

Sustainable Education System

Sustainable Governance Indicators 2024



Indicator

Question

Policies Targeting Quality Education

To what extent do policies and regulations in the education system hinder or facilitate high-quality education and training?

30 OECD and EU countries are sorted according to their performance on a scale from 10 (best) to 1 (lowest). This scale is tied to four qualitative evaluation levels.

- 10-9 = Education policies are fully aligned with the goal of ensuring high-quality education and training.
- 8-6 = Education policies are largely aligned with the goal of ensuring high-quality education and training.
- 5-3 = Education policies are only somewhat aligned with the goal of ensuring high-quality education and training.
- 2-1 = Education policies are not at all aligned with the goal of ensuring high-quality education and training.

Canada

Score 10

Education quality in Canada is high. Education is largely a provincial matter (for instance, there is no federal department of education) but is well funded and of high quality by all international metrics.

The country boasts several world-class universities, and the overall quality of its institutions is exceptional.

Canadian teachers are well-paid by global standards. Canadian students score well above the OECD average in reading – fourth place among 77 countries – science, sixth place, and mathematics, 10th place. Research has emphasized how these strong results have come without the existence of a federal ministry of education.

Equity in access to education in Canada is impressive. A very high proportion of the population has some post-secondary education, thanks in part to the extensive development of community colleges. There are many educational second chances for Canadian youth. The high school completion rate is also high.

Socioeconomic background poses a much lower barrier to post-secondary education in Canada than in most other countries. Post-secondary education is also under the jurisdiction of the provinces.

Allocated resources are reasonable and generally used efficiently. The federal government contributes grant money to post-secondary students with financial need.

It also offers grants for education through a Registered Education Savings Plan if parents contribute. Furthermore, there are federal and provincial loans available programs.

Despite the strengths of the Canadian education system, a major challenge is the continuing gap in educational attainment between Indigenous and non-Indigenous populations.

Citation:

<https://www.cmec.ca/Publications/Lists/Publications/Attachments/64/Education-in-Canada2008.pdf>

Switzerland

Score 9

Switzerland's education system (see for an overview: SKBF 2023; Giudici and Emmenegger 2023) is strongly influenced by the country's federal and decentralized structure, as education policy falls under the jurisdiction of the cantons and municipalities. The system provides a high-quality education for a rich country that is dependent upon high-quality products in the industrial and services sectors. Given this dependence on education in a knowledge-based economy, education spending is relatively immune to short-term economic downturns. The university system performs very well, as is the case in many other small and open European countries. Vocational training is very solid and seems to be one of the most important factors in the low levels of unemployment, particularly among younger people. Two out of three young people undertake basic occupational training. The state plays an active role in orchestrating the vocational training system (Busemeyer et al. 2022, see in particular the section on Switzerland). The permeability of vocational and tertiary education has improved in comparison to other countries and is very high.

During the past 20 years, Switzerland experienced very strong growth in tertiary education. To a large extent, this has also been due to the strong growth of universities of applied sciences (Emmenegger et al. 2023). The number of students enrolled at the tertiary level (universities, universities of applied sciences, and professional education institutions) more than tripled between 1990/1991 and 2022/23. This is chiefly due to a growth of student numbers in colleges of education and universities of applied sciences, which have been institutionalized since the mid-1990s. Students with vocational training can acquire a diploma to enter these universities of applied sciences either during their training or through a special one-year course after they have finished their apprenticeship. For the educational year of 2022/23, 61% of all students in tertiary education attended universities, 30% attended universities of applied sciences and 9% attended professional education institutions. The share of female students in tertiary education increased from 39% in 1990 to 53% in 2022/23 (FSO 2023).

A strong growth of 21 percentage points occurred in the share of population with tertiary attainment between 2000 and 2022 – slightly above the average growth rate in 27 countries for which data are available (Indicator P9.4).

The vocational training system also offers considerable career prospects. Men with vocational training have similarly high employment rates throughout their working life as men with tertiary education. However, there is a significant difference in earnings. At the age of 50, the median annual earnings of a male academic are about CHF 125,000, in contrast to about CHF 80,000 for a male worker with vocational training. Average figures indicate that workers with vocational education earn about 60% of what a worker with a university degree earns (Korber and Oesch, 2016; BASS 2017). “(V)ocational education is associated with substantially lower earnings once workers enter their thirties, and this disadvantage is larger among women than men. While vocational degrees protect against unemployment, they come at the cost of flat earnings curves over the life course” (Korber and Oesch, 2019: 1).

Continuous monitoring of labor market demands, enabling the adaptation of education and training programs, is supported on the federal level by a specialized university of applied sciences (Swiss Federal University for Vocational Education and Training (<https://www.sfuvet.swiss/>)) and by a research project that explores how the Swiss Vocational and Professional Education and Training and comparable systems in other countries are governed (SERI 2023).

Universities and schools offer a range of opportunities for further education, such as certificates, diplomas and master’s of advanced studies, in addition to many other courses offered by firms or private organizations, ensuring that individuals have access to lifelong learning opportunities (www.berufsberatung.ch).

Educators, particularly at high schools and universities, are very well paid in international comparison, thereby facilitating the recruitment of highly skilled educators. For example, the maximum wage of a university professor is almost three times the median wage, and the average wage of a professor (all types of higher education) or a teacher at a high school is 1.5 times the median wage.

Education for sustainable development is integrated into the curricula of all school levels (Deutschschweizer Erziehungsdirektoren-Konferenz 2016).

Citation:

BASS (Büro für Arbeits- und Sozialpolitische Studien BASS AG). 2017. Analyse der Löhne von Frauen und Männern anhand der Lohnstrukturhebung 2014. Bern/Neuchâtel: Bass & Bundesamt für Statistik.

Busemeyer, Marius R., Martin B. Carstensen, and Patrick Emmenegger. 2022. “Orchestrators of Coordination: Toward a New Role of the State in Coordinated Capitalism?” *European Journal of Industrial Relations* 28(2): 231-250.

Deutschschweizer Erziehungsdirektoren-Konferenz. 2016. “Lehrplan 21.” <https://v-fe.lehrplan.ch/index.php>

Emmenegger, Patrick, Scherwin M. Bajka, and Cecilia Ivardi. 2023. “How Coordinated Capitalism Adapts to the Knowledge Economy: Different Upskilling Strategies in Germany and Switzerland.” *Swiss Political Science Review* 29(4): 355-378.

FSO (Federal Statistical Office, Bundesamt für Statistik). 2023. “Tertiärstufe – Hochschulen.” <https://www.bfs.admin.ch/bfs/de/home/statistiken/bildung-wissenschaft/personen-ausbildung/tertiaerstufe-hochschulen.html>

Giudici, Anja, and Patrick Emmenegger. 2023. “Education Policy.” In *The Oxford Handbook of Swiss Politics*, eds. Patrick Emmenegger, Flavia Fossati, Silja Häusermann, Yannis Papadopoulos, Pascal Sciarini, and Adrian Vatter. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 604–622. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780192871787.013.31>

Korber, Mailys, and Daniel Oesch. 2016. “Berufslehre bietet bessere Lohnaussichten für Männer.” *Die Volkswirtschaft*, November, 44–47.

Korber, Mailys, and Daniel Oesch. 2019. “Vocational versus General Education: Employment and Earnings over the Life Course in Switzerland.” *Advances in Life Course Research* 40: 1–13.

SERI (State Secretariat for Education, Research and Innovation; Staatssekretariat für Bildung, Forschung und Innovation). 2023. “Governance in Vocational and Professional Education and Training (GOVPET).” <https://www.sbfi.admin.ch/sbfi/de/home/bildung/berufsbildungssteuerung-und-politik/berufsbildungsforschung/leading-houses/govpet.html>

SKBF (Schweizerische Koordinationsstelle für Bildungsforschung). 2023. *Bildungsbericht Schweiz 2023*. Aarau: Schweizerische Koordinationsstelle für Bildungsforschung.

Austria

Score 8

The overall situation concerning access to high-quality education and training leaves much room for improvement; however, recent trends in this area have been promising. The percentage of people aged 25 – 34 with tertiary education has risen from 36% (men) and 41% (women) in 2015 to 39% (men) and 48% (women) in 2022. It is worth noting Austria had the highest share of short-cycle tertiary degrees as their highest attainment, which cannot be compared to “normal” tertiary programs. This points to some effects of the Bologna reform introduced at the end of the last millennium. In terms of formal years of schooling, Austria falls below European and North American averages (16.0 versus 16.7 years on average in Europe and North America; Statistik Austria 2022).

Those features must be contextualized to be fully understood: Notably, deviating significantly from the general European pattern, the earnings advantage for workers with a short-cycle tertiary degree is higher than for those with a bachelor’s or equivalent degree (OECD 2023: 97).

