendations, compared to 78 percent of children from privileged backgrounds. This is not merely the result of better marks, but of socially selective recommendations (Kuhn, 2021).

On the other hand, more than six percent of young people in Germany continue to leave school without any leaving certificate whatsoever. This fact has not changed at all in recent years (Klemm, 2023).

In 2022, 17 percent of adults aged between 25 and 64 years had neither a *beruflicher Bildungsabschluss* (vocational qualification) nor the higher education entrance qualification. This means that 2.8 million adults in Germany are formally categorized as having limited formal skills (Bildung in Deutschland 2024, Table 2.2.). Of those adults whose parents obtained neither type of qualification, 40 percent will similarly go on to attain neither.

Social Segregation

Access to higher education in Germany is thus strongly correlated with educational background. While 26.7 percent of children from families with parents who did not achieve a higher education degree will go on to attend a Gymnasium, this figure rises to 59.8 percent in families with parents who pursued a path of higher education. There are substantial differences between the Bundesländer here, however: in Berlin, Brandenburg, and Rhineland-Palatinate, students' chances to attend a Gymnasium are more fairly distributed (the odds of children from less educated families attending a Gymnasium are between 52 and 54 percent), whereas these odds are worse in Bavaria and Saxony (38.1 percent and 40.1 percent, respectively; Wößmann et al., 2024).

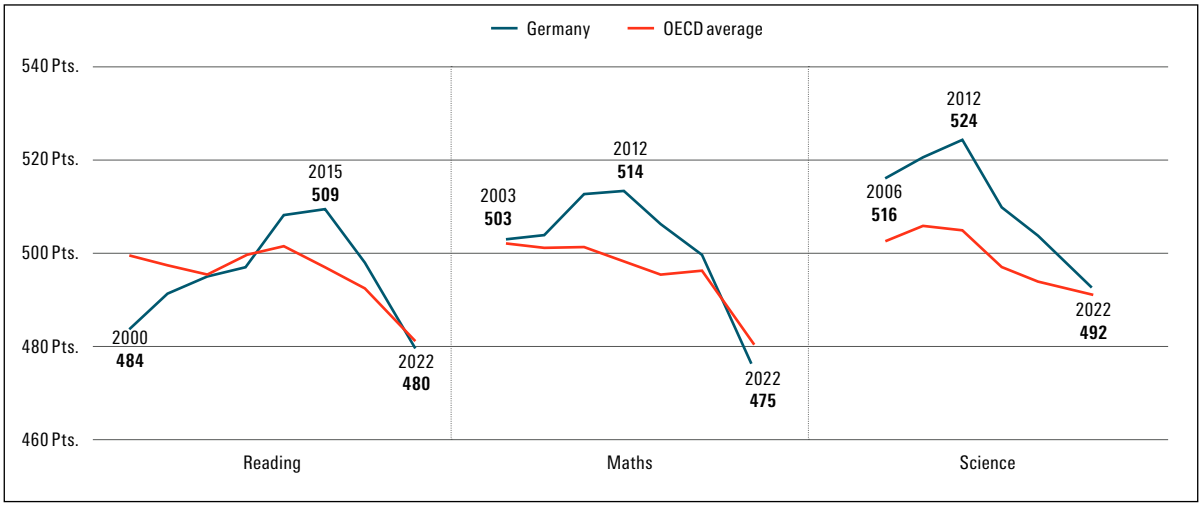
Nevertheless, efforts to abolish the Gymnasium have so far been unsuccessful. This is due in large part to the fact that representatives of the academic middle and upper classes also enjoy stronger representation in parliamentary and administrative bodies.

Upper Secondary Education

Upper secondary education includes the Gymnasium, which leads to the *Abitur* and access to university, as well as vocational programmes and training, which take place either in full-time schools or as part of a dual system of internship alongside vocational school.[4] Which

4 According to the federally certified training plan, training takes place within a company and is supplemented by lessons at a vocational school, usually one or two days per week. These lessons encompass both technical and general knowledge. This model is internationally regarded as exemplary. One problem is that supply and demand of apprenticeship positions seldom align. Even though more apprenticeship positions are currently available than are sought, many positions remain unfilled. Either the professions on offer do not appeal to young people, or young people fail to fulfil the expectations of the companies.

Figure 3: Above Average in Science Only



Average assessment of 15-year-old German students as part of the OECD's international education study, in points; Source: Tag24 (2023)

of these educational institutions students will have access to primarily depends on which school leaving certificate they obtain; the *Hauptschulabschluss* (general school leaving certificate obtained after nine years) primarily qualifies recipients for acceptance into the dual-system vocational training model. But applicants who only have a *Hauptschulabschluss* actually get the short end of the stick when competing for apprenticeship positions with prospective students who have a *Realschulabschluss* (general school leaving certificate obtained after ten years) or, as is increasingly the case, even an Abitur qualification. Around 40 percent of an age cohort complete the *Abitur,* the general higher education entrance qualification, qualifying them to take up studies at whichever tertiary institution they like (subject to any relevant restrictions that apply to incoming students). The *Abitur* exams are prescribed in all Bundesländer by the respective ministry of education (*Zentralabitur* or central school leaving certificate), with the ministries choosing from a nationally accepted set of examination tasks developed by committees of experts at the Institute for Educational Quality Improvement (IQB).

GERMANY IN INTERNATIONAL COMPARATIVE STUDIES

As discussed in the introduction, the most important expectation Germany's residents have of their education system is that it provides equal education opportunities for all students and prepares them to enter a profession. Comparative studies are guided by internationally and interculturally accepted standards (Programme for International Student Assessment, or PISA) and the nationally prescribed achievement standards IQB, *Vergleichsarbeiten* (written comparison tests, known as VERA), and the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (IGLU). The aim of these comparisons is to assess school performance quantitatively and comparatively. On the one hand, this allows researchers to retrospectively glean an understanding of how schools have performed, in accordance with neoliberal governance models, and on the other hand, it makes it possible to determine Germany's position in international competition.

Criticism of an understanding of education that is reduced to mere qualifications is wholly justified. Yet if we desire more — for example, to prepare students to live a self-determined life and to be able to see themselves as subjects — then we will need to provide certain basic skills that are also necessary to professional success. These include reading comprehension, the ability to express oneself in spoken and written form, and basic numeracy. It is, after all, quite legitimate to expect the education system to facilitate the acquisition of these necessary skills.

It is the responsibility of education policy to ensure that young people develop the skills that will enable them to adequately function in society and the economy. Tests and comparative studies provide important indicators of skill development, despite valid criticisms levelled at the neoliberal governance model that underpins these kinds of instruments.

In the most recent PISA study from 2022, 15-year-olds achieved the lowest scores ever recorded by Germany in a PISA study. The test focussed on maths skills, with reading and science as minor areas of assessment. Thirty percent of youth fell short of the minimum standards for maths; 25 percent fell short in reading. Compared to the 2018 PISA study, this decline in numeracy and reading skills is equivalent to the average learning progress made over an entire school year (Anders, 2023).

Germany is not the only country whose assessed values are trending downwards. With the exception of Japan, performance sank in all countries in all three assessment areas between 2018 and 2022. Germany's students performed close to the OECD average in terms of maths and reading; only in science did they perform slightly better. In 2018, Germany's results in all assessment areas exceeded the OECD average. Germany's 25-point decline in maths (from 500 to 475 points) was steeper than the OECD average, which dropped by 17 points (from 489 to 472 points).

The results of the IQB Trends in Student Achievement similarly demonstrate a significant decline in the skills of students in grade four. Especially in the areas of reading and writing, many students' results have worsened compared to previous years. The IGLU study recorded a downward trend in the reading performance of primary school children, especially for those from socially disadvantaged backgrounds and families with a history of migration.

Reading, writing, and numeracy skills differ markedly in all assessments and across all age groups according to social background, family history of migration, and region. Children from highly educated families perform considerably better in reading and writing than children from less educated families. There are differences in maths as well. Children from migrant families tend to perform worse in reading and writing, especially those growing up in a household where German is not the main language. The "frontrunners" are dwindling, while the discrepancies between well-performing and poorly performing students have expanded significantly.

When it comes to the question of what causes this poorer school performance, we must largely rely on conjecture. School closures during the Covid-19 pandemic and the switch to remote learning was harder on children whose parents could not compensate for the absence of on-site teacher guidance.

One subject of controversy is the question of whether extensive use of digital media is shortening the attention span of young people, as well as causing them to spend less time reading and writing — in other words, whether less is demanded of them intellectually. This is difficult to prove, however.

While these same factors also affect other countries in the OECD study and could therefore go some

way to explaining the general downwards trend, it is also the case that the number of children with a family history of migration and with a non-German heritage language doubled in Germany between 2012 and 2022. These students now make up one third of the student body, and more than 80 percent in some primary schools. Where are we seeing the effects of this change? Certainly, the impact of such a large shift must extend beyond mere acquisition of the German language.

The social disparity in education opportunities has grown. And how has the education system reacted? The fundamental problems of our school system are not being addressed; they have become taboo. Yet the causes are clear, according to OECD's PISA director, Andreas Schleicher: the selective school system, paternalistic restrictions on schoolteachers in the form of strict guidelines pertaining to materials and methods, the shortage of teachers, as well as the lack of language support even before children enter school.

Language deficits often crop up in children from less-educated or migrant families; in order to be able to recognize and remedy such deficits early on, targeted language support programmes have been bolstered in preschools and primary schools.

Training and ongoing professional development for teachers must also be ramped up. Teachers should be enabled and empowered to recognize learning difficulties early on so that they can introduce targeted support measures. Initiatives like the Bildungs- und Teilhabepaket (Education and Participation Package) are geared towards supporting children from socially disadvantaged families by providing them with easier access to tutoring, cultural activities, and extracurricular education opportunities.

The expansion of full-day schools could give children more learning time and support. From a pedagogical perspective, it would be prudent to introduce "binding" full-day school programmes that would require children to attend school for the entire school day (at least some days of the week). Bremen has already begun expanding its primary school system to incorporate binding full-day schools in line with the Swedish model. This allows for a completely different structure to the school day, with long breaks in the morning, larger learning modules, and learning taking place in a variety of learning groups.

Germany has just launched a Startchancen Programme (starting opportunities programme), which is intended to lessen education inequality and improve education opportunities for children and young people in marginalized regions. The programme's commencement is set to coincide with the 2024–2025 school year and will be implemented incrementally.

Through the programme, 4,000 schools in marginalized regions will be eligible to receive additional support. The programme is endowed with a total of 20 billion euros (split between the federal and state governments) and will run for ten years, making it Germany's largest and longest-term education programme to date. The funds are designated for expanding education infrastructure like full-day schools and digital equipment, as well as for measures intended to improve learning conditions.[5] Yet not all schools that need these funds are set to receive them. In order to broaden its reach, the programme would need to be supplemented with sweeping education reforms addressing the structural inequalities in Germany's education system.

EDUCATION FUNDING

Germany's public expenditure on primary through tertiary education (i.e. including universities) is lower than the international average, measured in terms of gross domestic product (GDP): in 2020, Germany's share amounted to 4.6 percent of the country's GDP, while the OECD average was 5.1 percent, and the EU-25 average was 4.5 percent (Bildung in Deutschland 2024, 66).

When it comes to primary education, however, Germany's spending on education institutions amounted to 1.1 percent of GDP in 2020, which was higher than the OECD and EU-25 average of 0.9 percent.

In 2021, German federal, state, and municipal governments spent a combined total of 8,000 euros on every primary school student, 8,900 euros on each *Realschule* student, 10,200 per student at a Gymnasium or school offering multiple education trajectories, and 10,900 euros per *Gesamtschule* student. While *Gesamtschule* students received the highest per-capita expenditure, it is important to take into account that a *Gesamtschule* is usually a binding full-day school.

There are glaring funding problems, however: deteriorating school buildings, the need for space and staff for full-day supervision, and the teacher shortage make for big holes in the budget. The Kreditanstalt für Wiederaufbau estimates the investment backlog for renovations and necessary new buildings (for full-day schooling, for example) at a total of 56.7 billion euros (KfW Kommunalpanel 2024).

Germany has a considerable shortage of teachers, and this shortage may get worse in the years to come. On average, each teacher is responsible for 15 students. In *Hauptschule,* the number sinks to 11, while it is even lower in special education schools. It has been estimated that the country could be in need of an additional 532,600 teachers by 2035 — around 40,000 per year (Klemm, 2022) — in order to meet this need, especially in primary schools and in specific subjects like maths, science, and computer science. For many years, the deficit in fully trained teaching personnel has been filled by *Quereinsteiger* (teachers with no official vocational training in the field of education) and *Seiteneinsteiger* (teachers who have completed neither vocational training in the field of education, nor a

5 For example, financing additional teachers, social workers, and support personnel, as well as measures to strengthen school communities.

Referendariat, or teacher traineeship),[6] to varying degrees depending on the state.

In conclusion, German schools will require an estimated total of 100 billion euros or more in funding in the coming years and decades in order to pay for school buildings, digitalization, personnel, full-day schools, and inclusion programmes. This amount encompasses both investments that are immediately necessary to combat the current investment backlog as well as ongoing and future expenditures aimed at adapting the education system to meet modern standards and demands and ensure an acceptable quality of education.

Education Costs for Parents

Even though education is free in public schools, parents are still compelled to make a hefty financial contribution. Textbooks are provided by the schools in most states, but there are also some regulations requiring parents to pay a share of the cost. In some cases, parents must buy the books themselves, which, depending on the subject and academic year, can add up to hundreds of euros per school year. Notebooks, pens and pencils, calculators, folders, and other school materials cost parents an average of 100 to 200 euros per year. With the rise of digitalization, devices such as laptops and tablets are becoming increasingly important for education; these devices can cost anywhere from 200 to 600 euros or more. When children attend full-day school programmes and/or partake in school lunches, parents must contribute the costs of their children's meals, which can amount to three to five euros per meal depending on the school and lunch service. For 20 school days per month, this amounts to a monthly meal cost of between 60 and 100 euros. Usually organized at least once per school year, class field trips can cost anywhere from 200 to 500 euros or more, depending on the length and destination of the trip.

One of the biggest education costs for parents is after-school tutoring. According to a 2016 study by the Bertelsmann Stiftung, roughly one quarter of students in Germany engage the services of private tutors. In addition to private tutoring by university or secondary-school students or teachers, there are also tutoring companies such as Studienkreis (Study Circle) and Schülerhilfe (Student Help), which make up about one third of the market. On average, private tutoring costs parents between 50 and 150 euros per month.

In many cases, parents must also account for the cost of their child's route to school, either by purchasing a bicycle or covering the cost of public transport. These prices vary according to the distance and method of transportation.

Various financial support options are available for low-income families. One is the Bildungs- und Teilhabepaket, which provides financial aid for purchasing school materials and covering the cost of tutoring, field trips, and school lunches. The programme's application process is so complicated, however, that many parents who qualify for these benefits do not actually end up taking advantage of them.

Altogether, private households in Germany spent a total of 6.9 billion euros on after-school tutoring, learning materials, and other education-related expenses in 2020 — equivalent to 0.2 percent of the country's GDP (Statistisches Bundesamt [Destatis], 2023, 107).

PRIVATE SCHOOLS

During the 2015–2016 school year, approximately nine percent of all students in Germany attended one of the country's more than 3,600 general-education private schools. Since 1992, the rate of private school attendance has nearly doubled. The East German states made up for the absence of GDR-era private schools during the post-reunification period, establishing Waldorf schools and other progressive reform schools. There are also primary schools in rural areas, which the East German government wanted to phase out and are now run privately as a local community initiative. Unlike in countries like the Netherlands, where approximately 70 percent of students receive their education in private schools, this is still more the exception than the rule in Germany (Klemm et al., 2018).

Nearly one quarter of Germany's private schools are primary schools. At 18 percent, the share of special education schools also makes up a high percentage of private schools, and nearly 15 percent of all private schools are Gymnasiums. Most private schools are funded by the Catholic or Lutheran churches, with Waldorf schools making up the third-largest group.

The right to establish private schools is enshrined in Germany's constitution, the Basic Law. However, the law also forbids these schools from engaging in practices of socio-economic segregation, meaning that they must not exclude less economically advantaged candidates by imposing tuition fees or selective admission requirements. In reality, however, private schools in Germany do engage in these practices, since this is essentially part of their business model. Alongside schools that advertise a particular educational vision, such as denominational schools, Waldorf schools, and alternative schools, the main "advantage" offered by private schools is exclusivity — in other words, a sense of prestige and opportunities to network. As Klemm et al. (2018) ascertained, the academic performance recorded by these schools does not exceed that of public schools, but attendees are surrounded by "better people".

In reality, private schools receive more than 70 percent of their funding from the government, as Klemm et al. determined using Federal Statistical data (ibid.).

6 Quereinsteiger have usually graduated from university, where they studied a main subject as well as a secondary subject, both of which are taught in schools, but did not take additional pedagogical units as part of a university teaching degree. They complete the practical phase of teacher training and are then considered on equal footing with fully trained teachers. Seiteneinsteiger, by contrast, have completed neither a university degree nor the practical phase of teacher training; they are usually employed on a temporary basis as substitute teachers.

In sum, the deplorable conditions in Germany's public schools are leading to a moderate increase in the popularity of private institutions. Twenty years ago, the Bertelsmann corporation (through its foundation, the Bertelsmann Stiftung) was already sounding out the state of the education market for its subsidiary company Arvato. It came to the conclusion that, while the further education sector represented a potentially lucrative business market, there was no money to be made in private schooling at a large scale. This may change, however, as public education facilities continue to deteriorate.

TEACHER TRAINING

The classic path to becoming a teacher is to complete a five-year-long university degree. This is the first phase of teacher education. However, a uniform course of study for prospective teachers does not exist in Germany, according to a study by Mark Rackles (2024) for the Rosa-Luxemburg-Stiftung.

Across all Bundesländer, the first phase of teacher training consists of a course of study divided into stages, with a Bachelor's and Master's programme. An education course geared toward the *Staatsexamen* (state examination) predominates in seven states, however, including Bavaria, Hesse, and Saarland. The study programme encompasses at least two school subjects that are given equal weight, in addition to teaching methodologies, pedagogy, and practical school training. In most states, courses of study are divided based on school type, with separate programmes for prospective primary school and Gymnasium teachers, for example. Students enrol for their subjects at university but are not, in most cases, educated within a fully-fledged faculty or department of education.

After completing their university studies, prospective teachers begin the practical phase of teacher training, known as *Vorbereitungsdienst,* which lasts between 12 and 24 months depending on the state. This second phase consists of a period of supervised practical training in a school and instruction in teaching methodology.

In view of the glaring shortage of teachers and the high rate of students in the field of education opting to discontinue their studies, education policy-makers and unions have demanded that teacher training be modified. In response, the Standing Scientific Commission on Education Policy (SWK), which operates on behalf of the Kultusministerkonferenz, has put forward several expert opinions on reforming teacher education (Ständige Wissenschaftliche Kommission der Kultusministerkonferenz [SWK), 2023).

Yet critics like Rackles (2024) describe these reports as a "relatively uncompromising defence of the university status quo". This "priority afforded the universities" when it comes to the provision of teacher training is exactly what the education consultant would like to do away with; he believes this monopoly must be dismantled in favour of universities of applied sciences. In addition, Rackles writes, the various teacher training degree programmes should be oriented towards specific school level (primary school, lower and upper secondary, special needs schools) rather than type of school (*Hauptschule, Realschule,* or Gymnasium). This would allow graduates of teaching programmes to be deployed more flexibly in various school types following completion of their studies. Permitting teachers who have focussed on only one school subject during the course of their studies to receive official qualifications, with the option to pursue a second subject later on, is also a must, according to Rackles. This would simultaneously make it easier for *Quereinsteiger* to attain the necessary qualifications. Finally, Rackles suggests integrating practical training and university studies into a single-phase teacher training programme. This idea, known as *duales Lehramtsstudium* (dual teacher education), is already being attempted in some Bundesländer.

Teacher Standing

The Global Teacher Status Index (Varkey Foundation 2018) revealed that the standing of teachers in Germany is very low when compared to other countries; within Europe, Germany took last place in this category. Only 20 percent of German residents would encourage their child to become a teacher, the study found — in spite of the fact that there are hardly any countries where teachers earn as much as they do in Germany.