Regarding the share of people aged 16 to 74 who possess at least basic digital skills, Austria ranks above the European average according to recent Eurostat data for 2021, placing 8th out of 22 countries surveyed.

Furthermore, Austria’s dual vocational education system has been credited with helping graduates transition smoothly into the labor market and maintaining a low overall share of NEETs by European standards. The transition from vocational training to employment or further studies has been particularly seamless in Austria.

Austria has also stood out positively in other established parameters of high-quality education. Alongside just a few other European countries, Austria has made

extensive use of teachers' aides in schools, resulting in favorable ratios of children to contact staff compared to teaching staff. The latest PISA figures, published in late 2023, show that Austria has largely resisted the downturn trends observed across the OECD, despite a notably poorer score in mathematics compared to previous PISA assessments. Overall, the country has defended its above-average position within the OECD, ranking 13th out of 36 OECD countries in 2023.

Citation:

OECD. 2023. "Education at a Glance." <https://www.oecd.org/education/education-at-a-glance/>

https://www.oecd.org/media/oecdorg/satellitesites/berlincentre/pressethemen/AUSTRIA_Country-Note_PISA-2022.pdf

<https://www.derstandard.at/story/3000000198312/pisa-studie-starker-rueckgang-bei-mathe-resultaten-in-oesterreich>

Statistik Austria. 2022. "Bildung in Zahlen 2020/21." <https://www.statistik.at/fileadmin/publications/BiZ-2020-2021.pdf>

Czechia

Score 8

Government spending on education is largely determined by legal requirements and government commitments, especially regarding pay levels. While investment in education and training has increased overall, it remains low at the pre-primary and primary levels. Public spending on education rose from 4.5% of GDP in 2019 to 4.67% in 2020, still below the OECD average of 5%.

The pupil-to-teacher ratio was 12.3 in 2020 and 11.7 in 2021, but recruitment has been challenging due to issues related to pay and the profession's prestige. The average age of teachers is around 46 years. In primary schools, 40% of teachers are over 50 years old; in secondary schools, this figure is 52%.

Specific features of the Czech education system include a low proportion of individuals with tertiary qualifications, a high proportion with upper secondary qualifications, and relatively low participation in education for children aged 3 to 5. The latter reflects recent family policies that offer robust support for parents staying home with young children. High participation in full-time education up to age 18 was established before 1989. The low number of tertiary-qualified individuals is also largely a legacy of the past, resulting in a workforce that may be less adaptable. This situation was compatible with economic development that emphasized medium-skilled work in various branches of foreign manufacturing companies.

In December 2023, the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports (Ministerstvo školství, mládeže a tělovýchovy, MŠMT) presented the Long-term Plan for Education and Development of the Education System of the Czech Republic 2023 – 2027, a conceptual plan for modernizing education for the next four years. The plan envisions an innovation of the secondary education system based on a balanced share of general education and vocational fields, along with efforts to better link both to

systems supporting graduates' future careers. At the same time, the quality of practical teaching in vocational schools is to be improved by enhancing cooperation with employers by incorporating elements of the dual system.

Even with constraints on the state budget, some funding for investment and improvements will, at least for a time, be available from the NPO. This will support the construction of unspecified objects for prestigious universities in Prague and Brno. It is hoped that resources and running costs will be subsequently available, even as several universities struggle to make full use of their facilities. There will also be support for courses in higher education to promote digital competence and to remove children from institutional environments.

According to statistics from the European Commission, the Czech Republic ranked in 2021 among the countries with the lowest percentage of the adult population in continuous and long-term education, with only 5.8% of adults receiving regular monthly education. This figure is below the EU average of 10.8%. A call has been issued under the NPO for further professional education in digital competence, which will be administered by labor offices. The impact remains to be seen.

Denmark

Score 8

Education is generally tax-financed, and public educational expenditures as a share of GDP are among the highest in the OECD (OECD 2023). Study grants and borrowing facilities are some of the most generous in the OECD. While the educational level is high, there is increasing concern that too few students choose vocational training tracks relevant either to the private sector or to welfare jobs in the public sector.

There is an extensive training system that allows employees to update their education, and collective agreements generally ensure opportunities for lifelong learning.

The Danish educational system is currently undergoing a transition. A vast majority in parliament is concerned that too many young people are drawn to university programs. Consequently, a reform of university education has been passed. First, some master's programs will be shortened to durations of 1.25 years from two years. Second, the reform will tighten access to university education, with stricter admissions criteria. To ensure there is sufficient human capital with a university degree, an MA council has been created. The council is responsible for monitoring labor market demands and offering recommendations on the number of students needed in different fields. Additionally, the reform stipulates that the revenue saved from reduced university spending will be invested in crafts training, education for nurses and other education linked to the so-called welfare state professions (Ministry of Higher Education and Science 2023).

The reform is largely initiated in response to changes in the demographic composition of the Danish population.

Citation:

Ministry of Higher Education and Science. 2023. Reform af universitetsuddannelserne i Danmark. <https://ufm.dk/uddannelse/videregaende-uddannelse/temaer/forberedt-pa-fremtiden/reform-af-universitetsuddannelserne-i-danmark>

OECD. 2023. Education at a Glance 2023: OECD Indicators. Paris: OECD Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.1787/e13bef63-en>

Estonia

Score 8

Estonians have traditionally placed a high value on education, as evidenced by high educational outcomes in venues such as OECD PISA test results, as well as the relatively high level of public expenditure in the education sector. System strengths include a small number of low achievers and a low level of educational inequality. This is seen in both the minimal effect of family background on educational performance and the negligible variance in performance and background between schools.

Estonia emphasizes comprehensive schooling and inclusive education in its predominantly public education system, ensuring adequate provision and financial resources. This approach results in high enrollment rates at all levels of the education system. Various social support measures are in place for students, such as free school lunches and school bus transportation.

During the pandemic-era school closures, which were as common in Estonia as in other countries on average (OECD 2023), the country's relatively high level of digital literacy and existing IT infrastructure enabled a swift transition to online education. Although educational outcomes declined compared to the pre-COVID-19 period, the drop was small by international standards (ibid.).

National development strategies have long prioritized policy measures to strengthen links between education, training and the labor market, ensuring that the provision of education keeps pace with the changing needs of the economy. However, ethnic, gender and skill gaps in lifelong learning persist (HTM 2022), and the vocational route within the education system continues to suffer from a poor image, often making it the educational choice for the most disadvantaged (Haugas et al. 2023). Recent developments include the establishment of the OsKuS comprehensive skills and professional qualifications system, the expansion of work-based learning (e.g., World Skills), the integration of academic and vocational tracks, and the launch of micro-credentials.

Estonian schools have a long history of integrating sustainable development into their daily teaching and curriculum. However, according to a recent study (Schulz et

al. 2023), while Estonian students are increasingly concerned about the climate crisis, their perceptions and behaviors still on average lag behind those of counterparts in mature welfare democracies. Moreover, existing educational gaps – ethnic, gender and socioeconomic – are reflected in gaps in sustainability awareness.

Citation:

Haridus – ja Teadusministeerium. 2022. Haridus-ja Teadusministeeriumi tulemusvaldkonna „Tark ja tegus rahvas” 2021. aasta tulemusaruanne. Tartu: HTM.

Haugas, S., Pöder, K., and Lauri, T. 2023. Ühtekuuluvuspoliitika fondide rakenduskava 2014–2020 prioriteetse suuna „Ühiskonna vajadustele vastav haridus ja hea ettevalmistus osalemaks tööturul” tulemuslikkuse ja mõju hindamine. Praxis 2023. <https://www.praxis.ee/tood/ukphindamine/>

National Audit Office. 2022. “The Reorganisation of the Upper Secondary School Network Needs Clear Criteria.” <https://www.riigikontroll.ee/Kontaktid/T%C3%B6%C3%B6tajad/T%C3%B6%C3%B6taja/tabid/215/Audit/2549/WorkId/12/language/et-EE/Default.aspx>

OECD. 2023. PISA 2022 Results (Volume II): Learning During – and From – Disruption. Paris: OECD Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.1787/a97db61c-en>

Schulz, W., Fraillon, J., Losito, B., Agrusti, G., Ainley, J., Damiani, V., and Friedman, T. 2023. IEA.

International Civic and Citizenship Education Study. 2022. ICCS 2022 International Report. Amsterdam: IEA.

Finland

Score 8

Governance of the education system in Finland is shared between central and local authorities. The Finnish government defines and sets educational priorities. Meanwhile, municipalities maintain and support schools and daycare centers and have significant responsibility for organizing education, defining educational curricula, funding and hiring personnel. The policies and regulations ensure the provision of necessary financial and human resources, even during times of economic crisis or government transitions. The provision of education services has become an even more important task for the municipalities after they lost the mandate to provide health and social care services beginning in 2023.