The fact that the teaching profession remains so unappealing despite its decent earning potential is due in part to the long hours and lack of opportunities for professional advancement (ibid.). For the status of the teaching profession, recognition as an intellectual and demanding job is even more important (Schleicher, 2024). The fact that 45 percent of teachers work part-time (among women this number climbs to above 50 percent) must also be ascribed to teachers' excessive workloads.

KEY CHALLENGES

The shortage of teachers and educational personnel for preschools and full-day schools is certainly the most urgent challenge. In a report for the teachers' union Verband Bildung und Erziehung (VBE), Klaus Klemm (2022) calculated that around 530,000 teachers will be needed in the next ten years — yet only 400,000 are on track to be trained in the best-case scenario. In order to counter the shortage, teacher education must be reformed. At most universities, not even half of the students who start a degree course in teaching complete their programme (Rackles, 2024, 23). Neither do we have enough pre-school teachers for pre-primary education centres and the expansion of full-day care centres. Die Linke is therefore calling for an additional 100,000 teachers and 200,000 pre-school teachers to be employed across Germany.

State support for the expansion of early childhood education has increased substantially, both through

federal funding and funding from the Bundesländer and municipalities. Programmes like the Gute-KiTa-Gesetz (Good Preschool Law) have provided additional means for increasing the quality and quantity of childcare options.

One key finding of the Bertelsmann Stiftung's report *Fachkräfte-Radar für KiTa und Grundschule 2023* (Professionals' Radar for Preschools and Primary Schools 2023) is that the shortage of skilled preschool workers continues to pose a huge challenge. In the long term, the problem could be alleviated by improving working conditions and increasing academization of the profession. The hefty workload for preschool educators significantly contributes to the elevated rate of sick leave among personnel.

It is common knowledge that there is an investment backlog for schools. The Kreditanstalt für Wiederaufbau calculated that municipalities currently require more than 50 billion euros to fund the construction of new buildings and renovations of existing structures. What is not determined, however, is the extent of the shortage of school places nationwide. The situation in Cologne is particularly egregious: 31 more primary schools are needed, a fact that the relevant authorities have been well aware of since 2018. Instead, shipping containers have been set up in schools in order to accommodate these overlooked children. Cologne also needs more than 800 more *Gesamtschule* places, despite the fact that three new schools have been opened in recent years. There is no nationwide survey of these figures.

The student body has changed dramatically in the last 20 years. About 30 percent of those in the relevant age group of between five and 20 years either migrated to Germany themselves or have at least one immigrant parent. Separating out the children who do not speak the language of instruction (or do not speak it well) is not a productive practice, since their ability to learn effectively is predicated upon their contact with other children. Schools must therefore provide sufficient support for these students.

It is unacceptable that at least 20 percent of children leave primary school without the language skills required to understand instruction at a secondary school.

Schools cannot negate the process of societal polarization. However, they do risk increasing it if they fail to afford all students the possibility to really participate in society. Early school selection after grade four and the separated education tracks further increases social division.

It is certainly important for schools to engage with digitalization. However, replacing blackboards with whiteboards and equipping students with tablets are not sufficient measures in this regard. The task of addressing societal challenges in schools is much more important, and this includes empowering individuals in their interactions with digital media.

Despite legal policies regarding inclusion, many mainstream schools do not have the personnel or finances needed to adequately cater to students with special education needs. Without favourable conditions, inclusion measures simply cannot succeed.

Unequal access to education is not merely an equity issue affecting political legitimacy. It also means that some proportion of human potential lies fallow and unavailable — to marginalized people, but also to society at large.

The question of whether children and young people learn better in learning environments geared towards "homogeneous" or heterogeneous levels of academic achievement remains a divisive one. In the 1800s, Wilhelm von Humboldt was already calling for a school system that would comprise a number of different albeit not hierarchically structured levels. His efforts failed, however, due to the hierarchically structured society in which he lived. Once again in the Weimar Republic, the combined efforts of conservatives and the Catholic church were able to prevent the introduction of a comprehensive school system. The former East German states adopted the tiered school system after 1989, albeit as a two-tier system with the Gymnasium and one other school type, thereby phasing out their comprehensive schools.

As of 2022–2023, Germany has more than 2,200 integrated *Gesamtschulen*. In some states, like North Rhine-Westphalia, the *Gesamtschule* is widespread, while in other states (like Bavaria and Saxony), it is non-existent. Approximately 20 percent of lower secondary students attend a *Gesamtschule*. In North Rhine-Westphalia, more than 30 percent of secondary students attend a *Gesamtschule,* which is reflected in the prevalence of this school type throughout the state. Yet since these schools invariably find themselves in competition with the Gymnasium, they have been nowhere near able to fulfil their aspiration of being a school for all students.

There is ample research evidence that school systems that separate children early on lead to more unequal learning outcomes. According to the research, marginalized students specifically profit from having a longer period of shared learning, while neither the other students nor the general achievement level is negatively impacted. At *Gesamtschulen* in North Rhine-Westphalia, 79 percent of children who were not recommended to continue to a Gymnasium completed their Abitur. Children from migrant families and those living in marginalized areas are particularly (and massively) prone to being misjudged. Just 11 percent of young people from migrant families who achieved their Abitur had been deemed suitable candidates for Gymnasium at the end of grade four. Yet in 2022, 89 percent of them did in fact complete an Abitur despite having been recommended to attend either a *Hauptschule* or *Realschule*. In fact, in school districts that are particularly disadvantaged, more than 92 percent of those who achieved their Abitur did so in opposition to the recommendation they received at the end of their primary schooling.

POLITICAL DEMANDS FOR LEFT-WING EDUCATION POLICY

School as a Site of Democracy and Inclusion

"One school for all" must remain the central demand of left-wing education policy. This model is not only necessary to make schools more socially equitable and to help young people fully develop their potential; it is also an irresponsible waste of resources to operate multiple different kinds of schools side by side, with each school requiring additional personnel and space. But most importantly, we are missing out on the potential for social cohesion offered by a single school for all: it would be a place where children and parents from all walks of life could come together; a site of inclusion and democracy.

Does the two-tier system that has been implemented by certain Bundesländer constitute a step in the right direction in some respects, or does it in fact contribute to the stabilization of the segmented school system? This remains to be seen.

The fact that young people and students appear so vulnerable to racist, misanthropic ideologies and authoritarian models of government poses an additional problem for schools. If we are to strengthen democratic consciousness, it is not enough to simply explain the function of political parties, parliamentary structures, and election processes. The biggest issues of our time must be afforded adequate attention in our schools: peace, climate, environment, energy policy, poverty and wealth, and class division, to name only the most important.

Schools must be actively involved in society and also remain receptive to community involvement. Students should take part in the process of shaping their surroundings even outside of school: in issues relating to peace and the environment, for instance, but also in municipal planning processes. Teachers and students should be encouraged to engage and grapple with their social, political, cultural, and natural environment.

Hand Over Finances and Responsibility to Schools and Municipalities

Federalism is often the subject of criticism in political discourse, since expertise and financial responsibilities are unevenly and opaquely distributed. However, it is important that schools enjoy an appropriate degree of freedom and that local communities are involved in decision-making processes. We must develop a model in which the federal government has basic legislative authority over school structure and education goals, but federal funds are not distributed according to the Köngistein Key (a state allocation plan based two thirds on tax revenue and one third on population) — that is, funds must be distributed between the states based on need rather than tax revenue. This may mean that poorer states receive more education funds. The individual Bundesländer, in turn, should distribute these funds to municipalities based on a social index. Along with the schools, municipalities would thus benefit from being granted more freedom when it comes to hiring choices, building schools, and creating curricula.

Closing the investment backlog and employing the necessary school staff would require special funds set aside by the government in the amount of 100 billion euros. This measure was recently proposed in the Bundestag by the parliamentary factions Die Linke and the Social Democrats (SPD), but is also a demand of the social movement Bildungswende JETZT! (Education Change NOW!).

Reform How Teachers Work!

Teachers' working conditions must be improved. Teachers need offices and shared working spaces in their schools to enable them to cooperate with each other outside of class time. The lone-warrior mindset must end. Additionally, working hours are currently defined for teachers only in terms of teaching hours; they ought instead to be measured in terms of fixed attendance hours at the school.

Give All Students the Tools They Need to Participate in Education and Society

Rather than a Startchancen Programme that selectively supports schools, we need comprehensive systems of support to address the specific problems faced by schools in the form of providing additional staff and allowing teachers a greater degree of freedom when it comes to setting the curriculum.

The school system would benefit from a mandatory pre-school year to help children gain the social and language skills they will need to start school. This would be far better than lowering the age of school entrance or, as is now increasingly the case, holding students back after grade one.

Schools should be expanded to provide mandatory full-day school programmes with free lunch for all students — not only because undernourished children have difficulty following their lessons, but also because eating together is an important part of social education.

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Maie Kitsing

THE EDUCATION SYSTEM IN ESTONIA

The Estonian general education system has gained worldwide recognition, especially through the international PISA study. Historically, Estonian education has been strong, with a network of public schools established over 300 years ago. During the Soviet occupation, Estonian education was notably strong compared to other republics in the Union. Although education policy is important when it comes to achieving educational success, social, regional, and economic policies, along with societal values also play a significant role. This article focuses on educational reforms carried out over the past two decades aimed at improving education quality and creating equal opportunities. Effective education policies and their implementation have resulted in excellent student performance and ensured more equal access to education in international comparisons. However, demographic changes, a shifting society, and economic development continue to create challenges that the Estonian education system must confront.

EDUCATION POLICY AND RESPONSIBILITIES

The Estonian general education system is decentralized, with the state providing the foundation and framework for education policy, while local governments and schools are responsible for implementation. Responsibility is shared between the central government, local government, and school principals. For instance, the central government allocates education grants to local governments based on student numbers, and local governments manage and finance municipal schools and preschools. School principals create effective teaching conditions using the budget they have at their disposal and seek additional funds for various projects.

Local governments keep records of school-aged children and ensure compliance with compulsory schooling, provide material and other assistance to allow children to complete their compulsory education, organize transportation, and ensure medical care and catering during school hours. They are responsible for managing the school network in accordance with regional needs, and for appointing and dismissing the heads of educational institutions under their authority (Parliament of Estonia, 1992).

The decentralization of general education and the purposeful planning of its development have led to the need to implement evidence-based management at the state, local government, and school levels. The Estonian Education Information System, established in 2004, and its visual platform EducationEye (in Estonian "Haridussilm"), created in 2014, provide public access to data. In 2017, comprehensive national supervision (whole inspection) was discontinued, but schools were required to implement internal evaluation. The aim of the reform was to direct the responsibility of leaders towards goal-oriented and evidence-based management. Centrally conducted surveys assess the satisfaction of students, teachers, and parents. The assessment of learning outcomes is sample based, except for national final exams at the end of upper-secondary and basic school (Kitsing & Kukemelk, 2020).

School principals and teachers in Estonia have a high degree of autonomy. Principals recruit, sign contracts with, and dismiss staff, including teachers. While the state sets minimum salaries, actual salaries are determined by the principal in alignment with the school's governing body. Principals also manage the school budget. Teachers choose textbooks and teaching materials, and while the national curriculum stipulates learning outcomes, content and methods are up to the teacher. According to PISA 2022, Estonian and Japanese teachers have the greatest freedom in curriculum decisions. Schools also have discretion in student assessment, disciplinary policies, and admission criteria (OECD, 2023b).

In previous decades, the school network primarily consisted of rural basic schools and combined basic and upper-secondary schools in regional centres and larger cities. At the beginning of this century, a significant decline in the birth rate and economic changes led to greater urbanization, necessitating changes to the school network. In 2012, a school network reform process was initiated, separating basic schools (grades one to nine) from upper-secondary levels (grades ten to twelve). The reform provoked opposition from local governments. To address this, state gymnasiums (*gümnaasium*, grades ten to twelve) were created.

Over the past decade, there has been a trend in rural areas and smaller towns that has seen local governments merge preschool institutions with basic schools or bring schools in their area under unified management. The primary reason for this is the declining number of students. Merging educational institutions helps cut costs and better utilize human resources (Kuiv, 2020; Maask, 2023).

The biggest change in the management of, and responsibilities for, the education sector occurred in 2017 with the administrative reform of Estonian municipalities. As a result of these reform measures, the number of municipalities was reduced from 213 to 79. From an educational standpoint, it was particularly important that the reforms led to the dissolution of county governments. The tasks of county governments were divided among local governments, ministries, and other state institutions. In the education sector, county governments were previously responsible for conducting state supervision. This task was taken over by the Ministry of Education and Research (MoER), but on

a significantly smaller scale. The number of school inspectors across the country decreased from around 50 to 10. Comprehensive and regular state supervision of educational institutions was replaced by thematic and case-based supervision.

SCHOOL STRUCTURE AND CHANGES

In the Estonian education system, schools are classified as follows: a basic school (in Estonian *põhikool*) refers to a nine-grade school. According to the English system, the Estonian basic school consists of both "primary" and "lower-secondary" education. A common school type includes both basic and upper-secondary education. In this case, the school is simply called a "secondary school" (in Estonian *keskkool*), and secondary school consists of primary, lower, and upper education. A school that only offers upper-secondary education is called a gymnasium) (in Estonian *gümnaasium*).

The Estonian education system is characterized by decentralization. Preschools (kindergartens), basic schools (grades one to nine), and secondary schools (grades one to twelve) are predominantly municipal institutions,[1] with private kindergartens and schools making up about 11 percent of educational institutions. Schools for students with special educational needs and a certain number of gymnasiums (so-called "pure" gymnasiums, which consist of only grades ten to twelve) are primarily state-owned.

The structure of the education system and national education standards are shaped by education policy, allowing students to move from one educational level to another. The levels of education include early childhood education and basic education (grades one to nine, ages seven to sixteen), and secondary education (general secondary and vocational secondary education). Basic school consists of three stages (grades one to three, four to six, and seven to nine). The fourth stage of general education schools is the gymnasium level (grades ten to twelve) (Figure 1).

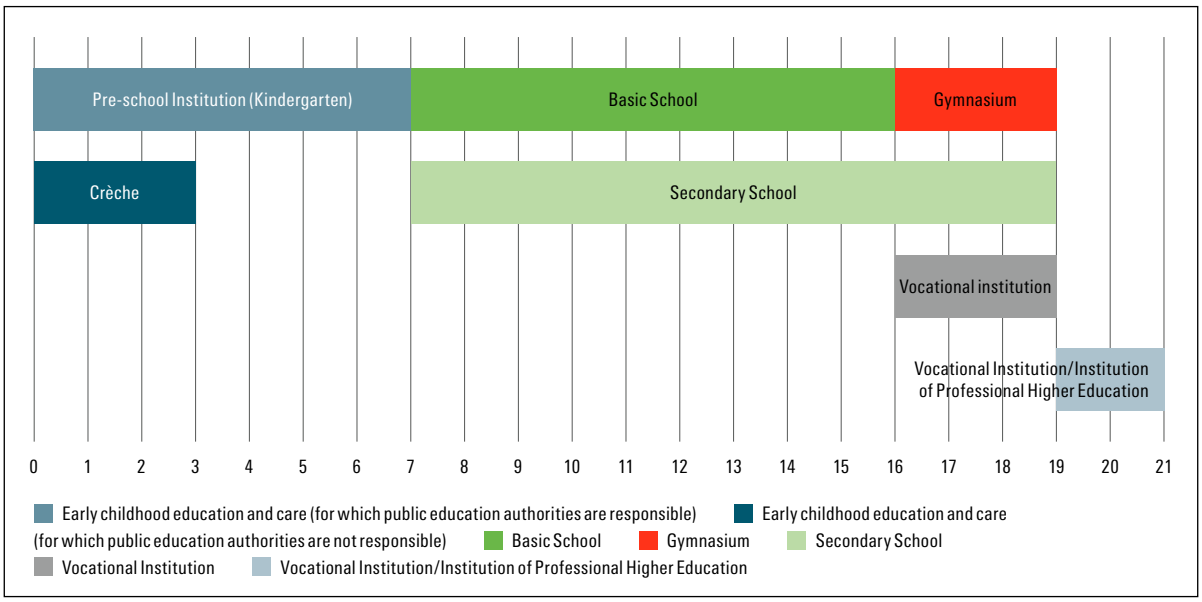
Compulsory basic education starts at the age of seven and lasts until students complete the ninth grade or turn 17. Last year, preparations began for a reform to raise the compulsory education age. It is planned that students starting the ninth grade in the 2025/2026 school year will be required to continue their education until the age of 18.

There are 175 school days per year and five breaks, with the summer break lasting two and a half months. The general distribution of lesson hours across school stages is set out in the national curriculum, but schools determine the specific distribution of lessons for each grade.

The school schedule reflects the organization of learning activities and extracurricular activities that complement the school curriculum. The school principal may form what are known as "long-day groups" in basic school. The long-day groups start work after compulsory lessons, and parents decide on whether their children participate. These groups are usually for younger students, and are offered free of charge, especially in rural areas. Long-day groups provide supervision and pedagogical guidance for students during their free time, assist with homework, and support interest-based activities and development. The school

1 Secondary schools consisting of grades one to twelve are often also referred to as "gymnasiums". This means that a gymnasium can offer both basic and secondary education (grades one to twelve). Then there are what are referred to as "pure" gymnasiums, which consist of grades ten to twelve.

Figure 1: Estonian formal education structure 2023/2024



Source: Eurydice. https://eurydice.eacea.ec.europa.eu/sites/default/files/inline-images/EE_EN_2023_24.jpg

schedule is established by the principal (Parliament of Estonia, 2010). In the 2023/2024 school year, approximately 5 percent of students at basic schools took part in these long-day groups. Healthcare requirements for the school schedule and the organization of education are set by the Minister of Social Affairs (Ministry of Social Affairs, 2007).

After compulsory lessons, schools offer extracurricular activity clubs. In general, subject-based clubs (math, science, drama, etc.), robotics groups, choirs, folk dance groups, and ball games are free of charge, while clubs for specific interests may be subject to a fee. Participation in these extracurricular activities is not mandatory; students decide whether they wish to be involved.

INTERNATIONAL COMPARATIVE STUDIES

The first international assessment in which Estonia participated was the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) in 2003. The results were a positive shock — Estonian students placed seventh in the international rankings (Gonzales et al., 2004). As of 2006, Estonian students have taken part in the PISA study. In international comparisons, Estonian students have delivered good results (OECD, 2023a) (Figure 2).

In the ranking of countries based on PISA results, Estonia has been among the top ten in the world. According to the PISA 2018 and PISA 2022 education surveys, Estonia's 15-year-olds are the absolute leaders in knowledge and skills in the European Union (EU). Estonian students have the lowest underachievement rate in the EU and the highest shares of top performers in all three domains in the EU (European Commission, 2024).

The impact of students' socio-economic background has been very small in previous PISA studies, but PISA 2022 showed that the impact of this metric on the quality of education has increased to 13.4 percent, placing Estonia close to the OECD average of 15.5 percent. The reasons for the increasing impact of socioeconomic background on education quality are still being investigated. Despite the increasing gap, Estonia has the lowest socioeconomic gap in underachievement in mathematics among EU member states.

There are many reasons for students' successful achievements. The presence of a growth mindset among students and the willingness to put effort into learning certainly impact academic results. In Estonia, students believe that they can improve their intelligence. Like the 2018 PISA survey, in PISA 2022, Estonia ranks first among countries in terms of growth mindset — the belief that a person's ability and intelligence can develop as a result of effort (OECD 2023a).

Both international studies and national analyses of academic performance have shown that students' academic results differ significantly between Estonian-speaking schools and Russian-speaking schools. By PISA 2022, in all assessed domains, there was a significant difference in performance between schools with Estonian and Russian language instruction. Although Russian-speaking schools have improved over time (except for the last PISA survey), the gap with Estonian-speaking schools is still approximately one school year (Tire et al., 2023). There are several reasons why the results of schools with Russian as the language of instruction are lower. One likely reason is the Estonian-language proficiency of the teachers. The training provided by universities for teachers is conducted in Estonian. Due to their limited Estonian skills, teachers in Russian-speaking schools seldom participate in this training, which may affect their professional development. The high level of school autonomy has allowed Russian-speaking schools to remain isolated. Russian-speaking schools score lower on most metrics characterizing the school climate than schools with Estonian as the language of instruction (these include student support, relationships between teachers and students, student absenteeism, bullying, etc.). There are certainly differences in teaching methods as well, although this has not been directly studied in Estonia. When comparing the teaching outcomes of schools with Estonian and Russian as the languages of instruction, another clear difference emerges — students in Estonian-speaking schools have significantly more advanced epistemic beliefs, referring to their understanding of the nature of science (Täht, et al., 2018; Tire et al., 2023).

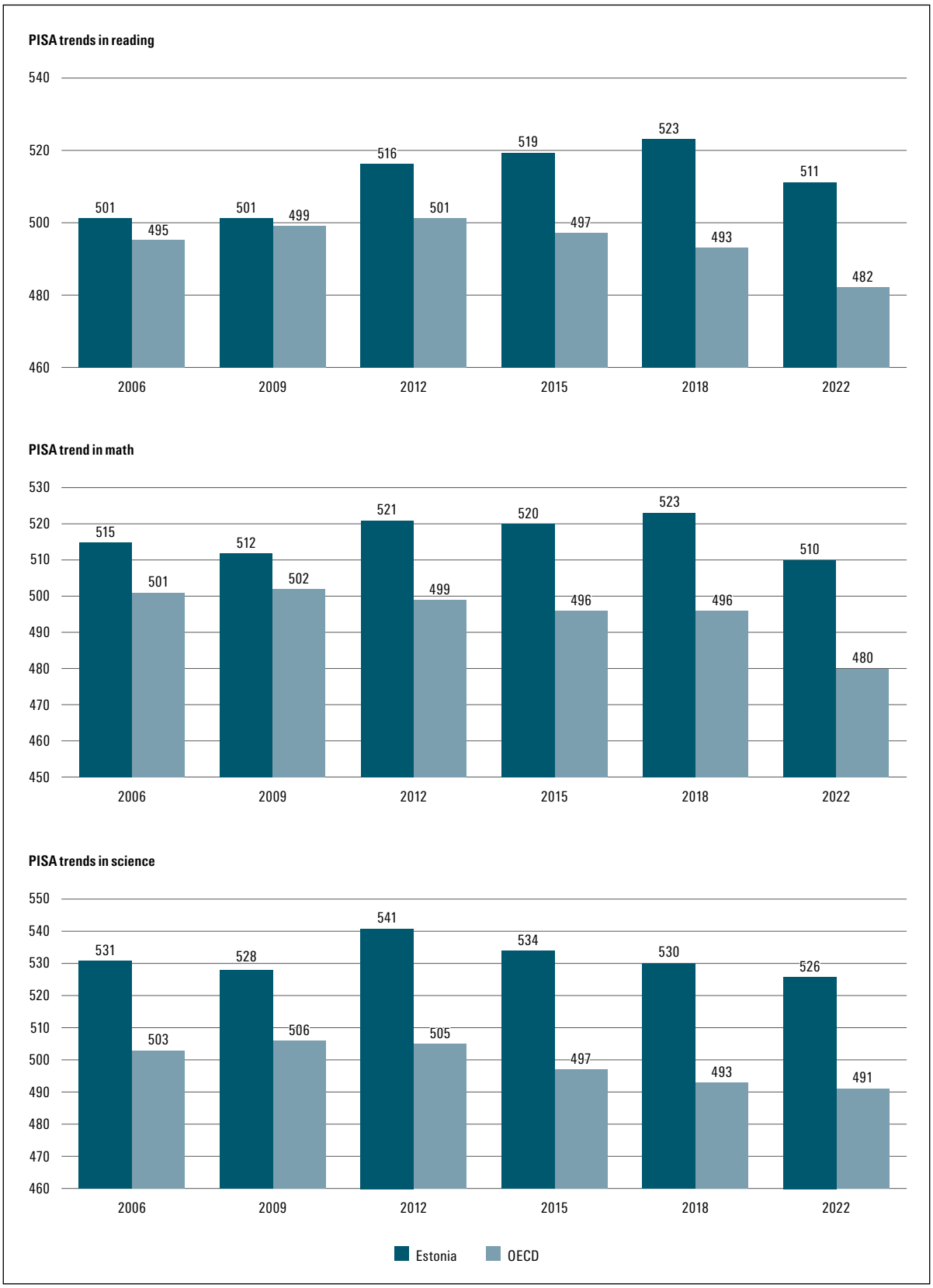
PUBLIC AND PRIVATE SPENDING ON EDUCATION

Estonia's public sector spending on education accounts for about 6 percent of GDP, one of the highest proportions among OECD and European Union countries. Estonia's long-term education expenditure exceeds that of other European Union countries by about a quarter, while being comparable to the level of Finland. Estonia's education expenditure as a percentage of total government spending is the highest of any country in the European Union (Aaviksoo, 2024).

The funding of educational institutions differs depending on whether they are state, municipal, or private institutions. The expenses of the schools are administered by the school's managing body with support from the state budget covering staff wages and in-service training expenses of teachers and heads (principals), as well as expenses for study materials and school lunches for students in both municipal and private schools. Local municipalities cover the operational costs of their own schools (heating, lighting, etc.). State educational institutions are funded from the state budget (Eurydice, 2023a).

The expenses of private schools are administered by their management, but the state provides support for teachers' salaries, school lunches, and the purchase of study materials based on the number of students. Since 2018, the state has also offered private school owners funding to support operational costs, covering 100 percent of the average operational costs of municipal schools. In addition to state support, private

Figure 2: Change in the average PISA scores for mathematics, reading, and science over the last six PISA assessments (2006, 2009, 2012, 2015, 2018, and 2022).



Source: OECD (2023a), PISA 2022 Results (Volume I): The State of Learning and Equity in Education, PISA, OECD Publishing, Paris, https://doi.org/10.1787/53f23881-en..

schools have the right to charge tuition fees. The use of tuition fees is decided by the private school operator, but generally, they are used to cover the costs of things such as smaller class sizes in language studies or assistant teachers. Generally, tuition fees do not cover the costs of extracurricular activities, including hobby activities and after-school programmes, as well as costs associated with school meals, accommodation, transportation, and other services that support learning (Serbak & Valk, 2016).

The main difference in the budget formation between a private school and a municipal school is the private school's right to collect tuition fees from parents.

TEACHER TO PUPIL RATIO

In terms of the number of students per teacher, it can be said that teachers in Estonia enjoy favourable working conditions. Studies show that in larger classes, more time is often spent on discipline, leaving less time for teaching and learning. In contrast, in smaller classes, teachers have more time to address students' individual needs and create a better learning environment (OECD, 2019; OECD, 2021).

The student-teacher ratio is obtained by dividing the number of full-time students by the number of full-time-equivalent teachers. In 2021, the student-teacher ratio in Estonian basic schools was 12.2, which was slightly lower than the European Union average of 13.4. In Germany, the corresponding ratio was 14.8 (Figure 2) (Eurostat, 2021).

Although the ratio in Estonia is lower, there is significant regional variation — in some schools, there are one to two students per teacher (rural schools), while in others, there are 30 students per teacher (in the capital of Tallinn) (Põder, et al, 2023).

With the implementation of the school network reform, the number of students per teacher is likely to increase. However, due to Estonia's dispersed population, it will likely remain quite low, especially in rural areas.

TEACHER TRAINING AND STATUS

Initial teacher training in Estonia takes place at the higher education level at the University of Tartu and Tallinn University. Subject and class teachers for basic and upper-secondary level schools are trained at the master's level, while kindergarten teachers complete a bachelor's degree. The conceptual foundation of the training aligns with the standards of a four-level professional qualification.

Teacher qualification standards stipulate the knowledge, skills, experiences, and attitudes required by teachers, and have been developed in collaboration with the Qualifications Authority, teachers, school leaders, universities, the MoER, and other partners. These standards serve as the basis for developing teacher training curricula and continuing education programmes, both for initial teacher training and during the professional induction year and continuing education. The Estonian Teachers' Union is the body that grants teacher qualifications. In educational institutions, these standards assist in teacher self-assessment (MoERb, 2024b).

The first teacher qualification standard in Estonia was established in 2005, marking the first attempt to describe the teaching profession in terms of skills rather than knowledge. In 2013, a transition was made from a single-level qualification standard to four levels: Teacher, Level 6 Qualification (preschool education); Teacher, Level 7 Qualification; Senior Teacher, Level 7 Qualification; and Master Teacher, Level 8 Qualification (Eisenschmidt and Koit, 2014). The content of the teacher qualification standards was updated in 2019. The professional standards for teachers are available on the website of the Foundation Kutsekoda (Estonian Qualifications Authority).[2]

Teachers have a nationally established minimum salary, which as of January 2024 was 1,803 euro (gross monthly salary). Increasing teacher salaries has been a consistent strategic goal of the Estonian government. Over the past decade, the minimum teacher salary has doubled, rising from 800 euro in 2014 to 1,749 euro in 2023.

A survey on the reputation of the teaching profession in Estonia revealed that, according to teachers themselves, the teaching profession holds the fourth-highest social standing among professions. Approximately 40 percent of teachers consider the reputation of their profession to be very good or good, while one-fifth view it as poor. Among Estonian residents aged 35–50, two-thirds believe that the teaching profession ensures a respectable social standing, with only 5 percent rating the profession's reputation as poor (Estonian Survey Centre, 2021). According to the TALIS 2018 survey, 26 percent of Estonian teachers felt that their profession was valued by society (OECD, 2020).

BIGGEST CHALLENGES

The challenges in the field of education are outlined in the Estonian Education Development Plan 2021–2035, which was approved in 2021 as a continuation of the Estonian Lifelong Learning Strategy 2020 (Government of Estonia, 2021).

Shortage of Teachers and Support Specialists

The Estonian Education Strategy 2021–2030 identifies the issue of the teacher pipeline as a major challenge. The supply of qualified teachers and support specialists has not been sufficient, with teacher shortages being particularly acute in certain subjects and regions (Government of Estonia, 2021). Over a decade ago, it was already evident that the teacher shortage in Estonia had a specific structure (lack of strong teach-

2 Occupational Qualification Standards: Teacher, EstQF Level 6: https://www.kutseregister.ee/ctrl/en/Standardid/vaata/10824210; Occupational Qualification Standards: Teacher, EstQF Level 7: https://www.kutseregister.ee/ctrl/en/Standardid/vaata/10824233; Occupational Qualification Standards: Master teacher, level 8: https://www.kutseregister.ee/ctrl/en/Standardid/vaata/10719399

er training graduates, young teachers, male teachers, and especially teachers in STEM subjects (Valk, 2016). In recent years, there has been a continuing structural shortage of qualified teachers and support specialists, with a more pronounced shortage in rural schools and a greater need for teachers of STEM subjects (Kukk and Tagamets, 2023).

There are several reasons for the shortage of teachers and support specialists. The average age of teachers has increased, and the proportion of teachers exceeding retirement age has grown. Few young people are interested in the teaching profession. The primary problem is the attractiveness of the teaching profession. There are also not enough career changers entering the teaching profession through alternative routes. Teacher retention is another issue — not all those who start working as teachers stay in the profession for long (Kukk and Tagamets, 2023).

The main reason for the lack of attractiveness of the teaching profession is the low salary. However, the growth rate of salaries in the education sector has been the sixth highest in the European Union in the years 2020–2022, growing by 12 percent. Despite the salary increase, the significant gap between salaries in the education sector and other sectors remains a problem (Kübarsepp, 2024).

Reorganization of the School Network

The decline in student numbers and the concentration of the economy and human capital in larger cities, especially in the last two decades, have led to inevitable changes in the school network. The gradual separation of basic schools (grades one to nine) from secondary schools (grades one to twelve) and the creation of "pure" upper-secondary schools (grades ten to twelve), as well as the integration of pre-primary institutions (kindergarten) into basic schools, have inevitably sparked resistance among local communities. At the same time, the state's task is to ensure quality education for all students. Maintaining very small schools is costly, and there is often a shortage of qualified teachers and support staff, which can negatively impact the quality of education, including the support provided to students. In upper-secondary education (grades ten to twelve), for example, students have significantly fewer opportunities to study different languages and elective subjects. The process of reorganizing the school network has been slower than desired and has been hindered by a lack of clarity in the division of responsibilities for organizing general secondary education (Raudla, 2021). Unlike basic schools, which are mostly owned by local governments, secondary schools are owned either by the state or local governments. Upper-secondary schools ("pure gymnasiums") are mainly owned by the state. The current school network changes are mainly aimed at basic schools, with a network of six-grade basic schools emerging in rural areas and nine-grade schools being established in larger centres.

Transition to Estonian-Speaking Education

The reasons for this planned transition date back to the Soviet era when two education systems operated in Estonia — Estonian- and Russian-speaking schools. Each system had its own curriculum: in Russian-speaking schools, the curriculum of the Soviet Union was followed, and learning Estonian was largely optional (Tomusk, 2019). In Estonian schools, children learned in Estonian and followed the Estonian curriculum. After re-establishing independence, efforts were made to unify the two education systems. From 1993, teaching Estonian became mandatory in Russian-speaking schools, but instruction could still be conducted in Russian. A decisive step towards transitioning to Estonian-language instruction was taken two years ago. The transition to Estonian-language education will start in kindergartens and grades one and four this year on 1 September and will continue until 2030 (Parliament of Estonia, 2022). This is a significant challenge as the transition requires additional professional teachers with excellent Estonian language skills, support staff, and leaders at a time when there is already a shortage of qualified teachers in Estonian-speaking schools.

DISTINCTIVE FEATURES OF THE ESTONIAN EDUCATION SYSTEM

Strong Preschool Education

Since 1999, preschool teachers in Estonia have been guided by the national early childhood education curriculum. Unlike in many other countries, Estonian preschool institutions are educational establishments, not social institutions. Teachers are required to have at least a bachelor's degree. Support services for children, such as speech therapy and special education services, are free of charge, allowing for skilled and timely support for a child's development in case of any issues. Because most preschool institutions belong to local governments, it is possible to provide free services and, if necessary, offer additional support to the family.

Ownership of Educational Institutions

Basic schools (grades one to nine) and secondary schools (grades one to twelve) mostly belong to local authorities, with private schools comprising 11 percent of such institutions. Local authorities can provide social support to families in need of assistance in the home. Local governments receive allocations through the national equalization fund, which helps to balance the budgetary resources of municipalities and cities, thereby reducing regional disparities and increasing more equitable access to quality education.

High Degree of Autonomy for Educational Institutions

The school principal has the role of an organizational leader, with the freedom granted by the state to manage the educational institution in the best possible way: recruiting staff, releasing them if necessary, managing

the budget and utilizing resources within it, and developing remuneration principles that support the institution's effectiveness. The responsibility that comes with this freedom encourages the principal to consistently focus on the quality of the educational institution. Teachers also have significant autonomy; they choose the teaching materials and methods that suit them best. There is no state supervision over the teacher's daily work. The school principal is responsible for ensuring that the teaching in their school is effective and that conditions are in place for the professional development of teachers.

Equal Treatment and Needs-Based Support for Students

All students receive free lunch and textbooks. Support services at school, such as speech therapy and special education services, are free for students. All children up to age 19 are entitled to health insurance coverage through the Public Estonian Health Insurance Fund. Primary care is free, and school nurses generally provide health screenings in grades one, three, seven, and eleven. Dental care is also free for all children up to age 19. Local governments support families of students from lower socio-economic backgrounds, ensuring that these children also have access to extracurricular education. Most extracurricular activities at school are free for students. Transport to school is free.

Coexistence of Estonian- and Russian-Language Schools

One characteristic of the Estonian education system is the coexistence of Estonian- and Russian-speaking schools. Schools offering education in Russian or bilingual Estonian-Russian education make up slightly more than 10 percent of all schools, and about 20 percent of Estonian students study in these schools. This parallel education system has been politically sensitive, but in 2022, it was decided to transition to Estonian-language education. This significant change will begin in the current academic year for grades one and four and will continue until 2030.

CURRICULUM CHANGES

Over the past 30 years, the national curriculum for basic and upper-secondary schools has changed significantly, influenced by both societal needs and shifts in pedagogical theories. A completely new curriculum was adopted in 1996. This outcome-based curriculum applied to grades one to twelve, and consisted of a general section and specific syllabi for all subjects. This curriculum was the first time the values, knowledge, and skills students were expected to have acquired by the end of each educational stage were described. General competencies were described under three headings: communication, values, and operational competencies, including learning skills.

The development of the curriculum over the following decades has been marked by regular updates. The 2002 update of the national curriculum did not bring significant changes. In 2011, considering the separation of basic schools from upper-secondary levels, it was necessary to divide the national curriculum into two parts — the national curriculum for basic schools and the national curriculum for upper-secondary schools (Government of Estonia, 2011a, 2011b). Both curricula were reviewed, aiming to reduce dropout rates, support students with special educational needs, enhance the school climate, and increase interest in STEM fields. Additionally, there was a new emphasis on supporting students whose native language is not Estonian and those from diverse cultural backgrounds. Subject syllabi were consolidated to promote interdisciplinary integration (MoER 2010).

A significant change in the curriculum was the shift in emphasis from teaching to learning. The concept of the learning environment expanded to include intellectual and social environments in addition to the physical environment. Creating a learning environment was seen as a collaborative process involving school leadership, teachers, students, and parents (Mehisto & Kitsing, 2022).

The 2014 curriculum changes were somewhat smaller in scale compared to 2011. Both formal and substantive changes were made: reduced learning and teaching loads, duplications were removed from subject syllabi, and learning outcomes were aligned with Bloom's taxonomy.[3] General competencies were refined and digital competence was added. The regulation was supplemented with a new elective subject, "entrepreneurship education". Entirely new subject syllabi were created for science in grade seven of basic school and for physics and chemistry in upper-secondary school (MoER, 2014).

The most recent change to the national curricula was made in 2022. Looking at the curriculum development over nearly 30 years, we see a movement towards either a more general curriculum or, conversely, a less prescriptive curriculum. One of the most important changes in the updated curricula was the transfer of detailed content from the regulation to guideline materials. The goal of this change was to give teachers greater freedom in teaching and the opportunity to be creative in achieving student learning outcomes and to collaborate with other teachers. Therefore, learning outcomes are formulated more generally than they were before, and the national curriculum no longer includes detailed content, concepts, and lists of practical work. To enhance the coherence between subjects, the lesson allocation plan for basic school is presented by subject area rather than by individual subjects in the national curriculum. This approach reduces restrictions on the implementation of integrated learning.

3 Bloom's taxonomy: remembering, understanding, applying, analysing, evaluating, creating. Shabatura, J. (2022). Using Bloom's Taxonomy to Write Effective Learning Outcomes. Homepage of the University of Arkansas. https://tips.uark.edu/using-blooms-taxonomy/

Changes were also made to subject syllabi. For decades, the school curriculum included a subject called "physical education". In the 2022 curriculum, this was renamed "movement education", with the goal not being athletic achievements but rather fostering the students' movement-related desires, skills, and habits. Changes also affected other subjects, for example, in the natural sciences, there is now a greater emphasis on inquiry-based and practical learning (MoER, 2022b).

DIGITAL TECHNOLOGY IN EDUCATION

Estonia's digital success stems from a conscious decision made more than 20 years ago to invest in digital technology. Since the late 1990s, investments have been made in infrastructure, equipment, digital learning materials, and teachers' digital competencies. In the last two decades, there has been significant collaboration with the private sector in promoting digital education.

In the early 2000s, the focus of the Tiger Leap Foundation (the initiator and leader of IT education in Estonia) shifted from hardware to software. In the educational system, work was undertaken to facilitate the implementation of digital education: computer labs were established in schools and numerous teachers underwent at least basic training in digital technology (Tiger Leap Foundation, 2003). However, by the end of the first decade of this century, a gap in digital education became apparent — inequalities in information literacy among teachers, students, and parents increased, and access to digital infrastructure and learning materials varied widely between schools (Praxis, 2017).