The Finnish higher education system is centralized. It consists of 13 universities and 22 universities of applied sciences (UAS) that operate under the aegis of the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture.

The policies and regulations in the education system, by and large, facilitate high-quality education and training.

A national Education and Research Development Plan outlines education policy priorities every four years and guides the government in preparing and implementing education policies. Social and political consensus on the value of education has provided stability for the structure and key features of the education system. Decisions in schools are made either by the local government or the school, depending on how decision-making is organized in the municipality.

Centered on the principle of lifelong learning, education policy in Finland promotes and maintains high educational standards. Teachers are well-trained, and teaching is still considered an attractive profession. In comparison with most other countries, teachers in Finland enjoy a high level of autonomy and are not formally evaluated,

and there are very few national tests for students. This facilitates the recruitment of highly skilled educators.

In recent years, the integration of pupils with special needs into regular classes, an increase in bureaucratic burdens due to reporting requirements, and overall cuts in education budgets have led to more dissatisfaction and exhaustion among teachers at the primary and secondary levels. Likewise, a persistent lack of personnel resources in early education in some regions – such as the capital area – endangers the quality of early education.

By and large, Finland's education system has proved successful and, in recent years, even ranked at the top of the OECD's Program for International Student Assessment (PISA). However, while Finland remains among the top performers, the country's ranking appears to be slipping as gender and regional disparities in student performance grow significantly.

The Education and Research Development Plan, revised every four years by the government, directs the implementation of education and research policy goals as stated in the government program. The plan ensures the continuous monitoring of labor market demands, enabling the adaptation of education and training programs – with different effects in different regions – to provide relevant hands-on skills.

Finland's expenditure on educational institutions as a percentage of GDP (for all education levels combined) is above the OECD average, and the country has one of the highest shares of public funding among OECD countries (OECD 2015). The government's education policy facilitates learning for everyone and allocates resources effectively across different levels of education (e.g., preschool, primary, secondary and tertiary). In Finland, students complete nine years of basic education (comprehensive school), with the system focusing on equity and preventing low achievement. At the upper-secondary level, students can choose between general education and vocational education and training options, either of which can lead to tertiary education.

Compulsory education has recently been extended to encompass the ages from six to 18, from the previous range of ages seven to 16. Attainment rates in upper-secondary and tertiary education exceed the OECD average, and Finland boasts one of the OECD's highest enrollment rates in upper-secondary vocational education and training (VET) programs. School dropout rates in Finland are lower than in other EU member states, but rates among people with an immigrant background exceed the national average. The absence of tuition fees, coupled with universal access to study grants (which cover living and housing costs) and student loans, ensures equitable access to education. However, children of parents who themselves attended higher education institutions and have above-average incomes are still more likely to pursue university studies.

Adults (16- to 65-year-olds) in Finland were among the most skilled of any such group in any participating country in the Survey of Adult Skills, with younger adults (16- to 24-year-olds) scoring higher than all adults in Finland and young adults in other countries. It is fair to say that these individuals have access to lifelong learning opportunities.

Education for sustainable development is well integrated into the curricula of all school levels.

Citation:

OECD. 2015. Education Policy Outlook 2015: Making Reforms Happen. OECD Publishing. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264225442-en>

Germany

Score 8

In Germany, education is widely acknowledged as a public good. Article 7, Paragraph 1 of the Basic Law states that the government holds primary responsibility for education, which is predominantly funded by taxpayers. The inherent public interest in education places an obligation on the state to ensure the effectiveness of the educational system (Hepp, 2013). More specifically, education in Germany is regulated at the state level. Consequently, individual states have their own school acts (Schulgesetze) and thus different policies and regulations.

As described, the financial resources for education are predominantly provided by the government. For public school systems, municipalities and states share responsibilities for finances. Generally, states finance the teaching personnel while municipalities usually provide resources for material costs. Because the finances are not regulated at the federal level, differences across municipalities and states can be observed regarding schools' financial resources (Schrooten, 2021). For instance, in 2021, spending per student in Berlin was around €13,300, while it was €8,200 in Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania. However, spending cannot be compared directly, as schools in different states differ in factors such as structure and educational offerings (Destatis, 2023a).

Since the Basic Law outlines the government's responsibility for providing education, resources must be available even in times of economic crisis or government transition. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the system struggled with schools' digital backwardness regarding equipment and teacher training. Nevertheless, federal and state governments reacted quickly by providing additional crisis programs and digital investment budgets. Generally, the budget ranges from approximately 6 to 7% of GDP, with 7% for 2021 and 7.1% for 2020 (Destatis, 2023b).

Concerning human resources, in 2021, Germany had a ratio of pupils and students to teachers and academic staff of 14.8 for primary schools and 12.1 for upper-secondary schools. Both ratios are above the EU average (Eurostat, 2023).

To provide highly skilled educators, teachers undergo a multi-stage training process that includes a university program and preparatory training, known as the Referendariat. The specifics of university education for aspiring teachers vary among the states. In Bavaria, Hesse, Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania, and Saxony, students graduate with a state examination (Staatsexamen), whereas in other states, students earn a bachelor's and master's degree.

Although the framework is designed to facilitate the recruitment of highly skilled educators, Germany faces a considerable teacher shortage, particularly in STEM subjects. An improvement in the situation is unlikely, especially since the number of students enrolling in teaching programs has declined. Even with a 100% graduation rate, it is insufficient to address the teacher shortage. Additionally, there is criticism that the current education system does not adequately prepare educators for digitalization or the challenges arising from increased heterogeneity in schools (Stiferverband, 2023).

As of 2004, Germany has national educational standards implemented by the federal states and introduced into core curricula, forming the basis for consistent skill development for all students from primary school to the end of the upper-secondary level. Each state has its own core curriculum, developed by the individual state's departments of education and cultural affairs (e.g., Hessisches Kultusministerium, n.d.). However, it is unclear to what extent these curricula are adapted to labor market demands.

The provision of training programs and education with relevant hands-on skills occurs through vocational training under the dual system. This system is referred to as “dual” since training takes place at two learning locations: in the company and at vocational school (Kultusministerkonferenz, n.d.). Besides the option of vocational training under the dual system, several companies also offer dual study programs. Vocational training and these study programs, due to the dual involvement of both the public and private sectors, are highly responsive to the changing skill needs of the labor market.

With regard to lifelong learning, adults in Germany participated in non-formal learning for an average of 4.24 hours per week before the COVID-19 pandemic and 3.23 hours per week during the pandemic lockdowns. This is slightly less than the OECD average of 4.54 hours (pre-COVID) and 3.42 hours (during lockdowns). Additionally, 45% of adults in Germany choose not to participate in available education and training opportunities, compared to the OECD average of 50%.

According to the OECD Skills Outlook for 2021, fundamental skills – specifically reading competence in this study – increased by 25 points from age 15 to 27, compared to an OECD average increase of 13 points (OECD, 2021).

Sustainable development is included in most German school curricula. However, current surveys indicate that the sustainability dimension is not yet systematically integrated into school teaching and remains a secondary concern (Deutsches Schulportal, 2024).

Citation:

Destatis. 2023. "Ausgaben für öffentliche Schulen 2021 bei 9 200 Euro je Schülerin und Schüler." https://www.destatis.de/DE/Presse/Pressemitteilungen/2023/03/PD23_082_217.html

Destatis. 2023. "Budget für Bildung, Forschung und Wissenschaft nach Bereichen." <https://www.destatis.de/DE/Themen/Gesellschaft-Umwelt/Bildung-Forschung-Kultur/Bildungsfinanzen-Ausbildungsfoerderung/Tabellen/budget.html>

Deutsches Schulportal. 2024. "Bildung für nachhaltige Entwicklung (BNE) an Schulen – Umsetzung oft halbherzig." <https://deutsches-schulportal.de/unterricht/bildung-fuer-nachhaltige-entwicklung-bne-an-schulen-wie-gelingt-das/>

Eurostat. 2023. "Ratio of pupils and students to teachers and academic staff by education level and programme orientation."

https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/educ_uoe_perp04__custom_8840090/default/table?lang=en

Hepp, G. 2013. "Wie der Staat das Bildungswesen prägt." <https://www.bpb.de/themen/bildung/dossier-bildung/145238/wie-der-staat-das-bildungswesen-praegt/>

Hessisches Kultusministerium. n.d. "Curriculare Vorgaben, Kerncurricula." <https://kultusministerium.hessen.de/unterricht/kerncurricula-und-lehrplaene/kerncurricula>