As a result, one of the goals of the Estonian Lifelong Learning Strategy 2020 was to initiate a digital turn in lifelong learning. The programme sought to effect a transition to e-assessment measures and to create extensive e-learning materials in general and vocational education, as well as to train teachers, among other outcomes. As part of the programme, a student digital competence model was created. In 2017, a digital competence assessment was developed to measure the attitudes and skills of basic and upper-secondary school graduates. Diagnostic e-tests were created to support teachers in the developmental assessment of students. One result of the digital turn was the creation of the digital learning material portal E-schoolbag, featuring about 10,000 digital learning objects (MoER, 2020).

In the Education and Youth Programme 2021–2024, continued attention was paid to the development of digital education. In addition to updating the IT infrastructure of educational institutions and acquiring smart devices, further efforts were made to create e-learning materials, develop the digital competencies of teachers and lecturers, and provide educational institutions with technological support. The development of the infrastructure for students' personal learning paths was also initiated (MoER, 2021).

The electronic learning management systems (E-Kool and Stuudium), created in the early 2000s, have made communication between schools and the home more efficient. The digital learning management system allows schools, teachers, students, and parents to manage and share school-related information. For example, teachers can enter grades, homework, and attendance records, students can track their academic progress and assignments, and parents can monitor their children's schoolwork and communicate with the school. The digital learning management system has contributed to the communication between students, teachers, and parents, and has improved the transparency and efficiency of the learning process.

The digital competencies of students, teachers, and parents were confirmed during the COVID-19 pandemic. Schools transitioned to remote learning just two days after a lockdown was announced, and most parents had the skills to assist their children at home.

CHALLENGES RESULTING FROM THE UKRAINIAN CRISIS

Since the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, supporting Ukrainian refugees has become a new focus for the Estonian government. A major challenge for Estonia was creating opportunities for Ukrainian war refugees to continue their education at all levels, including pre-primary, general, vocational, and higher education, as well as in continuing education programmes. Additionally, support was needed for participation in extracurricular education, activities, and youth work.

Many Ukrainian refugee children were assigned to regions where the student-to-teacher ratio was already high, exacerbating the issues of teacher shortages and unmanageable workloads. In Tallinn, an additional department specifically for Ukrainian children was established at the Tallinn Tõnismäe State Gymnasium (MoERa, 2022).

The parliament allocated funds to integrate these students into Estonia's education system. The MoER created additional places in schools and offered immersive language-learning programmes, summer camps, psychological and educational counselling, and a one-off school support allowance.

From 24 February 24 2022 to 31 December 2022, a total of 8,101 children/students from Ukraine were integrated into preschool institutions and schools. Educational opportunities were primarily offered in Estonian-language schools but were also available in Russian-speaking schools if parents preferred. 45.5 percent of Ukrainian children in Estonia are studying in the capital city, Tallinn (Arenguseire Keskus, 2023).

KINDERGARTEN ATTENDANCE

The Estonian basic education system is founded on a strong preschool education framework. Local governments are obligated to ensure that all children in their service area between 18 months and 7 years of age can

attend a preschool institution if their parents so wish (children between 18 months and 3 years of age attend nursery schools, and children aged 3 and above attend kindergartens) (Parliament of Estonia, 1999). In Estonia, preschool education is not just a childcare service but also includes structured learning based on a national curriculum, which provides guidelines for teaching practices and outlines learning outcomes. Each preschool institution compiles its own curriculum and daily schedule based on this framework. Although each preschool institution sets its own rules, approved by the board, kindergartens are generally open from 7 AM to 7 PM.

The state has established requirements for preschool institution buildings, outdoor areas, and catering. There are also state-imposed health protection requirements aimed at promoting children's health and organizing daily schedules. The relevant regulation sets out, for example, the knowledge and skills required of the institution's staff, provides guidelines for admitting a child to kindergarten, and explains how to monitor the child's health and development (Ministry of Social Affairs, 2010). Both local governments and private kindergarten owners must comply with all state-issued requirements. This helps ensure equal and high-quality conditions for the care and development of all children.

From 2019 to 2022, the proportion of children aged three to seven attending preschool institutions was around 91 percent. In 2022, 91.6 percent of all children aged three to seven attended preschool institutions. The total number of children significantly increased due to Ukrainian war refugees, of whom 1,921 were attending preschool institutions as of November 10, 2022, accounting for approximately 3 percent of all children attending kindergarten (MoER, 2022a).

In 2023, the proportion of children attending kindergartens dropped to 88.2 percent (MoER, 2024a). Before 2020, the vast majority (95 percent) of six- to seven-year-old children attended kindergarten (Lang et al., 2021), but in recent years, this has changed. So far, no studies have been conducted that clearly identify the reasons for the decline in participation. It is quite likely that the economic crisis has led to increased inequality among different socio-economic groups. Growing regional inequality is evident in the concentration of economic and human capital in Estonia's larger urban areas (Plüschke-Atof, Loewen, & Leetmaa, 2020).

The deteriorating economic situation is quite likely to affect weaker socio-economic groups, including parents' ability to pay kindergarten fees and meal costs. The PISA 2022 study explored the reasons for student absenteeism. Surprisingly, the survey showed that among Estonian students who had missed more than three months of school, 16 percent pointed out that they had missed school due to family care responsibilities (OECD, 2023b). Since the reasons for absenteeism have not been previously studied in PISA, there is no existing trend data on this issue. It can be assumed that as incomes decrease, kindergarten fees and meal costs may become an obstacle for some families to enrol their children in kindergarten. The economic situation will certainly also affect local governments in peripheral areas, including their ability to support disadvantaged families in paying kindergarten fees.

Local governments own 89.5 percent of kindergartens, with only 10.5 percent in private hands. The state and local governments are not obligated to fund private preschool institutions. As previously mentioned, local governments are obligated to provide kindergarten services to families residing within their territory. This obligation can be fulfilled by the municipality or city through public kindergartens, which are funded from their own budget, or it can purchase preschool services from a private entity or another local government. If a local government purchases preschool services from a third party (for example, a private provider), it must ensure that the participation fee paid by parents does not exceed 20 percent of the minimum wage and that children are treated equally to those attending the local government's own kindergartens. Private kindergartens can receive a pre-arranged amount of financial support from local governments, as determined by the city or municipal government.

Demographic changes (such as a decrease in the number of children and internal migration) have also led to changes in the network of kindergartens. The number of preschool institutions has decreased, some kindergartens have been merged with schools, and several smaller kindergartens have been combined into larger institutions (MoER, 2024a). Local governments located in the suburbs of major cities are facing the problem of not having enough kindergarten places for all who want one. The solution could be either to expand existing kindergartens or to build new ones. A temporary solution is to purchase kindergarten services from private kindergartens.

CONSEQUENCES FOR A LEFT-WING EDUCATION POLICY

Left-wing education policy has emphasized equal and fair opportunities for accessing education. Changes in the education sector and regional policy indicate the need to focus more on ensuring equality. In other words, students must have equal opportunities to accessing education regardless of their socio-economic background, place of residence, or nationality. Such a basis for education policy requires that all schools employ professionally qualified teachers, support specialists, and school leaders, and that there are no disparities in learning environments between schools.

Parents' financial capabilities should not be an obstacle to learning, so all students should have access to hot meals at school, free transportation to and from school, and medical care. Additionally, young people should have equal opportunities to pursue their hobbies. In Estonian education, these benefits are provided — free textbooks and hot school lunches, often also breakfast, free transportation, and medical care.

The state subsidizes extracurricular activities, and local governments support less privileged families in their children's participation in such activities.

Regardless of the school's location, all schools are subject to similar requirements. Necessary free support services are provided to students (speech therapy, along with psychological, social, and special education support). The funding of educational institutions is based on both the principles of equality and fairness. Such a funding scheme allows school leaders to create a learning environment that meets the needs of all students.

When developing general education, it is essential not to forget early childhood education, which plays a significant role in a child's development, especially if their home environment is challenging and their parents' education level is low. Therefore, it is crucial that all children have access to early childhood education.

In Estonia, this is generally ensured. However, internal migration from peripheral areas to cities, along with regional economic inequalities and the shortage of teachers and support specialists have undoubtedly created cracks in ensuring equal access to both basic and preschool education. The most serious problem is the shortage of teachers. The teaching profession is not popular among young people, and few qualified teachers aspire to work in rural areas. It is very difficult to find support specialists for rural schools and kindergartens. As a result, necessary support is not provided in time, and students' learning difficulties can be exacerbated.

At present, as mentioned above, one of the main reforms in Estonian education is the transition to Estonian-language instruction. The reform affects about one-fifth of all students and its goal is clearly related to creating equal opportunities for all students, regardless of their mother tongue. A unified Estonian-language educational system will provide better prospects for further education, future employment, and support national identity and societal cohesion, and reduce segregation.

Ensuring equal access to quality education is not solely the responsibility of education policymakers; it is a broader issue for the country — pertaining to the question of how the state can allocate resources not only equally but also fairly. In the field of education, this could, for example, mean that salaries for teachers in peripheral areas might be higher, or that teachers could have better opportunities for housing (such as targeted support or favourable loan conditions).

Salary differences are a very sensitive issue in society. For example, in 2024, teachers in the north-eastern region of Estonia, specifically in Ida-Virumaa, will receive higher salaries. Ida-Virumaa is a region with the highest number of Russian-speaking schools. As the transition to Estonian-language instruction requires a high level of Estonian proficiency, the government decided that teachers who are fluent in Estonian will receive a higher salary by a coefficient of 1.5, meaning they will earn 50 percent more than teachers in other regions. Kindergarten teachers who teach in Estonian in Ida-Virumaa will have their salaries increased by a coefficient of 1.3. However, this additional state-imposed pay is leading to labour shortages in neighbouring municipalities and causing discontent among teachers in other regions. Agreements on the school network are also necessary. Decision-making must consider the financial capacity of the state and local governments while also respecting the individual's right to access education as a public good. Demographic changes will inevitably lead to adjustments in the school network, but in a democratic society, a win-win solution must be found for both the state as a whole and individuals. Reaching a consensus takes time. For example, the school network reform in Estonia has been ongoing for more than ten years. Although state gymnasiums with very good learning environments have been established, there are still municipalities with gymnasiums that have fewer than 50 students, which certainly do not offer equal learning opportunities and conditions compared to larger gymnasiums.

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Pablo Huerga Melcón

THE EDUCATION SYSTEM IN SPAIN

INTRODUCTION TO EDUCATION POLICY IN SPAIN — GENERAL CONSIDERATIONS

On 3 October 1990, a new education law was passed in Spain, known as the LOGSE (Ley Orgánica de Ordenación de Ordenación General del Sistema Educativo), a law that was designed to update and replace the most successful and stable of Spain's education laws, the law known as the Ley del Setenta (Ley General de Educación y Financiamiento de la Reforma Educativa of 4 August 1970), which guided Spain's democratic transition from 1970 to 1990.

The LOGSE permanently changed the order and structure of the Spanish education system. With it, the Spanish government made major concessions by granting special autonomy in educational management to all the Spanish Autonomous Communities, which was already a major step at the time. Until then, secondary education in Spain had included two parallel networks of education centres: the network of secondary education centres, starting at age fourteen and ending at eighteen, consisting of three years of what was called the Bachillerato Unificado Polivalente (BUP, unified and comprehensive baccalaureate), and the Curso de Orientación Universitaria (COU, university orientation course), which concluded with the national university entrance exam (Selectividad). Parallel to this, there was a vocational training network, which consisted of two two-year cycles: FP1 (generic and common to all vocational training students), and FP2 or advanced training, where each vocational field specified a particular curriculum and also offered access to university at the age of eighteen. The new law (LOGSE) dissolved both networks, unifying them through the four-year compulsory secondary education (ESO) system, running from age twelve to sixteen, which had to be taught in all institutions, both the former vocational training centres and those of the former BUP. This meant the elimination of the powerful network of vocational training centres that existed in Spain, forcing them to include the new general compulsory studies to the detriment of the independent structure of vocational training that had existed until then. It substantially altered the cohort of teaching staff by transferring a substantial percentage[1] of primary school teachers to the new secondary education, and by dissolving the robust cohort of vocational teachers and designating them all as secondary school teachers. The new law also blocked the merit-based academic teaching course, from which teachers could transition from secondary teaching to university. The new law also imposed a change in the structure of the curriculum for all primary and secondary education. It made it compulsory to leave primary school two years earlier, at the age of 12, which meant interrupting the natural maturation process of children in school and transferring them early to secondary school. On this issue, the president of the Confederation of Psycho-Pedagogical and Orientation Organizations in Spain, Ana Cobos Cedillo, has stated: "This is a phase that ought to be extended for long enough to allow children to arrive at secondary education having completed the phase of childhood, that has, having lived and experienced this phase through to its completion."[2] Undoubtedly, commercial interests, the need to bring forward adolescence, and thus students' access to consumption was behind such a decision, a structural problem that we still have in the current education system. In secondary education, moreover, an innovation was introduced that has been calamitous for the system: an element known as compulsory secondary education (ESO). This consists of a four-year cycle, which begins at the age of 12 and lasts until the age of 16. The compulsory nature of ESO means that all students must necessarily pass through this tunnel of time, with no possible alternative.

Since repealed, the LOGSE formed the backbone around which the Spanish education system was built and developed from 1990 onwards. In terms of changes since 2000, there have been several educational reforms that have affected the structure and content of the Spanish education system. For example, the implementation of the Organic Law on Education (Ley Orgánica de Educación, or LOE) in 2006 and subsequently the Organic Law for the Improvement of Educational Quality (Ley Orgánica para la mejora de la Calidad Educativa, LOMCE) in 2013 introduced significant changes to curricula, assessment measures, and other aspects of the education system. These reforms have sought to improve the quality of, and equity of access to, education (in particular regarding access to quality public education in rural areas), and to adapt the system to the demands and challenges of contemporary society. Currently, a new law is being implemented, in a way a revival of the LOE, known as the LOMLOE (Ley Orgánica por la que se Modifica la Ley Orgánica de Educación) or the Ley Celaá, which was approved by decree and without consensus in 2020 and which in essence allows the Autonomous Community of Catalonia to impose a form of education based on a radical linguistic immersion in Catalan, discriminating against all native Spanish speakers, who constitute the majority of the working classes in Catalonia. However, none

1 According to data provided by Álvaro Marchesi, one of the main figures responsible for the new primary education reform, 8,000 teachers were transferred to secondary education, while the number of BUP and vocational training teachers increased from 37,045 to over 72,000 in the territories under the control of the then Ministry of Education and Science. Marchesi, A. et al. (1989). Libro blanco para la reforma del Sistema Educativo. Madrid: MEC, 343. **2** Bisbal Delgado, C., (2019), Estos son los motivos por los que el primer curso de la ESO produce vértigo en padres y niños, El País, https://elpais.com/elpais/2019/09/20/mamas_papas/1568975653_043057.html (last accessed 11 September 2024).

of these changes have altered the general structure of the education system, which has remained fundamentally unchanged since the LOGSE was introduced in 1990. The new laws have played a moderating role that has only served to mitigate, alter, and ideologically condition the curricula of the subjects, the increasingly distribution of the management of the education system among the autonomous communities and the slow but recurrent process of deterioration of public education in Spain, while the system of private and semi-private *(escuelas concertadas)*[3] education is growing, primarily in the field of vocational training.[4]

ORGANIZATION OF EDUCATION POLICY IN SPAIN

Education policy in Spain is mainly organized at three levels: the national level, the level of autonomous communities, and at the municipal level. According to the current law, the main responsibility lies with the national government and the autonomous communities. The municipalities, however, have responsibility for the management and maintenance of pre-primary and primary schools throughout the national territory of Spain.

At the national level, the central government manages education policy through the Ministry of Education, now called the Ministry of Education and Vocational Training, which is responsible for establishing the general guidelines and legal frameworks for education throughout the country. In addition, the national government provides funding and resources for the education system and oversees compliance throughout Spain.

At the regional level, the autonomous communities have the power to develop and implement education policies adapted to their particular needs and circumstances. Each autonomous community has its own department or regional Ministry of Education, which is responsible for implementing these policies within its territory. The autonomous communities are tasked with aspects such as the development of school curricula, the management of public schools, the recruitment of teachers, and the organization of specific educational programmes. According to the law that is currently in force, both central and regional authorities share responsibility for education policy in Spain, working together to guarantee quality and equity in the education system.

In this sense, decentralization is increasing in autonomous communities with their own co-official languages, such as Galicia, the Basque Country, and Catalonia. In these communities, the school curriculum is ostensibly affected by aspects related to the nationalization policies promoted by the regional governments. In this sense, for example, the autonomous government of Catalonia systematically fails to comply with the constitutional obligation to provide a minimum of 25 percent of classes in Spanish, even in the face of a firm ruling by the High Court of Justice of Catalonia.[5]

STRUCTURE OF THE SCHOOL SYSTEM IN SPAIN

The following is a general outline of the current structure of the education system.[6]:

The school structure in Spain has undergone significant changes since 2000, although the overall organization remains similar in many respects.

Pre-school education up to the age of six is not compulsory, but it is very common and available in both public (offered by local councils) and private institutions (currently, 51.5 percent of students are enrolled in public schools, while 48.5 percent attend private schools).[7] It is generally divided into two cycles: zero to three years (first cycle) and three to six years (second cycle).

Primary education, from six to 12 years of age, is compulsory and free for all children in Spain. It normally consists of six grades, from first to sixth, and is provided in primary schools.

Compulsory secondary education, from 12 to 16 years of age (ESO) is compulsory and free for all young people in Spain. ESO consists of four years, from the first to the fourth year, and is generally offered in secondary schools. Upon completion of the compulsory secondary education cycle, students can go on to intermediate vocational training or to complete a baccalaureate *(bachillerato)*.

The baccalaureate, from 16 to 18 years of age, is a non-compulsory stage of schooling, which is completed after the end of ESO. The baccalaureate prepares students for higher education and offers different specializations. These currently include a baccalaureate in health sciences, another one in science and technology, another one in social sciences, another baccalaureate in the humanities, as well as one in arts and the so-called general baccalaureate, which were introduced with the law of 2020. From the baccalaureate, it is possible to access university by taking the entrance exam known as the evaluation of the baccalaureate for access to university (Evaluación de Bachillerato para el Acceso a la Universidad, or EBAU), or to go on to higher vocational training studies.

In addition, Spain has a vocational training system and offers a wide range of public and private vocational training programmes for those who wish to acquire specific skills for employment. Vocational training can be pursued after completing ESO or after the baccalaureate. Vocational training is currently very important because it has a more immediate link with the produc-

3 Escuelas concertadas are publicly funded, privately run schools. The closest equivalent in the US context would be "charter schools", in the UK, perhaps "foundation schools". In the interests of simplicity, we have referred to them here as "semi-private schools" in order to distinguish them from the traditional public school system. **4** See https://www.educaweb.com/noticia/2023/02/09/aumenta-alumnado-centros-privados-formacion-profesional-21139/ (last accessed 29 September 2024). **5** For more on this, see the article by Bravo García, J. R. (2021). Lengua vehicular y geopolítica: la posición de España, Eikasía: Revista de Filosofía, 99; 291–334. **6** Source: Ministry of Education and Vocational Training, and Sports. **7** See Vélaz-de-Medrano Ureta, C., Manzano-Soto, N., and Turienzo, D. (2020). El primer ciclo de la Educación Infantil en las CC. AA: A través de la revisión normativa. Ministry of Education and Vocational Training, and Sports, 67. http://femp.femp.es/files/566-2924-archivo/El%20primer%20ciclo%20de%20la%20Educaci%C3%B3n%20Infantil%20en%20las%20CCAA.pdf (last accessed 9 August 2024).