Kultusministerkonferenz. n.d. "Berufliche Ausbildung im Dualen System – ein international beachtetes Modell." <https://www.kmk.org/themen/berufliche-schulen/duale-berufsausbildung.html>

OECD. 2021. OECD Skills Outlook 2021. <https://www.oecd.org/germany/Skills-Outlook-Germany-DE.pdf>

Schrooten, M. 2021. "Bildungsfinanzierung – Fokus Schule." <https://www.gew.de/index.php?eID=dumpFile&t=f&f=106614&token=9a86a96ee9ecf90cc43c30a1e6a328e20ca5d813&sdownload=&n=2021-05-Bildungsfinanzierung-Fokus-Schule.pdf>

Stifterverband. 2023. "Empfehlungen an Bund und Länder für die Lehrkräftebildung." https://www.stifterverband.org/sites/default/files/lehrkraeftebildung_empfehlungen_an_bund_und_laender.pdf

Japan

Score 8

Japan boasts a high-quality education system. In particular, primary education in Japan is considered among the best in the world. Japanese pupils are top performers in mathematics and science, as well as among the best in reading among all OECD countries. For cultural reasons, teachers enjoy high esteem in Japan. Despite the quality of education in public schools, however, many students attend private so-called cram schools to better prepare for entrance examinations to high schools or universities. The performance of Japanese students often comes at the cost of the "exam race," anxiety about attending school or bullying.

In 2021, Japan spent 3.3% of GDP on education, which was not high compared to other OECD countries. However, due to the problem of an aging population, expenditure per student on educational institutions has remained above the OECD average. It is concerning that teachers' salaries in real terms decreased by 2% between 2015 and 2022. If this trend continues, it may detrimentally influence the quality of teaching.

The curriculum guidelines are revised every 10 years by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT), which also authorizes textbooks of private publishers for use in schools. The 2017 guidelines put greater emphasis on

interactive and experiential learning, communication in foreign languages, and competencies necessary to live independently in a rapidly changing society. While current curriculum guidelines do not specifically refer to the SDGs, they emphasize the importance of building a sustainable society.

The Open University of Japan, heavily subsidized by the government, was established in 1983 to offer distance learning courses. The concept of lifelong learning was introduced to Article 3 of the revised Basic Act on Education in 2006. Lifelong learning is supervised by the Lifelong Learning Promotion Division in the MEXT Education Policy Bureau. In line with SDG goal four, the Third Basic Plan for the Promotion of Education from 2018 emphasized lifelong learning by promoting school-community partnerships, creating a scholarship loan system to support re-learning, and enhancing education opportunities for the elderly and people with disabilities.

Key challenges facing Japan's education system include teaching the flexible skills needed to succeed in a globalizing world, and improving the connection between tertiary education and labor market, which currently relies on the massive, annual recruitment of recent graduates. In addition, adult learning and reskilling in Japan is not as common as in comparable countries.

Citation:

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Norway

Score 8

Education at all levels, up to Ph.D. studies at universities, is tax-financed and free in Norway. A state program of student loans and scholarships has existed since 1948. Combined with a generous, decentralized supply of educational institutions, this makes the Norwegian population among the most well-educated in the world.

“Education for all” is a cornerstone of the Norwegian welfare state and an economic necessity for a small population to thrive in an advanced industrial society. Private schools and universities exist but are legally and financially integrated into the national system.

The needs for new and upgraded skills in the economy are regularly monitored, and there are strong incentives for colleges and universities to adapt to the skills required in the private sector and public services. Individual rights to education are limited to the 13-year-long basic education and a subsequent guarantee of work-related activity or adapted further training. While there are no legal rights to lifelong learning, most large enterprises have programs for continuously upgrading their workforce’s skills.

The quality of higher education institutions has been regularly monitored by the independent Norwegian Agency for Quality Assurance in Education (NOKUT) since 2003. The latest White Paper on the education system, the “Utsynsmeldingen” from 2023, sets out four targets: ensuring competences for a productive and competitive economy, supporting the green transition, maintaining good welfare services throughout the country, and reducing exclusion from the workforce. These targets align comfortably with traditional national goals for the educational sector in Norway.

Citation:

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Sweden

Score 8

Education has consistently been a political priority, with each government promising reform to address ongoing issues of poor student performance. The current administration asserts that schools and the education system must return to basics, emphasizing facts and skills such as writing and arithmetic (Regeringskansliet, 2023).

Even though education is a prioritized policy area, Sweden’s expenditure on public education was slightly lower than the OECD average in 2020. Despite efforts to improve the education system, Sweden was ranked 14th in the PISA results from 2022, which is lower than the 11th place achieved in 2018 (PISA, 2024). In 2022, Sweden’s performance in math and reading comprehension decreased to the same

level as in 2012, marking Sweden's lowest scores in these categories. The results in natural sciences remained unchanged from 2018. However, Sweden's average score of 4.49 is above the OECD average of 4.43 (Skolverket, 2023a).

Learning about sustainable development is integrated into the curriculum and is one of the learning objectives for Swedish elementary schools (Skolverket 2023c; Skolverket 2023d). In 2019, the government voted to implement sustainable development as a mandatory subject in schools (Motion 2019/20:1110). During 2022, the Schools Inspectorate reviewed the quality of elementary schools' work in mainstreaming sustainable development in all subjects. The inspection showed that teaching on sustainable development issues could be improved in 27 of the 30 examined schools. Few schools reach high quality in their work (Skolinspektionen 2023).

Labor market policy in Sweden is regulated by the Act (SFS 2000, 625) on Labor Market Policy Initiatives. The initiatives consist of programs and activities designed to strengthen individual opportunities for obtaining or retaining employment. These regulations apply nationally and thus cover all regions. However, different circumstances apply to residents of support regions 1 and 2 seeking assistance to start a business. Support regions, or De-SO regions, denote areas eligible for special business support. De-SO areas are demographic statistical zones divided into three groups: Area A covers larger populations or urban areas, Area B consists mostly of larger populated areas outside the main city of a municipality, and Area C primarily comprises areas located within the main city of a municipality. Support regions 1 and 2 encompass De-SO municipalities in northern or central Sweden, with support region 2 also covering five municipalities in the county of Västra Götaland in southwestern Sweden. In these areas, individuals do not need to be unemployed or at risk of unemployment to qualify for support. The programs offer assistance to job seekers and employers and provide initiatives for individuals with disabilities that may affect their ability to work. Additionally, the programs aim to ensure job seekers are trained in areas in demand by the labor market to prevent labor shortages. The Swedish Public Employment Service (arbetsförmedlingen) is generally responsible for these initiatives and annually publishes a report on the labor market policy initiatives and programs (Arbetsförmedlingen, 2022).

Lifelong learning opportunities are a prioritized policy area, and the Higher Education Act (högskolelagen) (1992:1434) regulates that university organizations should encourage lifelong learning.

The government has assigned Sweden's universities to analyze their courses as part of implementing new retraining support (Utbildningsdepartementet, 2022). The retraining support is directed to individuals between the ages of 27 and 62 who have worked for at least eight of the last 14 years. The support applies to the same forms of education as ordinary student financing but is geared toward strengthening individuals' roles in the labor market (CSN, 2023). According to recent EU data,

Sweden is “the top performer” in the EU, with more than a third of adults participating in lifelong learning schemes in 2021 (Eurostat 2023).

Citation:

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United Kingdom

Score 8

Education is a devolved competence in the United Kingdom, meaning it is the responsibility of the individual nations – England, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland. This decentralization long predates the recent devolution of power that established the devolved national administrations. For example, Scotland has always had its own school curriculum, exam system, and undergraduate university degree structure, which differ significantly from those in England. Additionally, Scotland and Wales have a higher proportion of comprehensive (nonselective) schools. Consequently, it makes little sense to talk in terms of UK education policy and

performance. The Department for Education (DfE) in the UK government oversees education in England, which encompasses 84% of the UK population. In Scotland, Education Scotland, a delegated agency of the Scottish government, is responsible for delivering education. Northern Ireland has a similar agency, though local authorities play a primary role in implementation.

Although there is private provision (confusingly known as public schools), it covers only 7% of pupils. The education system in England underwent numerous reforms in the 2010s, resulting in improvements in PISA scores. In contrast, Scotland's education system, traditionally a source of pride compared to England, has seen a decline, leading to political criticism of the Scottish National Party government.

In England, there is a statutory limit on class sizes of 30, and the latest data (for 2023) show actual class sizes have been stable at 26.7, with a slight increase in total enrollment in the last year. Nearly a quarter of pupils were eligible for free school meals, a means-tested benefit. The latest report on education in England from the Institute for Fiscal Studies observes that spending has “fallen as a share of national income, from about 5.6% of national income in 2010–11 down to about 4.4% in 2022–23. This is about the same share of national income as in the early 2000s, mid-1980s, and late 1960s. There has been no long-run increase in the share of national income devoted to public spending on education, despite large rises in education participation over the long run.” The start of the 2023–24 school year highlighted under-investment in schools, particularly with the failure to address buildings using reinforced autoclaved aerated concrete (RAAC). This led to closures and the use of temporary facilities, raising concerns about the impact on pupils' prospects.

Significant changes have been made to boost early years education in England, with a commitment that from September 2025, families will be entitled to funding for 30 hours per week for children aged nine months or older. Devolved governments maintain similar or higher commitments. However, further education has seen mixed results. Funding was cut during the 2010s, but increased spending became a priority for the Sunak government, partly in response to concerns that too many students were pursuing university courses with limited labor market relevance and a high dropout rate. The renewed rise in NEETs (people aged 15–24 neither in education nor employment or training) is also worrying.

Shortcomings in adult education are being addressed, with varying approaches among the UK nations. A warning was issued by AONTAS, the National Adult Learning Organisation, about a persistent decline in adult education. In response to the independent Augar review conducted in 2018, England introduced the Lifelong Learning Entitlement, aiming to create “a single funding system to help people pay for college or university courses, and train, retrain, and upskill flexibly over their working lives.” It is due to become operational in 2025. Scotland launched an Adult Learning Strategy for 2022–27 to ensure accessible lifelong learning opportunities. Wales passed the Tertiary Education and Research (Wales) Act, establishing the Commission for Tertiary Education and Research, a new Welsh government-

sponsored body due to become operational in April 2024 that has a mandate to integrate tertiary education and lifelong learning functions.

A December 2023 policy paper for England, “Sustainability and Climate Change: A Strategy for the Education and Children’s Services Systems,” focuses on maintaining education standards and resilience while respecting sustainability objectives. It aims to provide students with “opportunities to develop a broad knowledge and understanding of the importance of nature, sustainability, and the causes and impact of climate change, and to translate this knowledge into positive action and solutions.”

UK universities continue to be highly regarded, with prestigious institutions like Cambridge, Oxford, and Imperial College London featuring in top global rankings. However, there are concerns about the financial stability of less well-regarded universities, partly because tuition fees have been capped for a decade, resulting in real-term cuts. University tuition remains free in Scotland, though not for students from other parts of the UK. UK universities can charge higher fees to foreign students, incentivizing them to prefer international over domestic students.

Citation:

<https://ifs.org.uk/publications/annual-report-education-spending-england-2023>

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-67781489>

Belgium

Score 7

Almost all educational institutions in Belgium are entirely or primarily state-funded. The funding is managed at the community level (Dutch, French, and German), ensuring steady financial support across business and political cycles. Teachers and professors typically enjoy civil servant status, contributing to job security. The education system is effective in quantitative terms, with Belgium’s educational achievements consistently above the EU average in primary, secondary, and tertiary education. However, qualitative measures, such as the OECD’s PISA scores, indicate a continuous decline in performance. Flanders, initially performing better than the French-speaking education system, is also experiencing a faster decline.

Mainly in the French-speaking community, and to a lesser extent in Flanders, the civil servant status of primary and secondary school teachers results in a mix of highly motivated and underperforming teachers, leading to high absenteeism and underwhelming teaching performance despite substantial financial resources.

Tertiary education is organized in a much more competitive fashion and maintains rather high-powered incentives. However, this is accompanied by chronic underfunding, which results in falling teacher-to-student ratios, overcrowded classrooms. Despite these challenges, Belgium’s universities perform well according to most international indices.

Professionals are invited to engage in lifelong learning, but the tax-and-subsidy system does not sufficiently promote it. As a consequence, according to Eurostat, in 2022, about 10% of the relevant population reported having engaged in lifelong learning over the “last 4 weeks,” which is slightly below the EU average (11.9%), but much below neighboring Netherlands (26.4%), or Denmark (27.9%) and Sweden (36.2%).

While wages and working conditions make it difficult to attract highly skilled educators, Belgium still fares well compared to other EU countries. Since 2019, sustainability has been integrated into the education program from primary school onwards.

Citation:

<https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/en/web/products-eurostat-news/w/edn-20230130-1>

https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/TRNG_LFSE_01__custom_4665066/bookmark/table?lang=en&bookmarkId=d88f7aa3-5cfa-4bfa-a913-3e92a647ee06

France

Score 7

France’s education system is rather successful. Public expenditure on education amounted to 5.2% of GDP in 2022, slightly above the OECD average. Over the past 20 years, the share of university graduates among 25- to 34-year-olds has increased from 31% to 50%. Tertiary education very substantially increases employment opportunities; the employment rate reaches 86% for those with tertiary attainment, compared to 53% for those who did not finish secondary school, and 74% for those who did, but went no farther. Tertiary education also influences wages very substantially; wages among those with a tertiary qualification are on average 55% higher than among those with only a secondary degree.

Conversely, this means students with attainment levels below an upper secondary qualification are particularly disadvantaged in the French labor market. The public school system is not well aligned with labor market demands. Especially for young people with lower education attainment levels, it is particularly difficult to integrate into the labor market. While combined school and work-based learning programs (dual training) have become more common in recent years thanks to incentives provided by the Macron administration, they are still not sufficient. The traditionally high rate of youth unemployment in France is linked to this problem.

In the last PISA study (2022), French students overall performed slightly below the OECD average (but slightly above in the reading category). France ranks among the lower-performing countries (21st out of 30). Like most OECD countries, it experienced a decrease in performance over the 2018 – 2022 period, mostly as a result of the pandemic. Moreover, France is one of the countries in which performance most closely correlates to socioeconomic status, although the pandemic does not appear to have strengthened this link.

Higher education is dual, with a broad range of excellent elite institutions – prestigious lycées and grandes écoles – and a large mass university system, which is poorly funded and poorly managed and does not prepare its students well for successful entry into the labor market. Spending on universities is below the OECD average. More importantly, dropout rates are dramatic: Only 40% of initially registered students ultimately obtain a university degree.

Another worrying element concerns the growing share of private education, which currently accounts for about 17.6% of French students between the primary and high school levels. Recently, repeated teacher absences, especially in public secondary schools, have been a focus of public complaints. Average teacher salaries are below the OECD average, and pay increases have been slow to arrive.

While a number of reforms have been ongoing, they have created some degree of instability. For instance, a secondary reform temporarily offered students the possibility of opting out of math instruction for the last two years of high school. This has now been reversed, but illustrates a certain lack of direction and unclear general strategy.

Salary increases for teachers are slow at the start of their careers. After acquiring 10 or 15 years' experience, the statutory salary earned by primary school teachers and secondary school teachers was at least 15% lower than the average salary (2021 – 2022 school year).

Education with a focus on sustainable development has become a cross-subject pedagogical goal. Specific activities have included a competition between schools to save energy, gardening projects on school premises and a labeling project (E3D) that denotes institutions that have enacted a global sustainable development strategy.

Citation:

Ministère de l'Éducation. "Éducation au développement durable." <https://www.education.gouv.fr/l-education-au-developpement-durable-7136>

OECD. 2023. Education at a Glance: France.

Ireland

Score 7

Education policies and regulations in Ireland largely ensure the provision of necessary financial and human resources, including during crises and transitions, but require further investment (TUI 2023). There is less effective and timely monitoring of labor market demands and insufficient adaptation of education and training programs to provide relevant hands-on skills (see labor market section). Additionally, access to lifelong learning opportunities is inadequate, though there has been a shift in 2023 to support part-time education. There are significant skills shortages at the primary and secondary levels in specific STEM and language

subjects, prompting strategies to recruit Irish returnees and other teachers from abroad. Education for sustainable development is integrated into primary and secondary curricula, with a new Leaving Certificate subject launched in 2023, but it is not prevalent in most third-level courses despite campaigns for such education.

Class sizes tend to be large, and the education system is somewhat biased toward lower-cost areas, such as liberal arts, law and business studies, rather than higher-cost areas, such as engineering and science. PISA evidence indicates that the Irish education system is above average by OECD and Western European standards. The most frequently voiced concerns relate to levels of mathematical skills (not reflected in outcome data), lack of proficiency in foreign languages, and an overemphasis on the Irish language (and religion) in the primary curriculum. Reform of the Leaving Certificate, the final high school exams coordinated nationally, has been slow to shift to continuous assessment, partly due to resistance from teachers' unions and, to some extent, parents.