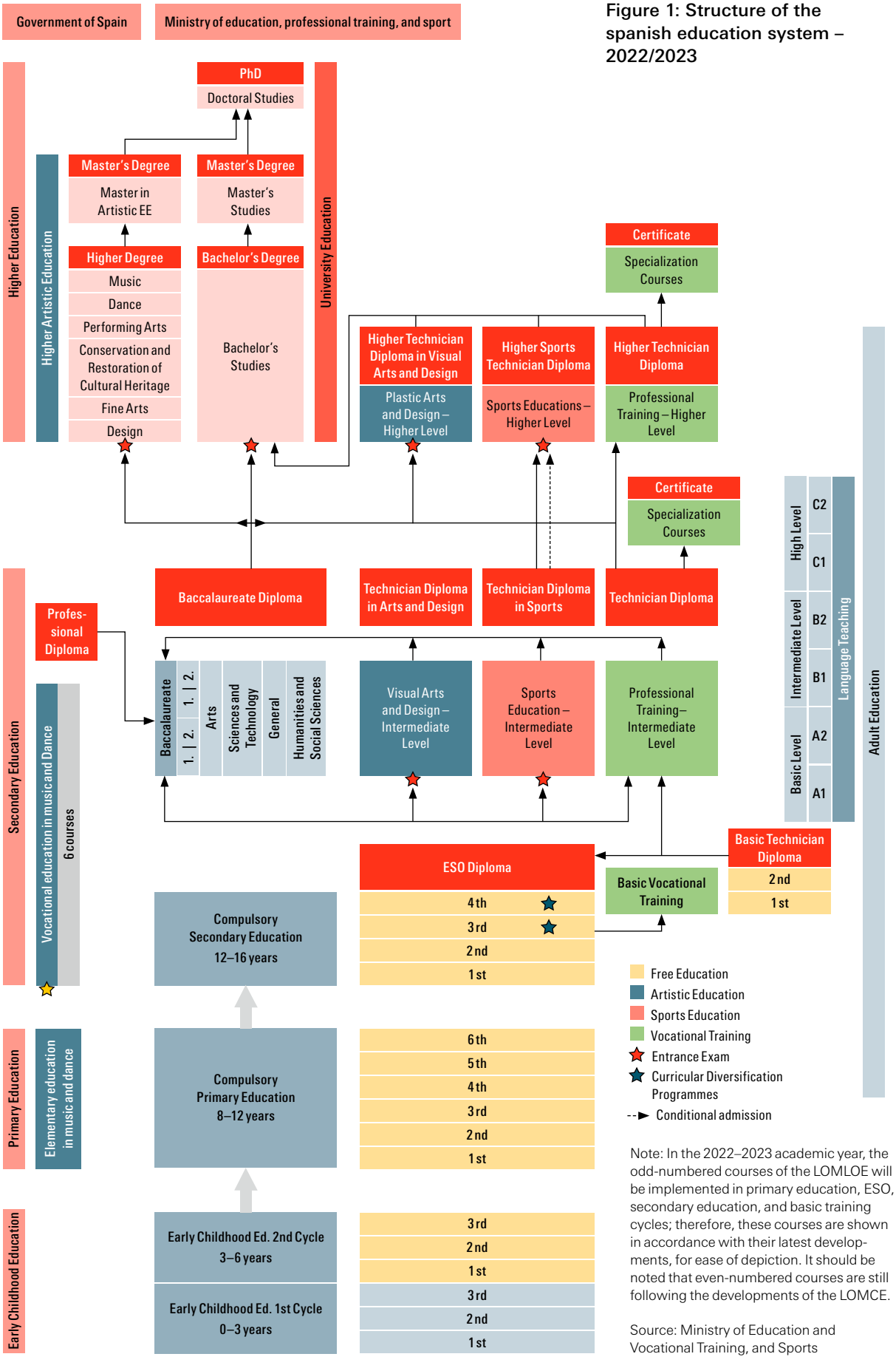


Figure 1: Structure of the spanish education system – 2022/2023

Note: In the 2022–2023 academic year, the odd-numbered courses of the LOMLOE will be implemented in primary education, ESO, secondary education, and basic training cycles; therefore, these courses are shown in accordance with their latest developments, for ease of depiction. It should be noted that even-numbered courses are still following the developments of the LOMCE.

Source: Ministry of Education and Vocational Training, and Sports

tive system, enabling young people to gain earlier access to the labour market.

The structure of vocational training includes three stages: a first stage called basic vocational training (from 14 to 16 years of age), intermediate vocational training (from 16 to 18 years of age), and higher vocational training (from 18 to 20 years of age)[8] .

Regarding the organization of school time, many schools in Spain have introduced the full school day, especially in primary and secondary education. This implies, paradoxically, that students spend only half a day at school, (because the day's work is concentrated in the morning, from 8am to 3pm). Normally, it is private and charter schools that offer a morning and afternoon timetable, where in addition to receiving academic classes, they have time for extracurricular activities, meals, and rest, which is why they are preferred by many families.

SPAIN'S PARTICIPATION IN PISA, TIMSS, AND IGLU

Overall, Spain's results in PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment) have shown significant improvements in recent decades, especially in reading and science (with Spain currently placed 28th in the overall ranking). However, challenges remain in mathematics. Spain has improved its relative position compared to other participating countries, although it remains below the OECD average in many areas. PISA results have also revealed significant disparities in academic performance between regions within Spain, with marked differences between autonomous communities[9] .

The following chart shows the average performance in mathematics, reading comprehension, and science according to the type of educational institution in each autonomous community: [10]

Spain has also participated in several rounds of TIMSS (Trends in International Mathematics and Sci-

8 For more on this issue, see the article by Fernández González, L. (2021). Sobre la formación profesional, Eikasía: Revista de filosofía, 99; 139–156. **9** See the article by Martí Selva, M. L. and Puertas Medina, R. (2018), Comparing educational effectiveness in Europe and Asia: TIMSS 2015, Revista de Educación, 380; 42–74. **10** Taken from the Ministry of Education and Vocational Training, and Sports (2023). Pisa 2022; Programa para la Evaluación Internacional de los Estudiantes; Informe español, 108. https://www.libreria.educacion.gob.es/libro/pisa-2022-programa-para-la-evaluacion-internacional-de-los-estudiantes-informe-espanol_183950/ (last accessed 5 September 2024).

Table 1: Average performance in mathematics, reading, and science by type of educational institution in each autonomous community and city participating in PISA 2022

	Mathematics		Reading		Science	
	public/private		public/private		public/private	
OECD Average	468	495	470	498	480	508
Total EU	469	493	471	489	480	502
Spain	462	497	464	496	474	506
Andalusia	448	483	453	486	465	496
Aragon	486	489	487	488	498	503
Asturias, Principality of	482	523	485	523	492	528
Balearic Islands	464	489	462	495	472	500
Valencia Community	463	494	473	502	473	506
Canary Islands	439	476	453	497	464	501
Cantabria	490	508	489	508	499	518
Castile and Leon	491	516	491	512	499	521
Castile-La Mancha	460	482	465	483	471	494
Catalonia	458	495	451	487	466	503
Ceuta	382	425	392	435	399	436
Extremadura	463	493	461	492	474	500
Galicia	483	494	481	496	503	512
Community of Madrid	476	512	483	510	488	517
Melilla	400	449	401	454	411	454
Region of Murcia	452	488	458	492	472	504
Chartered Community of Navarre	482	511	463	504	477	510
Basque Country	469	494	452	480	467	492
La Rioja	489	499	484	492	495	507

Basis: Participants in the long survey who received funding for their doctorate or studies. Seven did not provide any further details on other sources of funding. Due to the small number of cases, no percentages were given.
Source: Ministry of Education, Vocational Training, and Sport, https://www.libreria.educacion.gob.es/libro/pisa-2022-programa-para-la-evaluacion-internacional-de-los-estudiantes-informe-espanol_183950/

Figure 2: Structure of the Spanish Education system

MATHEMATICS

Average general scores

Spain
502

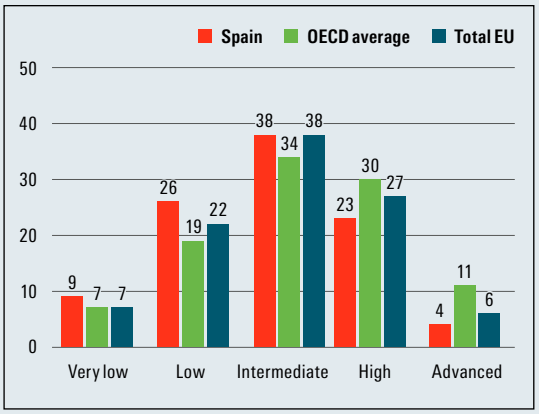
OECD
527

EU gesamt
513

Average scores by field

Arithmetic	ESP: 506 OECD: 529 EU: 512
Measures and geometry	ESP: 494 OECD: 532 EU: 518
Data	ESP: 499 OECD: 530 EU: 507

Performance levels
Percentage of students by performance level



SCIENCE

Scores average general

Spain
511

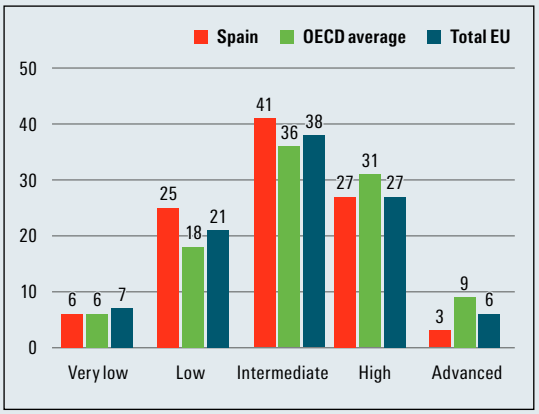
OECD
526

EU gesamt
514

Average scores by field

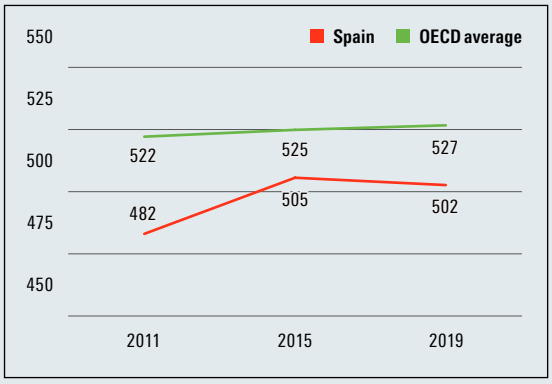
Life sciences	ESP: 514 OECD: 528 EU: 517
Physical sciences	ES: 503 OECD: 523 EU: 508
Earth sciences	ES: 518 OECD: 525 EU: 513

Performance levels
Percentage of students by performance level

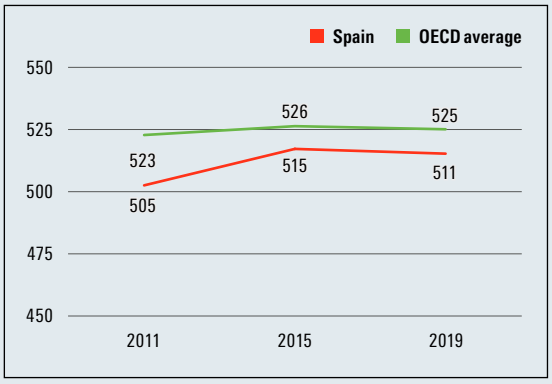


EVOLUTION OF PERFORMANCE ACROSS ASSESSMENT CYCLES

Mathematics



Science



Source: Ministry of Education, Vocational Training, and Sport

ence Study), with varying results in mathematics and science. Overall, TIMSS results suggest that Spain has improved its performance in mathematics and science in recent years, but still faces challenges compared to other participating countries. This assessment is conducted every four years and in Spain it is administered to students in the fourth grade of primary school. In the 2019 tests, Spain obtained an overall average score of 502 points, whereas the OECD average was 527 points and the European Union countries scored 513 points, as shown in the graph below:[11]

In the IGLU study (International Reading Literacy Study), Spain has obtained mixed results compared to other participating countries. There have been notable improvements in reading comprehension in some groups of students, but challenges remain in terms of equity and educational quality. However, as Lucas Gortázar points out, beyond these external tests, to assess the matter of equity in the Spanish education system, it is crucial to consider levels of early school leaving as one of the key factors. According to this perspective, Gortázar's findings indicate that the Spanish education system has not progressed in recent decades. Comparative data reveals that in Spain, the likelihood of a student from a low socio-economic background repeating a grade is almost six times higher than that of a student from a high socio-economic background, placing Spain at the bottom of all OECD and EU countries in this regard. And something similar happens when we analyse Spain's performance in terms of equity in educational attainment levels and early school leaving levels. "Economic status does not seem to have too much of an impact on the results of external tests such as PISA; but it does have an impact on the likelihood of internal assessments (repeating a grade) and, to a lesser extent, on early school leaving".[12]

As regards the relationship between the results in these studies and the social milieu, there are several factors that influence the academic performance of students in Spain: In terms of parents' level of education, there is a positive correlation between the parents' level of education and students' academic performance. Students whose parents have a higher level of education tend to perform better overall. With respect to family income, this influences access to additional educational resources, such as private tutoring, books, and study materials. Therefore, students from families with higher incomes have additional advantages that contribute to their academic performance. However, the government offers a series of measures to alleviate this problem as far as possible by way of free textbooks and free access to all educational services in all regions of Spain. Particular attention is paid to students with a migrant background who face additional challenges, such as language barriers, cultural adaptation, and differences in the education systems. These factors can influence their academic performance, but are dealt with quite effectively, particularly by the autonomous communities.

One of the aspects that has received less attention in Spain is that of aggressive and segregationist education policies, since in different autonomous communities where there is a co-official language, the most disadvantaged families and the working classes find themselves being forced into a system that does not suit them by trying to impose the use of a local language that is not their native language, a system invented by the institutions with the sole aim of generating a population that is disaffected with its status as Spaniards. It should be noted that in autonomous communities such as Catalonia and the Basque Country, the mother tongue among the working and disadvantaged classes is Spanish (partly because they are made up of families from other areas of Spain who have settled in these regions during the 20th and 21st centuries, but the public education system imposes the exclusive use of the co-official language, which has a substantial and irreversible impact on learning).[13] This represents an objective and structural discrimination for a majority of the population in these autonomous communities that is most socio-economically disadvantaged.[14] This problem is particularly complex in the autonomous community of Catalonia.

Using the metaphor of the "social lift", it can be said that the state still provides the minimum conditions of equality of access so that students can reposition themselves socially according to their academic performance and personal effort. However, the private and semi-private network and reactionary policies in terms of promoting effort at school contribute to the fact that this "social lift" breaks down and the system produces stagnation and increases structural social inequalities. Supporting academic performance, in accordance with the minimum standards of equality mandated by the public system, is the only way to enable any student, regardless of their social background, to achieve their full professional potential. The trend of condemning ignorance with demagogic arguments that seek to convey sympathy with the challenges of learning but do not facilitate the improvement of performance is neither socialist nor progressive.

PUBLIC AND PRIVATE SPENDING ON EDUCATION SINCE 2000

Public and private expenditure on education (as a percentage of GDP) since 2000 in Spain has undergone shifts, influenced by economic, political, and social factors. Although there have been increases in absolute terms, public expenditure as a percentage of GDP has

11 Taken from the Ministry of Education and Vocational Training (2020). TIMSS 2019: Estudio Internacional de Tendencias en Matemáticas y Ciencias; Informe español; 29. https://news.fiar.me/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Espana-TIMSS-2019.pdf (last accessed 5 September 2024). **12** Gortázar, L. (2019). ¿Favorece el sistema educativo español la igualdad de oportunidades?, Economía de la educación y política educativa, no. 910, 5–29, here 24. **13** For further clarification, see Olga Sanmartín's article in El Mundo. https://www.elmundo.es/elecciones/elecciones-pais-vasco/2024/04/18/661a464ffc6c83fc088b4581.html?utm_campaign=twitter (last accessed 6 September 2024). **14** See the article by Sánchez Tortosa, J. (2021). Higiene escolar y profilaxis didáctica: El fin de la escuela pública en la era de la pandemia, Eikasía: Revista de Filosofía, 99; 505–517.

fluctuated. In calculating public expenditure, in addition to the full funding of the public education system, the total funding provided by the national government and the autonomous regions to the network of semi-private education institutions must be included. Private expenditure on education has also varied over time, depending on factors such as the demand for private education and the economic situations of families. In general, however, private expenditure on education tends to be lower than public expenditure in Spain. In 2020, according to data from the European Union (Eurydice), the breakdown of public and private expenditure in Spain was as follows: for primary, secondary, and post-secondary education, 88 percent of expenditure was public, while private households contributed 11 percent; while in higher education, public expenditure was at 66 percent, and private households contributed 30 percent. Spending on education as a percentage of GDP in Spain is around 5.5 percent, which is slightly below the European average, according to OECD data.[15]

Parents play an important role in their children's education. They are involved in decision-making, such as deciding which school their children will attend, and they also participate in school activities and parents' associations. In addition, parents are often involved in the education process through assisting their children with homework, communicating with teachers, and monitoring their children's academic progress.

In Spain, however, the majority of teaching material is provided by schools, whether in the form of textbooks, digital resources, or other materials necessary for learning, including everything related to new technologies, where an effort has been made that could even be described as disproportionate. Grants and direct study aids are not only offered to users of the public or semi-private education system, but also to private institutions.

It is important to bear in mind that these aspects may vary according to the autonomous community and the specific policies of each region, and according to their relative wealth.

THE FUNDING OF PUBLIC AND PRIVATE SCHOOLS IN SPAIN

Firstly, it should be noted that Spain maintains a tripartite educational network. According to the State Registry of Non-university Educational Institutions,[16] the system is made up of a network of public schools, which is administered by the various autonomous communities and accounts for 65.4 percent of all non-university institutions (22,666 institutions); then there is the network of semi-private schools, which receives similar funding from the public administrations as public schools, constituting 10.9 percent (3,785) of all institutions; and finally there is the network of private schools, which are self-financed through enrolment fees, and also receive generic public funding as part of the policy of promoting private enterprise, with the funding administered by the government in accordance with the current laws, with this network comprising 23.7 percent (8,233) of all non-university educational institutions in Spain (34,684 in total). Semi-private private schools known as *escuelas concertadas* are run by the private sector, but maintained with public funds. These schools are integrated into the public education network but their management is private and they are run according to business criteria. In these schools, teachers do not need to pass public examinations, and their working conditions are often more precarious than those of teachers in the public system. These semi-private schools for early childhood, primary, and secondary education also tend to have a set ideological or religious orientation. As for the semi-private network, it must be said that although it is financed in the same way as public schools, it nevertheless has autonomy over its management, meaning it can alter teachers' salaries, working conditions, the organization of schools, and so on. And it is usually over-financed with special offers of extracurricular activities. 66.8 percent of Spanish students study in public schools, 24.5 percent in semi-private schools, and 8.6 percent in private schools[17].

In Spain, the majority of students attend public schools, which are funded and managed by the public administrations of the autonomous communities. Some autonomous communities have higher proportion of public schools, while others have more semi-private schools. Particularly in the Basque Country, with its network of semi-private schools with an explicitly nationalist orientation known as *ikastolas,* and in Catalonia, with the public school network dominated by a nationalist autonomous education policy, the rate of students in private schools is around or even above 50 percent, as is also the case in Madrid. (Though it is notable that many of the nationalist leaders in these regions send their children to private schools, where the predominant language is Spanish). In the rest of the autonomous communities, the percentage of private school users is in the majority.[18] Generally speaking, in the most economically disadvantaged provinces the percentage of students attending public schools is close to 80 percent, as is the case in Cuenca, Teruel, Melilla, or Soria; while in the wealthier regions, such as Catalonia, the Basque Country, or Madrid, the number of private and semi-private schools is much higher, and so is the percentage of students attending them.

15 Pérez, F. and Cucarella, V. (2016). Gasto público en Educación: Situación y perspectivas, Papeles de economía española, no. 147, 212–230; here 219. Available at: https://www.funcas.es/wp-content/uploads/Migracion/Articulos/FUNCAS_PEE/147art12.pdf (last accessed 6 September 2024). **16** This information is available online at: https://www.educacionfpydeportes.gob.es/va/servicios-al-ciudadano/catalogo/centros-docentes/servicios-generales/registro-centros-no-universitarios.html#dg (last accessed 29 September 2024). **17** The following website provides information on the distribution of students at public, private, and semi-private institutions, and about their distribution within all of the regions of Spain (current to April 2024): https://www.porcentual.es/colegio-publicos-concertadados-porcentaje-mapa/; further information can be found on the official website of the National Institute of Statistics: https://www.ine.es/jaxi/Datos.htm?tpx=26107#_tabs-tabla (last accessed 29 September 2024). **18** For more information, see: https://www.porcentual.es/colegio-publicos-concertadados-porcentaje-mapa/ and the following website from the Ministry of Education: https://www.educacionfpydeportes.gob.es/servicios-al-ciudadano/estadisticas/no-universitaria/alumnado/matriculado/2022-2023-rd.html (last accessed 6 September 2024).