Citation:

White, J. 2023. "Education budget fails to address 'big issues', say teachers unions." Irish Examiner, October 10. <https://www.irishexaminer.com/news/spotlight/arid-41245153.html>

McCoy, S. 2022. "Inequalities in Educational Outcomes: Insights from the Latest Research." National Association of Principals and Deputy Principals. <https://www.esri.ie/publications/inequalities-in-educational-outcomes-insights-from-the-latest-research>

Latvia

Score 7

Latvia's 15-year-olds perform above the OECD average in math and science and are close to average in reading. Comparing Latvia's progress from 2018 to 2022, results improved in science but declined in math and reading.

The education system exhibits diverse enrollment patterns. Among 15- to 19-year-olds, 35% attend general upper secondary education, and 24% pursue vocational upper secondary education. Additionally, 24% are in lower secondary programs, with 7% in tertiary programs. Furthermore, among OECD and partner countries, Latvia boasts one of the highest shares of women graduates from tertiary programs. In 2021, 65.7% of graduates were women, ranking Latvia first out of 34 countries. These figures differ from the OECD average. Regarding vocational education and training (VET) qualifications among 25- to 34-year-olds, 29% in Latvia hold VET qualifications. Notably, 11% have not attained an upper secondary qualification, which is lower than the OECD average.

Earnings in Latvia are influenced by educational attainment. Workers aged 25 – 34 with vocational or post-secondary qualifications earn 16% more than those without upper secondary attainment. Conversely, those with general upper secondary or higher education enjoy even greater earning advantages.

In 2023, significant developments have taken place in Latvia's education system. A new curriculum in Latvian has been introduced for educators in collaboration with

the Latvian Language Teachers Association. The primary goal is to enhance Latvian language proficiency, especially in primary and secondary education. Moreover, revisions have been implemented in the design and technology curriculum, incorporating teaching content from Oxford University and focusing on providing educators with the necessary support.

The sports and health education curriculum is expanding and places considerable emphasis on motivating students to engage in physical activities and adopt a healthy lifestyle. Collaboration with various organizations and partners is pivotal in achieving this goal. Ensuring the availability of teaching materials is a top priority, encompassing guidelines for teachers, accessible resources, and thorough evaluation of teaching materials, particularly in the subjects of Latvian language and mathematics.

Looking ahead to the 2024 – 2025 school year, a new assessment approach will be introduced, addressing issues identified during the 2022 – 2023 examination session. Effective collaboration among school directors, educators, and municipal education specialists is essential for successful implementation. Furthermore, plans are underway to introduce a new monitoring test in natural sciences for 11th graders, with the potential for expansion to other subjects shortly. These initiatives reflect Latvia's commitment to improving its education system.

For the 2023 – 2024 school year, the percentage threshold for passing the national examinations at primary and general education levels has been increased. To be certified as passing the test, a pupil must achieve at least 15% of the maximum mark in the 2023 – 2024 school year and 20% in the 2024 – 2025 school year.

Beginning January 1, 2024, the minimum monthly salary for teachers will increase by 12.2%, rising from €1,224 to €1,374 for a 36-hour workweek. Additionally, preschool teachers will see a 23.1% increase in their minimum monthly salary, from €1,240 to €1,526 for a 40-hour workweek.

Education is a key priority in the 2024 budget. An additional €119.5 million will be allocated for education measures, including a significant salary increase for the lowest-paid teachers. Extra funds are also designated for higher education, science, and the transition to teaching in the national language.

Citation:

OECD. 2023. "PISA 2022 Results: Country Notes – Latvia." <https://www.oecd.org/publication/pisa-2022-results/country-notes/latvia-f58bca29#chapter-d1e11>

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Lithuania

Score 7

Education policies in Lithuania are largely aligned with the goal of ensuring high-quality education and training. The country boasts a very high and increasing level of tertiary attainment, surpassing the OECD average (46.50% of the population compared to the OECD average of 41.90% in 2022) (OECD 2023). The rate of early school leaving was 4.8% in 2022, which is significantly below the OECD average of 8.09% (OECD 2023).

However, enrollment rates in vocational education and training programs remain low. The reputation of vocational education and training in Lithuania could be improved, as could the rate of adult participation in lifelong learning programs. Additionally, Lithuania needs to enhance the quality of its education programs. According to the most recent PISA report, released in 2022, Lithuanian students continue to score below the OECD average in reading, mathematics and science. Furthermore, there has been little change in these achievements over an extended period of time (since 2006).

A 2017 OECD report on education in Lithuania stated that the country's schools and higher-education institutions would benefit by clarifying and raising performance expectations, aligning resources to support those raised expectations, strengthening performance monitoring and quality assurance procedures, and building institutional capacity. Furthermore, the report advised addressing mismatches between graduates' skills and labor market needs. In a staff working document, the European Commission recommended improving quality and efficiency at all levels of education and training, including adult education. Many of these points have been addressed by the country's authorities, as discussed below.

The coalition government formed in late 2020 clearly indicated in its program that improving access to quality education was its top priority. This objective featured at the beginning of the government's program, accompanied by a list of priority projects and success indicators to be achieved by 2024 – the end of the government's term – and 2030.

In an effort to enhance the quality of education at all levels, the government included a series of priority projects in its program. It began by focusing on early childhood education, emphasizing teacher education, educational flexibility and the early identification of talented students. Additionally, the government introduced performance monitoring in order to address emerging problems promptly and work toward improving early education standards.

At the secondary education level, the government committed to establishing adequate quality standards in the country's schools by restructuring the school

network. This restructuring was intended to concentrate resources, thereby improving the quality of teaching.

The government's flagship project, launched in 2022, became known as the "Millennium schools." These schools are designed to have modern infrastructure and emphasize state-of-the-art learning approaches such as leadership and informal education. By 2025, the plan is to have 150 such schools able to set a good example for others. Private schools and schools that select students by competition are not eligible.

The National Recovery and Resilience Plan – financed by the Next Generation EU economic recovery fund – includes reform measures in education, such as digitalization and improvements in educational performance. The use of EU funding, which extends to 2026, might improve the chances of advancing these reforms and maintaining their continuity after the next parliamentary elections scheduled for 2024.

Among other initiatives aimed at increasing the quality of secondary education, the government's program underlined the need to improve curriculum content in response to the challenges of the 21st century. It emphasized the importance of individual analytical capabilities, a focus on real-life problems during the learning process, and general competencies such as reading skills and mathematics. Additionally, the program highlighted the need for civic education, creative thinking, cultural education, social and emotional intelligence, and digital skills.

Furthermore, the program committed to developing internationally recognized educational centers of excellence, which would contribute to educating and training teachers. This includes support for joint degree master's programs for educators and funding for research on education in cooperation with other European countries, particularly the Nordic nations.

In the area of tertiary education, the main focus of the government program is on increasing quality at all levels of university education, particularly in internationalization, student and lecturer mobility, and cooperation with businesses. It is committed to upgrading the requirements for entry into university study programs, clarifying the missions of universities and colleges, and improving vocational education and training to better meet labor market demands and contribute to the development of the country's regions. Additionally, it contains several projects aimed at increasing the attractiveness and quality of lifelong learning in Lithuania.

Successive governments have committed to improving the attractiveness of the teaching profession, particularly by increasing teachers' wages. By 2024, these wages were slated to equal 130% of the average wage in the country. The government also initiated a national agreement among parliamentary political parties on education policy for 2021 – 2030 to strengthen the continuity and consistency of

education policy and increase its funding over the long term. This agreement was signed by the governing and opposition parties at the start of the 2021 – 2022 academic year, and included many provisions from the government's program, along with concrete funding commitments and success indicators. For example, it set the objective of increasing salaries for school teachers and university lecturers to 130% and 150% of the national average wage, respectively, by 2024.

According to the government's annual report on its activities in 2022, several key reforms were implemented to enhance the education system. These included consolidating secondary schools to increase class sizes and elevate quality standards, and reforming vocational training schools to better align with labor market demands. Significant resources were dedicated to educating and training teachers and providing expert advice to schools on improving quality standards.

The study curricula for early childhood, primary and secondary education were updated. A new model of vocational training was established in cooperation with municipalities, businesses and researchers. Additionally, seven science, technology, engineering, arts and math (STEAM) centers were launched, along with a new project focused on the digital transformation of education. As a supplement to base funding, performance-based funding was introduced for universities, which includes additional funding tied to the achievement of specified quality standards.

Funding was increased in 2022 – 2023, including salary increases for school teachers and university lecturers.

In 2023, when the draft budget for 2024 was prepared, some trade unions representing teachers staged public demonstrations, demanding accelerated increases in funding, particularly in the area of salaries. They argued that due to high inflation and an inadequate methodology for calculating teachers' salaries, the government was failing to meet its promises. Some opposition parties supported their demands, and some considered withdrawing from the national agreement on education policy (as the Lithuanian Farmers and Greens Union ultimately did). After a series of negotiations between officials from the Ministry of Education, Science and Sport and trade unions, some unions reached a common ground with the government. The government maintained that it remained committed to achieving the funding indicators set in its program and the national agreement of the parliamentary political parties.

It should be noted that the multiple crises faced by Lithuanian authorities during the term of the current government – including the COVID-19 pandemic, the geopolitical crisis, the energy crisis, the cost-of-living crisis, etc. – did not affect increases in funding for education and research. The trend of increasing funding for schools and universities, initiated by the previous administration, continued under the Šimonytė coalition government and was maintained in 2022 and 2023. The most recent increases in budgetary expenditures allocated for the wages of school teachers and university academic staff were scheduled for 2024.

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Netherlands

Score 7

Basic skills, including language, math, and citizenship, are critical for students. Concerns persist about the insufficient mastery of these skills, particularly in the transition from the primary to secondary level of education. A notable number of primary and lower-secondary students fall below the target level in arithmetic. Additionally, lower-secondary students exhibit declining proficiency in Dutch and mathematics. Insufficient language and math proficiency among secondary students hinders their competitiveness in vocational and higher education. Often, the established reference levels are not being met. External factors such as stress and bullying negatively impact students' well-being. In higher education, students may not feel secure enough to ask questions. Despite efforts to address these issues, the Netherlands dropped in the PISA rankings from 26th to 34th place among 81 countries.

Educational standards in the country are slipping, and there is an increasing gap between families who can afford high-quality schools and additional tutoring and less fortunate families. A profound social sorting is occurring in the education system, with severe future repercussions. The fact that "doorstroming" is severely hampered means that upward social mobility is declining. Moreover, educational opportunities are creating de facto segregation due to spatial sorting, existing inequalities in society across race and class, the policy design of the educational system (with high levels of leeway provided to private schools with a religious affiliation), the agency afforded to parents and schools (which usually manifests as a conservative reflex of externalizing problems), budget cuts, increasing fees paid by parents, the segregation of teachers, the influence of very early central examinations and their class effects, and the historical spatial separation of social classes.

Policies and regulations in the education system have undergone significant changes, particularly with regard to budget allocations. Starting on 1 January 2023, primary and special education schools have received a unified basic amount per pupil and per school, eliminating separate budgets for staff and study materials. Simultaneously, the number of accountancy rules has been reduced from 130 to 30. In higher education, the reintroduction of a performance-based basic grant for college students,

coupled with a supplementary grant for families with an annual income of about €70,000 or less, aims to support students financially.

In response to labor market demands, the focus is mainly on intermediate vocational education (MBO) programs. The government's initiatives include holding employers accountable for internship placements, aligning facilities with higher education standards and investing in school safety. The Internship Pact MBO 2023 – 2027, which has been signed by various stakeholders, emphasizes the provision of internships and apprenticeships with proper guidance and conditions.

Lifelong learning opportunities have improved, notably with the introduction of the STAP budget during the COVID-19 pandemic. Although the STAP budget will be abolished in 2024, the decision to do so met strong criticism. Additionally, the WEB provides municipal-level financing, targeting vulnerable groups such as migrants and individuals with low literacy skills.

The education system faces persistent challenges in recruiting skilled educators, evident in a significant teacher shortage. The government has invested heavily, addressing salary disparities and providing additional allowances for teaching staff in schools with vulnerable pupils. However, the uneven distribution of the teacher shortage, particularly in the G5, and high turnover rates in secondary education highlight ongoing issues where financial stimuli alone do not achieve the desired effect.

Education for sustainable development is seamlessly integrated into primary and secondary curricula, guided by the SLO. Despite this, concerns persist about the attention given to this subject in teacher education programs and the actual systematic implementation of plans.

Citation:

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New Zealand

Score 7

In New Zealand, policies and regulations aim to facilitate high-quality education and training.

Policies and regulations ensure the provision of necessary financial and human resources for the education system, even during economic crises or government transitions. Education is generally considered a priority area for government spending. For example, the 2023 budget allocated \$1.2 billion for new infrastructure,

including 300 new classrooms, and \$1.2 billion to extend 20 hours of free early childhood education to two-year-olds (Schwanecke 2023). Continuity in funding – particularly core operational funding for schools – has been maintained during economic downturns. This is illustrated by the 2020 government budget during the COVID-19 pandemic, which not only guaranteed operational funds but also significantly expanded the school lunch program (from 8,000 to 200,000 students) and committed an additional \$1.6 billion to trades and apprenticeships (Te Bridie Witton 2020).

Second, institutions seek to facilitate the continuous monitoring of labor market demands, enabling the adaptation of education and training programs to provide relevant hands-on skills. Collaboration between government entities, educational institutions, industry representatives and other stakeholders is facilitated through the New Zealand Qualifications Authority, for example.

Third, frameworks within the education system are designed to attract and retain highly skilled educators – for example, by offering competitive salaries and benefits, providing professional development opportunities, and establishing clear career progression pathways. In addition, the Ministry of Education supports schools in recruiting overseas teachers.

How successful the government is in sustaining and enhancing the quality of education is a different question. For one, it should be noted that, across all levels from primary to tertiary education, New Zealand spends less annually per full-time equivalent student than the OECD average (,119 compared to \$12,647) (OECD 2023). In particular, the tertiary education sector has been suffering from underfunding in recent years, leading to significant job cuts and the closure of entire academic programs (Palmer 2023). Meanwhile, the latest PISA assessment revealed that a quarter of New Zealand students were in schools in which principals said they had inadequate or poorly qualified teaching staff (up from 16% in the previous round of testing in 2018) and nearly half were in schools that struggled to hire teachers (Gerritsen 2023). In 2023, teachers went on a nationwide strike over poor pay and working conditions (RNZ 2023).

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Slovenia

Score 7

Some indicators in the Slovenian education system demonstrate positive performance, with an 8% increase in spending between 2020 and 2021. A notable proportion of young Slovenians engage in education and training, with over two-thirds of those aged 18 to 24 still enrolled. Additionally, 38% of bachelor's students have professional backgrounds, although they lack direct access to most academic programs. Slovenia also boasts high rates of upper secondary education completion, with only 6% of young men and 3% of young women not achieving this milestone.

However, staffing shortages in the education system present significant challenges. These shortages are particularly acute in kindergartens and primary and secondary schools, impacting the quality of education provided. Despite these challenges, ample opportunities for lifelong learning exist, especially for adults in small and medium-sized enterprises.

Despite these strengths, recent international surveys have revealed declining educational metrics. Deteriorating scores in reading literacy, civic education, and overall student achievement were reported in PIRLS 2021, ICCS 2022, and PISA 2022. A key reason for the decline is most likely the long closure of schools (118 days) during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Additionally, Slovenian students reported significantly poorer quality of relationships with teachers, with an above-average proportion feeling disconnected from the school environment and experiencing low levels of support from math teachers. The ICCS 2022 survey indicated below-average ratings for the openness of classroom discussions and the student-teacher relationship. Furthermore, the PIRLS survey highlighted concerns about fourth-graders' well-being, with over a quarter reporting feeling tired or hungry in the morning before school.

These challenges underscore the urgency of ongoing curriculum reforms, with experts advocating for increased educational prioritization and investment as part of the National Education Program preparation.

Citation:

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Spain

Score 7

Article 27 of the Spanish constitution guarantees the right to education and academic freedom. The Spanish education system is decentralized: the central government regulates basic elements, while the autonomous communities develop their own regulations and manage the education system within their territories. Schools have pedagogical, organizational, and managerial autonomy over their resources.

Primary funding comes from the Ministry of Education and Vocational Training and regional education authorities. National allocations for education are established annually in the state budget, while autonomous communities determine their own education budgets. Local administrations are responsible for creating, constructing, and maintaining facilities for public educational institutions.

There is significant variation among autonomous communities in allocating financial and human resources per student, leading to substantial differences in educational outcomes. During the review period, the education system received significant EU resources to enhance the digital skills of teachers and students. The RRP supports efforts to reduce early school leaving and grade repetition rates, improve the link between educational attainment and labor market needs, and provide additional support to the most vulnerable students.

In April 2022, the Organic Law 3/2022 on the organization and integration of vocational training came into force, aiming to create 200,000 new vocational training places by 2023. It introduces dual vocational training in certain study grades and emphasizes the relationship between training centers and companies.

Between February and April 2022, a series of royal decrees were enacted to implement a curriculum reform for primary and secondary education. The updated curricula align with the EU Council Recommendation on Key Competences for Lifelong Learning.

The education system facilitates the recruitment of highly qualified educators through university education and further training opportunities. Primary school teachers need a teaching degree and must pass competitive examinations, while secondary education teachers require a university degree followed by specialized master's training.