In Madrid, for example, 54 percent of students go to public schools, while 29 percent go to semi-private schools, and 18 percent to private schools. In Bilbao, 48 percent of students are enrolled in public schools, while 50 percent study in semi-private schools, and 1 percent in private schools.

Education funding in Spain is divided between the autonomous communities and the national government. The autonomous communities are responsible for the management and financing of education within their territories, while the national government provides additional funds and sets out the general legal and regulatory framework. As mentioned above, the municipalities manage the primary education network.

The public funding provided by the autonomous communities can vary considerably, as it depends on factors such as the size of the population, the level of economic development, and local education policies, as well as the privileged economic arrangements of the autonomous Communities of the Basque Country and Navarre.

In addition to the funding provided by the autonomous communities, the national government also allocates funds to education through intergovernmental transfers and specific support programmes.

As the proportion of semi-private and public schools in Spain varies by region and public funding for education comes from both the autonomous communities and the national government, differences in funding and the presence of private and public schools may be a reflection of local education policies, family preferences, and other socio-economic factors. There are around 28,500 educational establishments in Spain, of which 19,155 are public and more than 9,300 (32 %) are private or semi-private.

Among the autonomous communities with the highest proportion of private schools are: Madrid, which, being the capital of the country and a region with high income levels, tends to have a higher presence of private schools compared to other regions; Catalonia, which has a significant proportion of private schools, especially in Barcelona and other urban areas; and the Balearic Islands, where in certain areas, such as Ibiza and Mallorca, the presence of private schools is considerable, in large part due to tourism and the presence of foreign residents.

Most families choose public schools because of economic constraints, and their quality is still higher and more reliable than that of any private or semi-private schools. It should be noted that the means with which public schools work are highly standardized, and the teaching staff is of the highest quality, due to the competitive examination process. In wealthier regions, there is another set of factors. Families there opt for private and semi-private schools because these wealthier regions are receiving larger immigrant populations, which attend public schools. As education policies in these regions neglect to provide care and improve conditions on the scale required by the incessant influx of foreign populations, families decide to seek refuge in more exclusive private and semi-private schools that can select which students to admit, something that public schools cannot do because it would be discriminatory. Therefore, families end up choosing schools not so much because of their educational quality but because of their associated milieu and a "safer" social environment; since their ability to select their students can reduce the degree of conflict that inevitably arises in public schools, which are obliged to accommodate the entire population. And yet, public schools have not seen a major decrease in the percentage attending them because they continue to deliver outstanding academic results considering their problems in these paradoxically wealthier areas. However, private schools serve as exclusive channels for sectors of the population that seek to maintain a degree of exclusivity typical of the upper classes.

WHAT IS THE RATIO OF TEACHERS TO STUDENTS?

In pre-primary and primary education, the ratio of teachers to pupils tends to be lower than at higher levels of education. On average, in pre-primary and primary classrooms, the ratio can range from one teacher for every 15–25 pupils, depending on factors such as the class-size policies of each autonomous community.

In compulsory secondary education and pre-university education, the ratio of teachers per pupil may be slightly higher than in pre-primary and primary education. The average ratio of teachers per pupil in these settings may be one teacher for every 20–30 pupils, although this may vary according to educational policies and the specific conditions of each institution. For example, in rural schools, ratios are usually better, precisely because legal requirements on class sizes must be complied with (currently, the maximum permissible number of students per class in preschool and primary education is 25, in the ESO, it is 30, and 35 for the baccalaureate), even if the number of students is low. This is also the case for subjects such as Greek and Latin, where the class size is often very small — one teacher for five to ten students — because schools are required to offer these courses, even though only small numbers of students enrol in them. The same applies to subjects with a strong ideological aspect, such as the teaching of co-official or non-official languages that hold a privileged status. Thus, in Asturias, for example, if a student chooses to study the Asturian language, the school must provide a teacher. The elective nature of the subject tends to produce very favourable pupil–teacher ratios, as long as the school has enough teachers and does not need to request additional ones. In certain situations, this can create truly ideal educational conditions.

TEACHER TRAINING AND THE STATUS OF TEACHERS IN SPAIN

In order to become qualified to teach in primary and secondary schools, it is necessary to complete a combination of university studies and specific training.

University degrees: For the primary education setting, there are teaching degrees that provide specific qualifications, namely degrees in early childhood education and in primary education. For secondary education, aspiring teachers must obtain a university degree with a specialization in a specific subject, such as a degree in philosophy, history, mathematics, English, and so on. Each degree qualifies the graduate to apply for a teaching post in that subject area.

Once they have completed their university degree (be it in mathematics, physics, philosophy, history, geography, or another relevant subject), it is necessary to complete a master's degree in teacher training, which is compulsory in order to work as a secondary school teacher in Spain. This master's degree provides specific training in pedagogical theory and teaching methods, and in other aspects of teaching. While it is true that graduates can teach in a private or semi-private school without this master's degree in secondary education, it is compulsory for teaching in a public school.

One of the glaring flaws of this system is that there are limited spots for admission to the master's course, which results in students being selected based on their undergraduate marks, which means many students are rejected. This, in turn, means that they have to look for work in private or semi-private schools. Alternatively, they can also pay for a master's degree at a private university that may admit them. In fact, master's degrees in teacher training are offered at private universities with no other limit to enrolment than the payment of exorbitant tuition fees. This perverse practice within the Spanish education system is not only going unchecked, it is even being encouraged by those in power.

Competitive examinations: After obtaining a master's degree in teacher training, aspiring teachers in public schools must pass a selective process known as competitive examinations *(oposiciones)*. This process includes theoretical, practical, and merit-based tests that assess candidates' knowledge, skills, and aptitudes for teaching. Candidates who pass the competitive examination are awarded a position as a fully qualified teacher. In the meantime, they can work as substitute teachers, meeting the labour demands of each autonomous community. Substitute teachers enjoy the same employment rights as civil servant teachers, except for their permanent status. In the case of primary school teachers, since their degree already includes professional training as teachers, they are not required to complete a master's degree, which is only mandatory for those aspiring to become secondary school teachers. When it comes to public schools, most teachers attain the status of civil servants after passing the competitive examination. If they do not pass this examination, their status in both primary and secondary schools is that of substitute teachers and their employment depends on the demands of each school at any given time.

With regards to the economic status of Spanish teachers compared to other population groups, teachers' salaries in Spain vary according to various factors, such as educational level (primary school teachers earn significantly less than secondary school teachers), experience, geographical location (each autonomous community, particularly those that have an economic agreement with the state, such as the Basque Country and Navarre, sets its own salary levels, and in these communities it is significantly higher than in the rest of the country), and the type of educational institution where they work (public, private, or semi-private). Teachers' salaries and working conditions are better in public schools than in private and semi-private schools. The reason for this is that the state agrees on much better working conditions for civil servants than private and semi-private schools do for their employees. In general, teachers' salaries in Spain are considered moderate compared to other EU countries. Although teachers are a highly educated and specifically trained group, their salaries are lower than other professions requiring a similar level of academic qualifications (for example, teachers possess the same level of education as doctors, but the salary of doctors employed by the state is higher). However, as mentioned above, teachers benefit from certain employment advantages, such as job stability and holiday periods. In any case, one of the key goals of the unions is to improve the working conditions and salaries of all teaching staff in Spain, securing equal pay regardless of the autonomous community they work in. [19]

THE BIGGEST CHALLENGES FOR SCHOOLS IN SPAIN IN THE COMING YEARS ARE:

Educational equity: Ensuring equal opportunities in education remains a major challenge in Spain. Today, when socio-economic inequalities have soared due to the neoliberal policies of recent decades, the tendency for these inequalities to persist in the education system by way of private and semi-private schools that are beholden to the interests of families — combined with neoliberal and demagogic policies that appeal to the "freedom of choice of school" — is a serious problem. Socio-economic and geographical disparities need to be addressed to ensure that all students have access to quality education, regardless of their social background or place of residence. This is undoubtedly the main issue. Only equal opportunity of access guarantees that school can operate as a social lift.

19 See the article by Quirós Madariaga, Beatriz (2021). El profesorado en la encrucijada, Eikasía: Revista de Filosofía, 99; 13–27.

Teacher quality: Ongoing teacher training and support is critical to improving the quality of education. It is important to invest in professional development programmes, provide incentives to attract and retain the best talent in the teaching profession, and promote a culture of collaboration and learning among teachers. To this end, the relationship between secondary and university teachers needs to be addressed.

Educational innovation: Schools must adapt to a changing environment and encourage innovation in teaching and learning. The need for the integration of information and communication technologies (ICT) in the classroom must be addressed, and measures must be taken to further encourage the development of 21st-century skills such as critical thinking, creativity, and problem-solving, and there must be more exploration of new learner-centred pedagogies and forms of cultural education.

Attention to diversity: Schools must be able to meet the educational needs of all students, including those with disabilities, special talents, specific linguistic or cultural needs, and other individual challenges. It is crucial to promote inclusion and diversity in the classroom, as well as to provide adequate supports and resources to ensure the success of all students.

Socio-emotional challenges: In addition to academic development, schools must pay attention to students' socio-emotional well-being. This involves promoting mental health, fostering resilience and social skills, and providing a safe and supportive learning environment. However, this also depends directly on families and the prevailing social environment in each municipality. Current Spanish policy promotes and fuels intergenerational and family conflict as part of its strategies of domination. This goes far beyond the field of education.

Community participation: Schools must strengthen relations with families, communities, and other relevant actors in order to encourage the participation and commitment of all sectors of society in education. The school must play a role in the life of neighbourhoods and municipalities, for which it must be provided with adequate resources.

Equal opportunities between autonomous communities: There needs to be a rethink the organization of the Spanish education system. We should centralize administration and management, centralize the coordination of political guidelines, and centralize the set of contents and curricula to be studied by all Spanish students. Encourage a sense of citizenship, as Spaniards, and political equality, as well as the use of Spanish as a common language among all students regardless of the autonomous administrations.[20]

RATIO OF TEACHERS TO PUPILS AS A STRUCTURAL PROBLEM

Particular emphasis should be placed on the issue of reducing pupil–teacher ratios. This is a crucial issue that must be addressed when talking about the challenges for schools in Spain. Class sizes have a decisive impact on the quality of teaching and learning, as well as on the well-being of both students and teachers. Lower class sizes allow for personalized teaching methods, as teachers can devote more time and individual attention to each student, more effectively identifying their needs, strengths, and areas for improvement. This allows teachers to adapt their methods to students' individual learning styles and rhythms, promoting better academic performance and greater student motivation. In addition, it improves the classroom climate by creating a calmer and more productive learning environment, which can reduce stress and anxiety for both students and teachers. Which in turn fosters a more positive, collaborative, and participatory dynamic, where interaction and dialogue between all members of the educational community are encouraged. It also reduces the workload for teachers and enables them to provide more efficient care as they are able to manage their time more effectively, which can contribute to reducing work-related stress and improving their professional well-being. Similarly, smaller class sizes facilitate inclusion and diversity, attention to student diversity, and allow for improved integration of those with special educational needs, as well as those from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds. This helps to promote equity and inclusion in the education system, ensuring that all students have access to quality education.

A DIGRESSION ON EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

Since 2000, there has been an increase in the supply of early childhood education provision in Spain, both in terms of the number of educational institutions and the number of places available. More kindergartens, nursery schools, and early childhood education centres have been built and opened throughout the country to meet the growing demand for care and education services for young children. In 2021, the enrolment rate for preschool education among four-year-olds in Spain was 96.5 percent, the fifth highest in Europe,[21] while the percentage of children enrolled between the ages of one and three in Spain is currently 45.6 percent, the highest in history,[22] representing an increase of 6.8 percent from the previous year. In 2022, the total number of early childhood education centres in Spain was 8,910, of which 4,543 were public institutions, while

20 See the article by Delmiro, Benigno (2021). O nos educamos o nos extinguimos, Eikasía: Revista de Filosofía, 99, 37–63. **21** The website of the National Institute of Statistics is available at: https://www.ine.es/ss/Satellite?L=es_ES&c=INESeccion_C&cid=1259925953043&p=1254735110672&pagename=ProductosYServicios%2FPYSLayout&param1=PYSDetalle&param3=1259924822888 (last accessed 6 September 2024). **22** https://www.educacionfpydeportes.gob.es/prensa/actualidad/2023/06/20230629-datosavance22-23.html (last accessed 6 September 2024).

Table 2: Pupils enrolled in the second cycle of early childhood education

Geo	1995/1996	2000/2001	2005/2006	2010/2011	2015/2016	2020/2021	2021/2022	2022/2023
Andalusia	196.398	208.667	250.138	287.449	263.481	235.815	229.360	221.323
Aragon	28.031	28.108	32.821	37.805	36.504	33.940	32.654	31.620
Asturias	21.116	19.486	20.779	23.830	22.774	19.195	18.691	17.884
Cantabria	1.374	11.467	13.556	16.000	15.556	13.243	12.747	12.272
Castile and Leon	60.356	54.045	56.652	61.528	57.953	50.730	48.770	47.063
Castile-La Mancha	53.012	52.208	57.370	68.038	61.409	55.514	53.744	51.802
Catalonia	171.239	168.479	205.952	244.071	231.175	208.285	200.444	193.980
Ceuta	2.504	2.682	2.859	3.464	3.658	3.069	2.812	2.600
Extremadura	33.591	31265	30 655	31.574	29.672	26.239	25.494	24.507
Galicia	63.019	54.837	60.143	65.763	63.688	58.054	55.663	52.997
Balearic Islands	21.096	24.856	29.753	33.557	32.623	31.301	30.859	30.046
Canary Islands	46.592	52.103	59.316	60.876	52.438	47.889	46.359	44.494
La Rioja	6.725	6.697	8.096	9.516	9.261	8.195	7.891	7.725
Madrid	129.664	141.036	176.967	204.556	202.206	186.709	179.058	172.295
Melilla	2.035	2.646	2.939	3.297	3.886	3.545	3.313	3.100
Murcia	34.830	38.317	47.405	53.890	50.648	47.595	46.376	45.450
Navarre	13.871	14.658	17.415	19.779	19.968	18.595	17.859	17.284
Basque Country	48.841	47.945	54.807	61.868	63.137	54.955	51.972	49.439
Valencia	96.051	106.858	133.269	155.746	143.023	130.256	125.896	124.853
Spain	1.041.345	1.066.340	1.260.892	1.440.607	1.363.060	1.233.124	1.189.962	1.150.734

The numbers reflect the number of pupils enrolled, selected years from 1995/96 to 2022/2023 in Spanish autonomous communities and autonomous cities. Source: Ministry of Education, Vocational Training, and Sport (2024)

4,367 were private. The number of pupils enrolled in the second cycle of early childhood education (three to five years old) is 1,150,734 according to data from the Ministry of Education. [23] The evolution of enrolment in the second cycle of early childhood education is shown in the following table:

There has been an increase in government presence and support for early childhood education in Spain. Local and regional administrations have invested in the expansion of the network of public early childhood education providers, with the aim of guaranteeing universal access to quality education for children aged up to the age of six.

Along with the quantitative growth of education provision, increasing attention has been paid to the quality of early childhood education in Spain. Policies and programmes have been implemented to improve teacher training and qualifications, as well as to promote pedagogical practices based on play, exploration, and the holistic development of the child.

In recent decades, there has been increased recognition of the importance of early education in children's cognitive, socio-emotional, and physical development. Awareness of the need to invest in early childhood education has been promoted as a key measure in efforts to reduce social inequalities and improve long-term educational outcomes.

Rates of preschool education, childcare services, and specific support services for educationally disadvantaged people in Spain are crucial areas of focus in the field of education and child welfare.

With regard to the rate of childcare compared to childcare needs, although there has been an increase in the supply of childcare and early childhood education centres in Spain in recent decades, there is still a gap between supply and demand when it comes to childcare services. The enrolment rate in the first cycle of pre-primary education (zero to three years) is around 41 percent, but as it is not compulsory, the funding systems for this type of education are not standardized across the autonomous communities, and there are notable inequalities between some of them, such as the Basque Country and Murcia, for instance. In Murcia, an autonomous community with 1.5 million inhabitants, the number of private early childhood centres is 122, while the number of public centres is 68, whereas in the Basque Country, with a population of 2.2 million, there are 576 public and 273 private centres.

Childcare rates vary significantly depending on the region and the availability of resources. In some urban and metropolitan areas, the demand for childcare places far exceeds the available supply, which can make it difficult for parents to access quality and affordable services.

23 Labrador, I. (2024). El descenso en la población de educación infantil y primaria en España, Funcas blog. https://blog.funcas.es/el-descenso-en-la-poblacion-de-educacion-infantil-y-primaria-en-espana/ (last accessed 6 September 2024).

Childcare provision can vary in terms of the length of the day, with full-time and part-time options available in many centres. However, the availability of full-time places may be limited in some areas, which may make it difficult for parents working full-time to reconcile work and family life. In terms of income, 30.9 percent of families say that their need for childcare services is not being met, according to the INE (National Statistics Institute). The main reason reported by 52.4 percent of families is that they cannot afford the cost of the service. Another 36.4 percent report difficulties in paying for it, particularly those in the second quintile, which benefits less from free services compared to the first quintile.[24]

In response to the needs of educationally disadvantaged groups, specific programmes and services have been promoted in some autonomous communities and municipalities. These services may include subsidies and financial aid for low-income families, educational and social support programmes for children at risk of exclusion, and early childhood services for children with special needs. However the level of services offered varies depending on the resources available in each autonomous community. In the Basque Country and Navarre, these services are of a much higher quality than in the other autonomous communities, due to their privileged funding arrangements.

Challenges to be tackled in the coming years in early childhood and primary education include: ensuring equity in access to childcare and early childhood education services, especially for low-income families and disadvantaged communities; improving the quality and supply of childcare services, including extending full-day coverage and improving staff training and qualifications; and strengthening specific support services for educationally disadvantaged people, promoting inclusion and equal opportunities from an early age. Public early childhood education is financed by public funds at the percentage stated above, with the majority being provided by municipalities, while private centres are financed by the fees paid by families. However state subsidizes part of the fee if there are not enough public places available.

WHAT POLITICAL DEMANDS FOR A LEFT-WING EDUCATION POLICY CAN BE DERIVED FROM THIS?

Left-wing education policy must promote political equality, equal opportunities, and social justice, and, ideally, leftist politics should not focus on particular identities, nor is it the place of leftist politics to favour privilege or unequal treatment before the law. The state bears the primary responsibility for this.

In order to offer quality education to all and to mitigate inequalities based on origin, we must invest more money. But above all, there must be continued promotion of a publicly funded, state-run education system, with rigorous standards for selecting highly qualified teaching staff, and its function as a "social lift" that redistributes students' position in society on the basis of merit. Left-wing education policy must focus on the state rather than abstract entities such as "humanity" or "the planet", or even the "European Union", since these categories, being beyond the reach of political action and the students' status as citizens, can only be considered as secondary points of reference. Thinking of the polemic between Protagoras and Socrates, we could say that human beings can only be educated when they have first been educated as citizens.

We must guarantee universal access to free public education at all levels, from early childhood education to university. This involves the elimination of fees in public education and providing adequate funding to ensure its quality and sustainability through a systematic improvement of pupil–teacher ratios.

Promoting inclusive education: Promoting the inclusion of students with disabilities, special educational needs, and different abilities in the regular education system. This implies the provision of adequate support and resources, teacher training in inclusive pedagogies, and the design of accessible educational environments for all students. This does not mean abandoning so-called special education centres. These facilities have done a tremendous amount of good for families over the last decades and must be preserved. Because not all children can be catered to appropriately within the mainstream education system and these special centres fulfil an essential function.[25] Recently, the UN Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities slammed Spain for keeping thousands of students enrolled in these centres, even though the current law foresees their dissolution in ten years. I believe this should be reviewed in dialogue with families. To claim that children with special educational needs can be placed in public schools without providing them with specialized care is sheer demagoguery. The state should take responsibility for improving and extending the network of special education centres that provide professional care tailored to the specific needs of children with special educational needs, so as to provide them with a real chance at social integration. Equality should not be confused with homogeneity.

Improving teachers' working conditions: Defend teachers' labour rights, including job stability, lifelong learning opportunities, reduction of workload, and an increased recognition of their profession in society. In this sense, the academic promotion of teachers should be encouraged by breaking down the current barriers that block secondary school teachers' access to university. The possibility of linking the academic career of teachers from secondary education to the university level would enhance the pedagogical effectiveness

24 See Marqués, S. (2021). El desigual mapa del primer iclo de Educación Intantil (0-3) en España, Magisterio: https://www.magisnet.com/2021/04/el-desigual-mapa-del-primer-ciclo-de-educacion-infantil-0-3-en-espana/. **25** https://portaldeeducacion.es/educacion-especial/index.htm (last accessed 6 September 2024).

of university teaching staff while also emphasizing the importance of academic excellence in secondary education — a goal that a socialist approach to education should not renounce.

Promoting critical and democratic education: Promoting education that fosters critical thinking, civil participation, and the formation of citizens committed to social justice and democratic values and to the state. This implies the inclusion of curricular content that addresses issues such as gender equality, cultural diversity, the environment, and human rights, but also the values that consolidate the structure of the state as the ultimate guarantee of public schools. It would also be important to contribute to the dismantling of the colonialist mentality currently exercised by Western countries towards the rest of the world, and to focus on fostering values related to the role of students as citizens and to their responsibility in the state.

Democratic participation and collaboration: A left-wing education policy would promote active participation and collaboration between all actors in the education system and society as a whole. This implies fostering co-responsibility and constructive dialogue in decision-making on educational issues, as well as promoting transparency, accountability, and civil participation in the planning, implementation, and evaluation of educational policies.

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THE EDUCATION SYSTEM IN FINLAND

THE ORGANIZATION AND STRUCTURE OF FINNISH EDUCATION

The roots of Finland's current pre-tertiary education system lie in political debates of the late 1950s and 1960s regarding the need for a better-educated workforce and equal educational possibilities for all children, regardless of where they live and their social background. After several parliamentary committees, a politically favourable situation in which left and centre parties held a parliamentary majority allowed a law to be passed in 1968 replacing the prior dual education structure, in which about 30 percent of students were selected to attend grammar schools through an entrance examination after four years of elementary education, with comprehensive compulsory education for all children aged seven to 16 (grades one through nine). The reform maintained some features of the old dual system by dividing basic education into a six-year primary school (grades one through six) with classroom teachers and a three-year lower secondary school (grades seven through nine) with subject teachers. The formal separation between the two was abolished in 1998 and a growing share of basic schools includes grades one through nine within a unified administrative structure and premises.

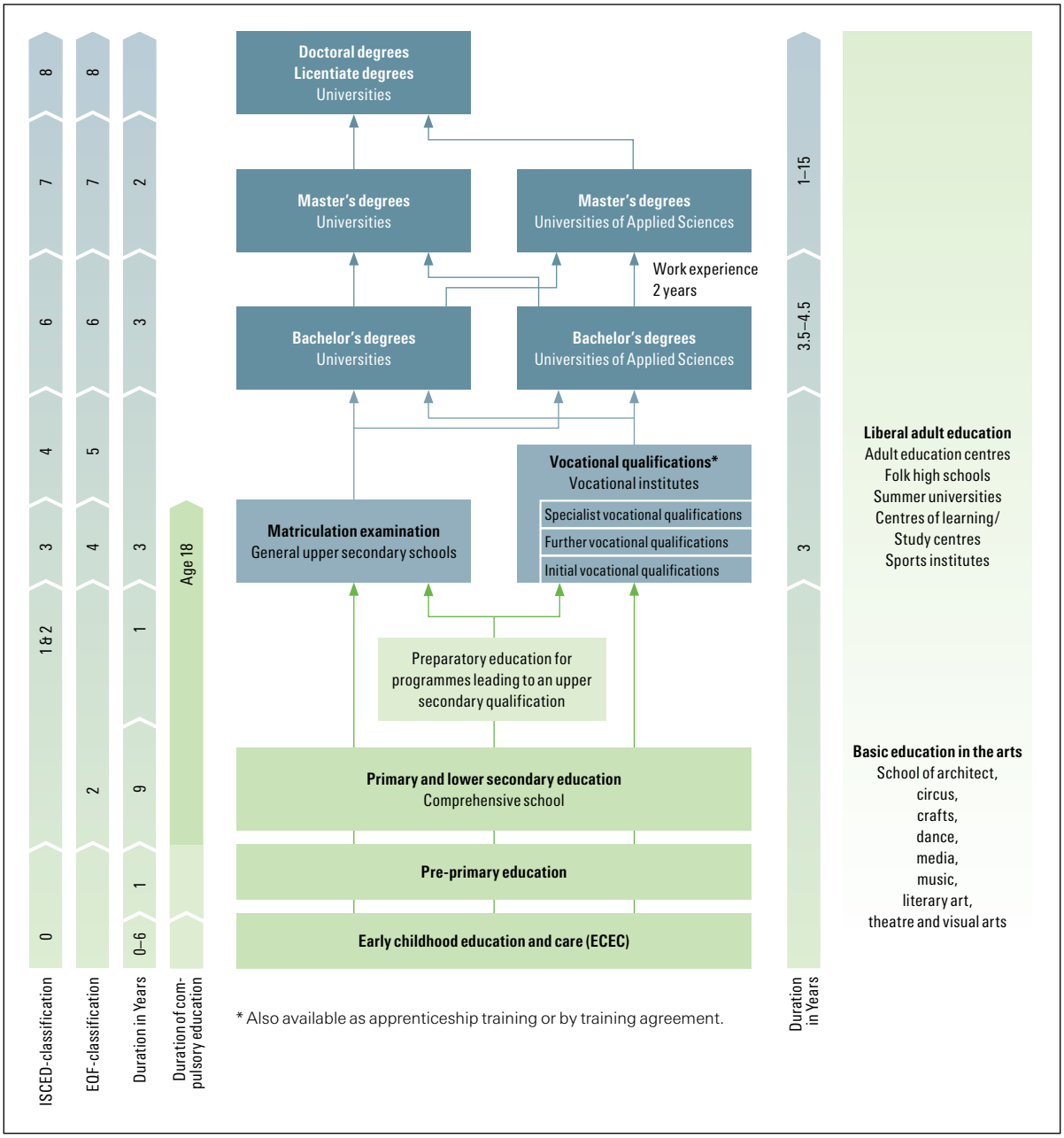
The adoption of the comprehensive (basic) school did not affect upper secondary education. After nine years of compulsory education, the majority of students applied for three years of either vocational or general (academic) upper secondary education. The structure stayed the same for 52 years until the government of Prime Minister Sanna Marin extended compulsory education to include upper secondary education in 2020. Three years earlier, one year of pre-primary education was also included in compulsory education. This is mainly organized in day-care centres due to six-year-olds' need for additional early childhood education and care (ECEC) after the half-day pre-primary programme.

While pre-primary and basic education follow a principle of neighbourhood school allocation, upper secondary education is entered through an application process in which the student can set five choices anywhere in the country, and the schools or vocational institutions accept their students from among their applicants based on their final basic education grade point averages (GPA). The general or academic track leads to a matriculation examination, which is the only high stakes test in the Finnish education system, while the vocational track leads to profession-specific vocational qualifications. Both tracks allow students to enter tertiary education via an entrance examination, and perhaps the most important feature of the Finnish education system is the principle of no dead ends.

Tertiary education comprises research universities and universities of applied sciences. Research universities engage in education and research and have the right to award doctorates. Universities of applied sciences are institutions of professional higher education, engaging in applied research and development, offering bachelor's degrees after initial studies and master's degrees for students returning for further studies after a period of work. Tertiary education student admission has traditionally relied on a combination of field-specific entrance examinations and matriculation examination results. In 2018, a reform decreed that half of students in all fields of study shall be accepted based solely on their matriculation examination results and the other half solely on an entrance examination. The main goal of the reform was to speed Finnish students' slow transition from secondary to tertiary education, given that two thirds of new matriculates had been left without a place in higher education each year due to a backlog of matriculates of the previous years. The reform was backed by research on the drawbacks of the prior entrance exam-based student selection (Pekkarinen & Sarvimäki, 2016).

The Finnish education system (see Figure 1) utilizes a combination of national, regional, and municipal governance and financing. The Parliament decides on educational legislation, funding, and policies, while the Ministry of Education and Culture oversees the planning and execution of education policies. The Ministry outlines the general guidelines and strategy for education policy, oversees all education tied to the state budget, and prepares education-related legislation and governmental decisions. The Finnish National Agency for Education, under the Ministry of Education and Culture, is the central actor in the development of education and the execution of education policy, responsible for, among other things, preparing the National Core Curricula for the various levels of pre-tertiary education. The Regional State Administrative Agencies promote students' basic rights and legal protection by handling complaints and assessing rectification requests. As the main education providers, municipalities are guided and obligated by legislative objectives and the National Core Curricula, based on which they prepare their own curricula. Each municipality has an elected or nominated political body called the local education committee or a similar institution, depending on the size and internal administrative structure of the municipality. Local education departments as administrative bodies are responsible for planning, preparing, and implementing the education initiatives determined by the committee. One special feature of Finnish education is that it is provided in separate schools and administration in both Finnish and Swedish (the share of the officially Swedish-speaking population was 5.2 percent in 2021).

Figure 1: Education System in Finland (MINEDU, 2022)



Quelle: Finnish National Agency for Education

ORGANIZATION AND FUNDING FOR FINNISH PRE-TERTIARY EDUCATION

There is a comprehensive network of basic schools throughout Finland (there were 2,014 at the end of 2023), with close to half of them providing primary education only (Statistics Finland, 2024). Schools in Finland vary greatly in size, from small rural primary schools with ten students to city schools with more than 900; the average size for a primary school is 169 students and for comprehensive schools covering grades one through nine, it is 464 students (Statistics Finland, 2020). Municipalities assign children to a local school with instruction in Finnish or Swedish based on the child's home language. Students with immigrant backgrounds whose home language is not Finnish or Swedish are provided additional home language instruction. Parents may also apply to send their child to a school other than the one they have been assigned to. Most students do attend their assigned schools, however interest in applying to schools that offer classes with additional hours in a particular subject, such as music, or the option of choosing a foreign language other than English at grade one has been growing in recent years, especially in the bigger cities. This has brought the new phenomenon of "school shopping" to some urban areas, which has also been heavily crit-

icized from the point of view of educational equality (see, e.g., Kantasalmi & Kupiainen, 2021; Seppänen et al., 2015).

Finland has only one private school in the sense of parents paying a full tuition, as the term is commonly used in many other European countries and in North America. The International School of Helsinki, with an annual tuition that is now close to €20,000, is an exception within the system, including the fact that fewer than 20 percent of its students are of Finnish origin. There are, however, several administratively private schools, most of which are fully funded by the state and adhere to the same curricula and distribution of lesson hours as the municipal schools they supplement. Among these 85 independent schools, some are relics of the earlier grammar schools, while others provide alternatives to the municipal schools by focusing on specific, often non-academic subjects or following a specific educational philosophy or pedagogical idea (e.g., Steiner, Montessori, or Freinet).

The school year comprises 190 school days divided into autumn and spring terms, with an approximately ten-week summer break in between. The school year begins in mid-August and ends on the last Saturday of week 22 in May or June. The normal school week runs from Monday to Friday, but the last Saturday of the semester is reserved for the spring festivities and delivery of annual report cards. The most important and visible among the festivities is the delivery of the matriculation examination records with the accompanying white caps to all matriculates. Within the guidelines, the education provider (in most cases the municipality) can decide on its schools' actual start date and the length of the autumn, Christmas, and Easter breaks. In addition to these, the traditional one-week winter break is arranged in February on a regional basis in three stages (weeks eight, nine, and ten) to secure winter conditions across the long country (the distance from the southernmost city of Hanko to the northernmost municipality of Utsjoki is 1,136.5 km, crossing the arctic circle) while avoiding overcrowding winter sport facilities.

Instruction time in Finnish basic education is among the lowest within the OECD (Sahlberg 2011, 63). The Basic Education Act (682/1998, Article 3) defines the minimum number of hours per week a student is entitled to receive education, although schools and municipalities can offer more, usually in the form of optional foreign language instruction, extra lessons in other curricular subjects, or training in not strictly curricular subjects such as IT. The minimum number of teaching hours (equalling 45 minutes of instruction with a 15-minute break) is: 20 weekly hours for grades one and two, 22 hours for grade three, 24 hours for grade four, 25 hours for grades five and six, 29 hours for grades seven and eight, and 30 hours for grade nine. One weekly lesson hour of Finnish/Swedish (called mother tongue in the curriculum) will be added to these in autumn 2024 for grades one and two, one lesson hour for mathematics for grade three (MINEDU, 2023; Suomi, 2023, 83), and one lesson hour in the other national language (Swedish/Finnish) for grades seven and nine (Opetushallitus, 2024). Overall, Finnish students receive 6,300 hours of instruction during their nine-year basic education, which is more than 1,200 hours less than the OECD average.

Compulsory education covers all children with permanent residence in Finland – a status that is also available for Ukrainian refugee families after one year of residence in Finland. Basic education is mandatory, but not school attendance (Jakku-Sihvonen et al. 1996, 23). Despite home schooling being an option in Finland, just 250 families currently use this option across the country (see https://hslda.org/post/finland). Municipalities' responsibility for education also covers home-schooled students, meaning that the municipality must supervise parents to ensure that they fulfil their children's educational rights and follow the learning outcomes of home-schooled children according to the same standards as other students.

The standard age to enrol in basic education is the beginning of the fall semester of the year in which the child turns seven, with 1 January as the cut-off date. Upon parental request or in the event of a parent-approved recommendation by ECEC or pre-primary teacher(s), the start of basic school can be postponed or accelerated by a year based on a professional assessment of the child's cognitive and/or socio-emotional maturity. Likewise, children for whom nine years of basic education are not enough to fulfil the basic education requirements due to disability or illness are allowed an extension of two additional years.

SUPPORT FOR LEARNING AND SCHOOLING

The Basic Education Act (628/1998) stipulates that every student has the right to receive a basic education that will allow and prepare them to continue their studies at the upper secondary level and attain further educational credentials. It also means that students have a right to adequate support for their education and schooling whenever the need arises, including education for children with the most severe intellectual disabilities (Lintuvuori, 2019).

The basis for Finnish special education is the reform of 2010 (Thuneberg et al., 2014), which introduced a Response to Intervention-based (RTI; see, e.g., Fuchs et al., 2003), three-tiered educational support for learning and for schooling into the comprehensive Finnish basic school, encompassing grades one through nine. The two-part term (support for learning *and* for schooling) is meant to not only cover support for the cognitive component of learning, but also other obstacles to students' progress in school, such as behavioral issues. The support system comprises general support for all (Tier 1), intensified support with targeted interventions for those in need of additional help, depending on a school-based decision (Tier 2), and special support, including still more intensive support and the

use of individualized curricula in one or more subjects (Tier 3). Unlike Tier 2, Tier 3 is based on decisions made in accordance with the official Administrative Procedure Act. Primarily, the level of support a child needs is based on the pre-primary or primary teacher's or subject teachers' (secondary level) educational observations (see, e.g., Thuneberg et al., 2014; Vainikainen et al., 2017). In addition to teacher observation, the basis for providing Tier 1–Tier 3 support is school-based screening for support needs (Vainikainen et al., 2017, 253–255).

The guiding principle of the three-tiered system is to provide Tier 1 and Tier 2 support in mainstream education classes using flexible teaching arrangements (e.g., co-teaching with a special education teacher, special arrangements, use of interpreters, etc.), while Tier 3 support can be arranged using either the same procedures as Tier 2 support or in small groups or special education classes. However, as Lintuvuori (2019) and Kupiainen and Hienonen (2015) have found, a new type of "small classes" comprising students receiving Tier 2 and Tier 3 support (i.e., classes with more than the 10 students allowed in a special education class, but clearly less than in the mainstream classes of the school) appeared in Finnish basic schools soon after the special education reform. This phenomenon indicates that, while the three-tiered support model was observed to at least some degree in most schools, the intended goal of inclusion was not, or at least not to the same degree. Another finding by Lintuvuori (2019) was that the share of students with individualized curricula clearly varied between municipalities, endangering equality and equity due to differences in the realisation of students' right to support. Overall, 135,000 Finnish compulsory education students (23.6 percent) received intensified or special support in 2022 (Kalenius et al., 2024, 40).

FINNISH LEARNING OUTCOMES IN LIGHT OF INTERNATIONAL COMPARATIVE STUDIES

Finland is clearly at a crossroads regarding the development of learning outcomes (Hiltunen et al, 2023; Kalenius, 2023). While it was among the top performers in the OECD PISA studies during the early cycles of 2000, 2003, and 2006, Finnish students' performance has declined in all the measured dimensions since then. The decline was one of the steepest among OECD countries in the latest PISA results from 2022 (Hiltunen et al., 2023). Moreover, this downward trend has been shown not only in the loosely curriculum-based PISA studies, but has also been observed in the assessments of the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA), the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS), and the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS), which are more closely tied to curriculum, as well as the national sample-based assessments of learning outcomes by the Finnish Education Evaluation Centre (FINEEC). Furthermore, after the positive impact of the adoption of the comprehensive school in the 1970s on education equality (Pekkarinen et al., 2009), Finland is now witnessing a backlash in the social heritability of higher education (Heiskala et al., 2021), with the social divide already visible in students' choices between the academic and vocational tracks in upper secondary education (Kupiainen, 2019a). The divide is primarily caused by the acceptance of students in upper secondary education based on their GPA. It might seem to contradict the fame Finland has gained for its small between-school differences in the PISA studies, but based on national studies (Hautamäki et al., 2002; Kupiainen et al., 2014), the differences would probably be comparable to other OECD countries were it not for Finnish students still being in the comprehensive basic school at age 15 due to Finland's later than average school enrolment age. The development can also be seen in PISA, where the impact of Finnish students' home background on their achievement is slowly approaching the OECD average.

While the share of students with immigrant backgrounds was extremely small during the first cycles of PISA, in the latest rounds the difference between native and immigrant-background students' performance in Finland has been among the largest in Europe, even if it is no different from that of Sweden (Hiltunen et al, 2023). There are, however, probably various reasons for international differences in the gap between native and immigrant-background students' performance related to the newcomers' socio-economic and language backgrounds. In Finland, the difference between the two groups declined slightly in PISA 2022, but the result only reflected a sharper decline in achievement among native students than among students with immigrant backgrounds.

One specific feature of the Finnish PISA results is that the gender difference has constantly been one of or the largest among OECD countries, especially with respect to literacy. Furthermore, in PISA 2022, Finland was the only OECD country in which girls performed better in mathematics than boys did, a change that first happened in 2015, but has remained ever since. Yet the difference in mathematics is one of the smallest in students' final grades at grade nine. Gender has the greatest impact in Finnish, health education, and Swedish (as the other national language), while the difference is much smaller in physics, mathematics, and chemistry ($\eta 2=0.155–0.117$ vs. $\eta 2=0.019–0.040$, all $p<0.001$) (Kupiainen, 2019b, 99). However, while girls have higher final grades in mathematics than boys do at the end of basic school, there was only a slight, non-significant overall difference in Finnish girls' and boys' performance in the IEA TIMSS 2018 study (Vettenranta et al., 2020). The difference from PISA might reflect the difference between the two tests, with the non-curricular, low-stakes PISA tasks favouring girls, with their better reading skills and possibly higher motivation in the low-stakes OECD assessment.

EDUCATION FUNDING IN FINLAND

According to Eurydice (2024), the distribution of expenditures for the different educational levels was quite stable in Finland from 2000 to 2017. Since the basic school was adopted in the 1970s, education has been free at all levels in Finland, from the beginning of compulsory education through higher education. There are no tuition fees for students except for liberal adult education programmes and institutions (e.g., Adult Education Centres and Open University). In 2020, Finland spent 5.26 percent of its GDP on primary to tertiary education, making it seventh among OECD countries, but the lowest among Nordic countries with Norway at 6.47 percent, Iceland at 6.02 percent, Sweden at 5.40 percent, and Denmark at 5.29 percent (OECD, n.d.). Yet Finland's 5.26 percent was clearly above the OECD average of 4.33 percent. Still, before the latest Parliamentary elections in 2023, one of the Trade Union of Education's key goals for the new government for 2023–2027 was to raise the share of expenditures on education to the level of the other Nordic countries (OAJ, 2022a, 2023).

In 2018, Finland's total funding for education was only slightly above the OECD average (5.7 percent vs. 5.0 percent), with the lowest level of private funding (0.1 percent) among OECD countries (OECD, 2018). Overall, private funding accounts for just 2.6 percent of Finnish educational expenditures and only one percent for pre-primary, basic, and general upper secondary education. At 4.0 percent, the share is higher for upper secondary VET and higher education (Eurydice, 2020).

Local education providers receive central government transfers for costs related to establishing and operating educational institutions. The state participates in financing educational services by means of a national government transfer system. The transfers cover all basic public services and are based on a given municipality's population size according to a value set per person in each age group, augmented by supplementary transfers and other additional funding based on specific needs and conditions. The state funding is paid as a lump sum and is not earmarked. The situation changed considerably in 2022, when all social and health services that had previously been administered at the municipal level were transferred to a new administrative level of "well-being service counties", making education the single largest sphere of municipal services. Local authorities in Finland are entitled to levy taxes to help them fulfil their obligations to provide basic services. Accordingly, municipalities have full fiscal autonomy, provided that they offer all statutory (educational) services for residents.

Provision of basic education is the obligation of municipalities and the few independent schools that are part of their respective municipal school systems. Regardless of the administrative structure of the school (separate primary, lower secondary, or comprehensive), instruction is based on a classroom teacher model for grades one through six and a subject teacher model for grades seven through nine. Each student is guaranteed a place in their local school to ensure as safe and short a path to school as possible. When a commute to school is lengthy or difficult, the municipality is obliged to provide free transportation by bus, taxi, or a public transit voucher. All education and education materials, including textbooks, exercise books, pencils and, in many schools, even laptops are free of charge. Most sports equipment is also provided free by the school, but must remain on the school premises. Students are also provided a daily warm meal, a practice that started before World War II, but became law in 1948.

TEACHER-STUDENT RATIO IN BASIC SCHOOLS

Between 1971 and 2017, the average ratio has been 15.96 students per teacher. The ratio was at its highest in 1971 with 22.25 students per teacher and its lowest in 2013 with 13.2 students per teacher. In 2019, the average class size for grades one through six was 19.6 students, clearly below the OEAC average of 21.1. Lower secondary classes were slightly smaller and fell below the OECD average. The only norm regarding class size is the maximum of 10 students for special education classes. Otherwise, class size varies considerably between and within schools, and "classes are too big" is a common reason given for declining learning outcomes as well as a common complaint among Finnish teachers. A Trade Union of Education survey (OAJ, 2022b; see also OAJ, 2024) showed that about ten percent of students are in classes with more than 25 students, which is almost twice as common among lower secondary students as primary school students (15 percent vs. 8 percent).

TEACHER EDUCATION AND TEACHERS' INCOME

The adoption of the basic school also marked a total rupture for teachers and teacher education. While elementary teachers had previously only taught the whole age cohort for the first four years, they now had to teach it for six years with a much more demanding curriculum that included subjects and content that had previously only been taught by subject teachers to students who had passed the grammar school entrance exam. On the other hand, more than half of all grammar school teachers, which had been one of the groups that most vocally opposed to the reform, were now to teach the whole basic school age cohort in grades seven through nine. One response was extensive continuing training for teachers, accompanied by an end to the 130 year Finnish tradition of elementary school teacher seminars and the transfer of all teacher education to universities in the 1970s.

While subject teachers already had to have master's degrees in their subjects of instruction, classroom teacher education also required a master's degree

(M.Ed.) starting in 1979. Finally, early education (ECEC) teacher education was also transferred to university-level bachelor's degree (B.Ed.) programs in 1995.

The general objective of teacher education is to ensure that graduates are ready to work independently as teachers, educators, and counsellors. Teacher education covers several types of teachers, but in this chapter, we will focus on the education of classroom and subject teachers, who form the main teaching corps in the basic school. The basic school comprises primary education (grades one through six), taught by classroom teachers, who are responsible for teaching most subjects to their class, and lower secondary education (grades seven through nine), where each subject teacher is responsible for providing all teaching in one or more subjects (e.g., mathematics and physics, or history and social studies), usually across grades and classes. In bigger schools, there may be several teachers in a given subject, which allows for collaboration and coordinated instruction planning of instruction. In addition, the teacher corps includes special education teachers who either teach a class of their own, support students in a mainstream class alongside the main teacher, or temporarily take students in need of support to a separate room, either individually or in small groups. Classroom teacher education programmes (M.Ed.) are highly selective with about 15 percent of applicants accepted yearly.

Unlike classroom teachers, subject teachers pursue their master's studies in the faculty or department of their specialization, in either a general programme or a programme tailored for subject-teacher candidates. To earn the qualification required for a permanent teaching position, students of both programme types apply to a one-year (60 ECTS) course in pedagogical studies in a teacher education department in one of the eight universities in the country with a faculty of education. As with classroom teachers, the programme includes two practice periods in a university school or other appointed school, supervised by university personnel. The option to apply for the one-year pedagogical studies needed for a teaching certificate is available to anyone holding a master's degree in a subject that is counted as part of the national curriculum. Due to the separate pedagogical studies, subject teachers often complete one more year of education than classroom teachers, which is reflected in their slightly higher salaries.

Based on salary survey data collected directly from employers and anonymous employees in Finland, the average salary of a teacher in 2024 is €48,663 a year and €23 per hour, with the average annual salary ranging between €34,843 and €58,639. In his study, Hanushek and his colleagues (2016) noted that, compared to other equally educated (female) employees, teachers' salaries were higher in Finland than in the other Nordic countries, which may explain the difference in teacher recruitment and shortage.

KEY CHALLENGES FOR FINNISH EDUCATION IN THE COMING YEARS

While declining learning outcomes could easily be seen as the most obvious challenge to schools and schooling, the accompanying problems of declining school engagement, the impact of increasing social segregation on schools and learning, decreasing well-being and depression among young people, and the ubiquitous role of smartphones and social media in the lives of school-aged children and youth indicate that there is no easy way to change the trend (for the connection between young people's declining well-being and the increasing use of smartphones, see Amez & Baert, 2020; Haidt, 2023). In this respect, the worrisome results of PISA 2022 might turn out to be at least a partial blessing as they clarified a need to look for a way to tackle the problems facing education. Given that the decline was nothing new, the then-Minister of Education Anna-Maja Henriksson, in her speech at the conference after the publication of the PISA 2022, was able to refer to the results of the Government Programme of 2023 (VN, 2023), which included a decision to increase classroom hours in Finnish/Swedish and mathematics at the primary and lower secondary levels, respectively. Likewise, the results raised demands for restricting the use of smartphones in school for purposes other than teacher-led learning tasks — an issue that the department of education of the City of Helsinki decided on in summer 2024 (HS, 2024a).

One openly controversial issue that arose from the PISA 2022 results was criticism of inclusion, a policy that had been introduced into the prior, relatively segregated Finnish education system with the 2011 special education reform. Especially in the media, inclusion was seen by many as a key reason for declining educational outcomes and increasing behavioural problems and disturbances in class. However, official criticism has only been directed toward the fact that the reform has been implemented without the necessary resources, resulting in calls for smaller class sizes and additional funding for education.

Other than the above challenges related mainly to basic education, another challenge is participation in early childhood education and care (ECEC), which is still lower than in other OECD countries despite the fact that all children below school age have been granted a subjective right to day care since 1996. In 2021, only 35 percent of children under the age of three participated in ECEC, while the share among three- to five-year-olds was 87 percent. One likely reason for the small proportion of children under three is the yearlong parental leave, and another might be the childcare allowance paid to parents who do not enrol their child in public day care before that age. Many regard the situation as problematic, especially for children from immigrant families, for whom the allowance can be economically important, but whose children are thus denied the language immersion offered by the day-care group. The transfer of ECEC from the Ministry of

Social Affairs and Health to the Ministry of Education and Culture in 2013 reinforced the understanding of early education as a right of the child and not just a social support for families, and a pilot study of two-year pre-primary education in 2022–2024 strengthened this view even further. Making the change permanent would also support families financially: while pre-primary is free as part of compulsory education, ECEC is subject to a fee, graded according to family income (max. Đ295 in Helsinki for one child, with lower fees for siblings) with 25–40 percent of children entitled to free care across municipalities.

WHAT POLITICAL DEMANDS FOR A LEFT-WING EDUCATION POLICY CAN BE DERIVED FROM THIS?

Overall, many of the positive aspects of the Finnish education system derive from the 1970s and the mainly centre-left-led decision to adopt the comprehensive school. The latest political reform, which extended compulsory education to also cover upper secondary school, was also enacted by the left-green-centre government of Prime Minister Sanna Marin. Yet the relatively strong and long-standing national consensus regarding education may mean that a commonly agreed-upon solution to the current challenges might be found even under the current right-wing government of Prime Minister Petteri Orpo (Suomi, 2023).

The Finnish comprehensive school can be seen as a political success story born of the political situation of the mid- to late 1960s. As has been well documented (e.g., Pekkala Kerr et al., 2013; Pekkarinen et al., 2007), the reform led to increased equality in terms of both students' cognitive development and intergenerational earnings. However, decades after the reform was implemented across the country in 1972–1977, new signs of increasing social heritability of higher education started to be observed during the 2000s (Kivinen et al., 2012), and the development has grown stronger since then (Heiskala et al., 2021). It is hard to avoid the conclusion that just offering equal educational opportunities for all might not be enough, especially in today's rapidly developing world, where the school must compete with a growing battery of alternative offerings in children's and young peoples' lives.

The previous government of Prime Minister Sanna Marin took one especially positive step by extending compulsory education to include the upper secondary level. While a great majority of that age cohort had already entered upper secondary education before the extension, the decision was important as the compulsory status made learning materials free, opening the general or academic track to students whose parents might have found the economic burden of the necessary laptop and textbooks overwhelming.

The discussion that followed Finnish students' declining results in PISA 2022 included a discussion initiated by some economists of education regarding a possible need to reconsider the principle of no high-stakes testing in the basic school (HS, 2024b). However, no further discussion has been raised regarding a possible need to reappraise the idea that a lack of group-level differences in learning outcomes is the ultimate proof of the equality of an education system (see Jakku-Sihvonen, 2013). While the widely accepted long-term goal of public education is to diminish differences arising from children's home background, the current interpretation might turn harmful by encouraging avoidance of demanding goals and assessment practices. After all, the lower the standards, the smaller the differences. However, while higher expectations might risk revealing inequalities, they might also be the only way to truly help students from lower socio-economic or immigrant backgrounds to reach equally high learning outcomes as their more fortunate peers. From this point of view, the unwillingness of the education administration to evaluate the possible impact of the latest basic education core curriculum (Opetushallitus, 2016) on declining learning outcomes is especially regrettable. There might be good reason to ask if the core curriculum's emphasis on general competencies, transversal skills, and multi-disciplinary modules, combined with the relatively wide autonomy of Finnish teachers in the implementation of the curriculum, might have led to outright differences in the education students receive based on teachers' varying interpretations of student's academic interests and well-being.

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Katrin Schäfgen

CONCLUSION: REQUIREMENTS FOR AN EFFECTIVE EDUCATION POLICY IN GERMANY

Taking a look beyond our own backyard to the education systems of other European countries has revealed the ways in which differing conditions and measures can impact academic success and educational equity. It has become apparent that countries that spend a higher proportion of public funds on education (Finland), but especially those with a higher degree of pupil participation in early childhood *education* (rather than childcare; in this case, Estonia and Finland) and longer periods of shared learning (Estonia and Finland) tend to have more success when it comes to acquiring basic skills and equalising social disparities.

Similarly, the degree of responsibility taken by the state for setting educational requirements and curricula has also been found to play a role in increasing a country's academic success. The comparison of the education systems of the four countries analysed has allowed us to determine a series of key education policy imperatives that will need to be realised if Germany is to improve its academic success and educational equity.

1. Increase Public Spending on Education Policy

Germany does not currently spend enough money on education. With its national public expenditure on education accounting for 4.0 percent of its GDP, Germany falls well below the OECD average of 4.6 percent. A significant increase in public investment in education is needed, especially in view of the challenges currently facing German society, such as displacement and forced migration, a shortage of skilled labour, ailing infrastructure, and the growing diversity of the student body.

As such, Die Linke (2023) called for the allocation of a special education fund of 100 billion euros in a proposal to the Bundestag on 29 September 2023. The same demand was also made by the alliance Bildungswende JETZT!, which managed to successfully mobilize thousands of people throughout Germany for the Bildungsprotesttag (Education Protest Day) in 2023 and 2024, and continues to intervene in education policy today.[1]

2. Lift the Ban on Cooperation Between the Federal and State Governments

The responsibility of the individual state governments for the education (and cultural) sector, including its funding, was confirmed in a verdict handed down by the Federal Constitutional Court in 2006 as part of the reform of Germany's federalist system. Verdict notwithstanding, the federal government continues to finance a number of (fixed-term) education programmes,[2] without which Germany would find itself lagging even further behind on the international stage. The ban on cooperation between federal and state governments has long been "as riddled with holes as a block of Swiss cheese", as Reith observed back in 2017. Especially noteworthy in this regard is the Startchancen Programme, the largest education project ever launched by Germany's federal government. It earmarks the provision of 1 billion euros per annum from 2024 to 2034 (to be co-funded by the German state governments with an additional 1 billion euros per annum). Furthermore, it is the first programme of its kind in which federal funds are not allocated according to the Königstein Key[3], but according to the social index.[4]

In view of the challenges facing education policy and the disparity in terms of what financial resources are at the disposal of each state government, the existing ban on cooperation should be replaced with a *mandate* for cooperation that would allow the federal government to be involved in education policy on a long-term basis. Moreover, all future allocation of federal funds should be permanently determined by a social index that is calculated according to need rather than the tax revenue of the individual Bundesländer.

3. Expand Provision of Early Childhood Education to Meet Demand

Even though a considerable effort has been made in this sector in recent years to raise the level of childcare for zero- to six-year-olds, especially in the old West German states — for example, via federal programmes including Zukunft Bildung und Betreuung (The Future of Education and Care, 2003–2009, which provided a total of 4 billion euros in funding), the Gute KiTa-Gesetz (Good Childcare Act, 2019–2022, with a total of 5.5 billion euros), or the KiTa-Qualitätsgesetz (Childcare Quality Act, 2023–2024 and 2025–2026, with 4 billion euros in funding in each respective period) — the demand for care is still not being met, especially in the early childhood age group (zero to three years). It is currently becoming clear that it will not be possible to honour the legal entitlement to full-day childcare, which is set to be gradually implemented from 2026. In addition to providing enough childcare places to meet demand, the primary objective should be ensuring the quality of full-day care, which also serves an educational function.

1 See https://www.bildungswende-jetzt.de/. **2** The "Digitalpakt I" was funded by the German Federal Government from 2019–2024 in the sum of 6.5 billion euros; the government allocated 100 million euros for the "Aufholen nach Corona" inititive (2021–2022), and a further 125 million euros for the "Schule macht stark" programme (2021–2030). **3** See https://www.gwk-bonn.de/themen/finanzierung-von-wissenschaft-und-forschung/koenigsteiner-schluessel. **4** See https://startchancen-programm.org/sozialindex/.

4. Establish One School for All

Despite the wealth of academic studies concerning the correlation between academic success, educational equity, and the duration of shared learning,[5] the Bundesländer continue to cling to the hierarchically organized system of school streaming. While the three-tier school system has now given way to a two-tier system in the majority of Bundesländer, the *Gymnasium* remains sacrosanct. One especially problematic element is the early segregation of children into different categories of schools, which in most cases begins when children reach the age of ten.

This system serves to continually reproduce and reinforce educational disparity and inequality. As such, its abolition is long overdue; the segregated school model should be replaced with One School for All, in which students from grade one to grade ten or 13 are able to learn together and are all given the opportunity to achieve the same qualifications. This school model has so far only been introduced in Berlin, where it has been met with enthusiasm and has been incredibly successful from the perspective of education policy.[6]

This school model also provides a full-day education programme in which interdisciplinary teams employ a *common* pedagogical concept in order to ensure a personalized learning experience for all students. At the same time, this model of school is an inclusive educational institution that enables students with disabilities to learn together with their non-disabled peers with the support of therapists, social workers, and psychologists, for example.

As this school model does not "sort" students into diverging education programmes after four or six years, this eliminates the need for grading, for repeating year levels, and for homework.

5. Ensure That the Sonderungsverbot (Segregation Ban) Is Consistently Implemented at Private Schools

Although the German Basic Law permits the establishment of private schools (and day-care centres) and allows these schools to charge attendance fees, this allowance is also coupled with a *Sonderungsverbot* (segregation ban), which is intended to prevent children from lower-income families from being denied access to these schools, which in many cases have a specific educational profile (such as denominational schools, or schools that employ progressive teaching methods). In practice, however, this legislation often goes unmonitored, and penalties are rarely imposed in the event of non-compliance (Helbig & Wrase 2017).

Therefore, the authorization of all privately funded schools must be subject to demonstrable compliance with the segregation ban and must also be subject to regular review. Authorization should be withdrawn in the event of non-compliance.

6. Update and Improve Teacher Training

In view of Germany's glaring and persistent teacher shortage, it is essential that the federal government assume a more prominent role in this area. In order to achieve this, an inter-state treaty should be signed at the KMK that would oblige each state to train at least enough teaching staff to fulfil its own requirements. This should be supplemented by a training initiative conducted by the federal government in order to allocate the necessary funds. Such demands have been made several times by a number of political parties and trade unions (for example, by Die Linke in Berlin in 2022, the Green Party in Brandenburg in 2023, and the Education and Science Workers Union, or GEW, in 2020) and academics (Rackles, 2022), but have yet to be met.

Furthermore, the structure of teacher training must be modified so that it is conducted at separate, dedicated faculties such as Schools of Education (Rackles, 2023) and places greater emphasis on acquiring skills specific to teacher training, such as methodology, didactics, and psychology, at the expense of those components that are specific to individual subjects. The two phases of teacher training (university degree programme and teacher placement) must also be better dovetailed and the drop-out rate significantly reduced.

7. Make Teaching a More Appealing Profession

Germany's strictly regulated school structures, the comparatively limited degree of autonomy enjoyed by German teachers compared to their peers in other countries, heavy workloads (Mußmann & Hardwig, 2022), and limited career opportunities all make teaching an increasingly unappealing profession, despite the higher-than-average remuneration. The glaring teacher shortage exacerbates the pressure on those teachers who are currently working in the German school system. The increasing degree of diversity among the student body also presents teachers with mounting challenges.

The appeal of the teaching profession can be boosted by granting teachers more autonomy in terms of how they organize and implement course content, by fostering cooperation between teachers, and, above all, by reducing each teacher's number of lessons. International comparisons indicate that allowing teachers to take on significantly fewer lessons (as is the case in Finland, for example) can lead to positive academic outcomes. Rather than constantly stepping up the requirements associated with digitalization, education for sustainable development, and inclusivity, we need to define exactly what the schools of the 21st century are expected to achieve and what is required beyond the provision of basic skills (reading, writing, arithmetic, foreign language acquisition, and science) in order to enable students to lead a self-determined life.

5 Senate Department for Education, Youth and Family (2016; 2019), most recently Wößmann et al. (2024). **6** "Zwei Berliner Gemeinschaftsschulen aus der Pilotphase erhalten den Deutschen Schulpreis 2024", Tagesspiegel, 2 October 2024.

In light of recent renewed declarations of an "education emergency", we have seen no shortage of sound concepts and strategies for restructuring the German education system. We must look beyond our own backyard at other countries' education systems and at specific tools (like better funding, more centralized structures, and more autonomy for schools and teachers) that can enable students to achieve higher degrees of competency in core areas and help eliminate educational inequity. The view beyond our current school system provides a wealth of incentives for developing an education system that reflects and corresponds to the values and principles of a democratic society — and is also a precondition for creating that society.

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