The framework legislation outlines guidelines for Continuing Professional Development (CPD) programs offered by autonomous communities. These programs provide teachers with diverse training activities and establish priority training guidelines. The National Institute of Educational Technologies and Teacher Training annually determines the priority areas for teacher training plans and offers professional development programs.

In January 2022, the government initiated a continuous national dialogue on enhancing the teaching profession, particularly in anticipation of low replacement rates. The results of this discourse will shape a new regulatory framework.

The education system is founded on a strong commitment to inclusiveness and values at all levels of education. The government's commitment to equity is reflected in the education law that came into force in 2021. Digitalization and the development of digital competencies are among the top priorities of the law, providing a reference framework for digital teacher competence.

“Environmental sustainability education is a fundamental element of the Education Act. This subject is covered both as a cross-cutting component and within the subject of Civic and Ethical Values. The law also envisions integrating sustainable development and global citizenship into the training program for prospective teachers.”

Citation:

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Royal Decree Law 157/2022 of 1 March

Australia

Score 6

Australia has a high-quality tertiary education sector, though existing policies (e.g., fee structure) have posed challenges to quality and equity. Equity remains a serious and ongoing issue in schools.

Australian education has significant strengths, including progressive, student-centered pedagogies and well-resourced, high-performing universities (Debroy 2018). However, the higher education sector was heavily hit by the pandemic, which interrupted the flow of international students, traditionally a major revenue source (Norton 2023). The sector has had to adjust to a major change in the fee structure, doubling the price of some degrees while reducing others. The income-contingent loans system for higher education tuition, whereby repayments are made through the income tax system on a progressive scale, means the fee increases do not directly increase barriers to enrollment. However, they lead to increased student debts and effectively higher income tax rates for graduates for many more years. The sector has also been criticized for its high rates of casualization and other workforce issues impacting education quality.

Australian schools have seen a decline in student performance in international assessments, with commentators identifying inequality – especially geographical differences in school quality and gender differences (underperforming boys) – as major problems (Hare 2022). Inequity in access to quality education persists, with

public schools chronically underfunded while well-resourced private schools receive considerable subsidies (Hare 2024). Progress on rectifying these inequities has been slow. Teacher pay is relatively low compared with other skilled professions, inhibiting the recruitment of high-quality educators. Staff well-being has also been a major concern in Australian schools.

The challenges and opportunities of artificial intelligence (AI) are a significant area of debate across both university and school sectors. The government has recently endorsed AI use in public schools, publishing a new framework to guide its responsible and ethical use (Cassidy 2023). Priorities for the framework include ensuring AI supports teacher-student interactions rather than supplanting them and substantially upskilling teachers in AI competency. The Tertiary Education and Standards Authority (TEQSA) has adopted a similar stance for the higher education sector, developing principles and practices to incorporate AI into teaching (TEQSA 2023).

Citation:

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Italy

Score 6

The Italian education system is predominantly public, administered nationally by the Ministry of Education (MIUR) and the Ministry of Universities and Research (MUR). MIUR oversees school policy, including recruitment and funding, while regional and municipal school authorities control curricula, infrastructure, and resource management. Private education in Italy is limited and primarily consists of religious schools, with a few reputable private universities like Bocconi, LUISS, and Cattolica. MUR coordinates the university system.

In principle, the education system is open to everyone without discrimination, with tuition fees charged only at the tertiary level. Although fees are low compared to Anglo-Saxon systems, they are the second highest in the EU, after the Netherlands.

Access to upper secondary and tertiary education has long been socially discriminatory due to limited resources for scholarships and support mechanisms for financially needy students. However, significant funds have been invested in this area since the COVID crisis and thanks to the NRRP, doubling state funding for university scholarships.

Italy falls below the EU average in early school leavers, tertiary attainment, and adult education. Expenditure per pupil at all education levels is below the OECD and EU averages and has remained almost unchanged over the past decade. The education system's ability to provide skilled workers, especially in specialized fields, is insufficient, often criticized by the private sector.

After a decade of cuts, spending on tertiary education was restored from 2019. The share of education expenditure devoted to salaries of teachers, professors, and technical staff is above average compared to research expenditure, not because salaries are high but due to limited capital and research funds. The selection of school staff is not sufficiently meritocratic. Although there are high-quality education areas at secondary and tertiary levels, overall quality could improve.

The allocation of public resources to universities increasingly includes a mechanism linking funding to research and teaching outcomes, promoting a more competitive and quality-driven higher education system. During the pandemic, the education system was under pressure, with regional differences in handling it. Southern regions were less effective in providing distance learning and had higher school dropout rates (Openpolis).

The Draghi government injected more resources into education with EU Next Generation funding, pledging €31.9 billion to improve all education sectors. The NRPP also provided for various reforms approved for 2022 and 2023, including teacher recruitment, vocational high schools, vocational training institutes, and national guidelines for university degrees. However, a significant divide remains between northern and southern Italy in student preparation and university attractiveness. Although policymakers are aware of this gap, it has widened in recent years, with little action being taken to address it.

Citation:

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United States

Score 6

The United States has a complex education system. It is not entirely accurate to speak of "the education system" of the United States, given that education has historically been a policy competence of each of the 50 state governments. The

national government only became significantly involved in non-higher education in the 1960s, and it is still far less involved in education than many other central governments. The Department of Education is one of the smallest departments in the U.S. federal government. Most education funding comes from state and local taxation. Teachers are employed by local and state governments, with over 10,000 different school districts managing education administration and policy.

It is almost impossible to speak definitively about the integration of sustainable development in the U.S. school curriculum because no single curriculum exists. However, some states have integrated sustainable development into their curricula. For example, California has the Education and Environment Initiative (EEI), which incorporates environmental literacy into the curriculum from elementary to secondary school. Many states have adopted the Next Generation Science Standards (NGSS), which teach students about the interconnectedness of humans and the environment, as well as other areas of sustainability. Additionally, some schools include global citizenship education, which aims to encourage students to consider themselves connected to the well-being of others worldwide.

Despite significant state-level variation, we can make some general statements about the U.S. education system. The system faces a chronic teacher shortage, one of the reasons being low pay. Teachers' wages, never high, have stagnated or even declined.

Teachers, however, have a reputation for professionalism. Over 90% of U.S. teachers participate in some form of professional development, which is often mandated by their employers.

The federal government has made limited efforts to raise overall standards. The Common Core program aims to ensure that all states meet a basic level of numeracy and literacy for all their pupils.

There is a substantial higher and further education sector in the United States. Community colleges and universities offer a wide range of traditional and online courses, degree programs, non-degree programs, and continuing education programs. Additionally, various community organizations and public sector bodies, such as local governments, provide free or subsidized lifelong learning opportunities, including skills training, language development, and personal intellectual enrichment.

Greece

Score 5

The public education system is underfunded and understaffed due to the austerity policies adopted during the economic crisis. The education system has not recovered since then and continues to lack necessary financial and human resources. Greece's

public expenditure on education, at 4.1% of GDP in 2021, is below the EU average (Eurostat 2023). There is no systematic monitoring of labor market demands, and education and training programs are not adapted to labor market shifts.

The share of the Greek population with tertiary attainment (ISCED 5 and above, age group 25 – 64 years) rapidly increased from 28% in 2014 to 35% in 2022. Still, Greece remains a laggard in terms of upper second and tertiary attainment (Eurostat 2022a, OECD 2020). Moreover, even though Greece has one of the best ratios of pupils to teachers (Eurostat 2021a) and the school drop-out rate in Greece is not high (Eurostat 2022b), the country ranks last among all EU nations regarding results in PISA tests (PISA 2022). Additionally, the share of people aged 16 to 74 who have at least basic digital skills is below the EU average (Eurostat 2021b).

Furthermore, the framework conditions of the education system do not facilitate the recruitment of highly skilled educators. There are many disincentives to embarking on a teaching career. Teachers and university professors generally earn meager incomes. Primary and secondary school teachers can be posted at schools in remote areas. The only incentives for a career in teaching are that teachers in public schools and universities have the status of permanent civil servants and enjoy long summer breaks, as the school period starts in mid-September and ends in late May.

Individuals, however, have access to lifelong learning opportunities at an affordable cost. Public universities also offer short- and long-term courses as part of training and continuing professional development.

Education for sustainable development is integrated into school curricula, primarily at the primary and junior high school levels, but the relevant subjects are considered a lesser priority compared to the classical subjects of language, history, religious studies, and mathematics. In Greek universities, there are relatively few departments of environmental studies, while sustainable development topics are not part of the core curriculum of the other sciences and humanities.

Nevertheless, the government has rolled out plans to address the deficiencies noted above. The government's Greece 2.0 plan, funded by the EU Recovery and Resilience Facility, dedicates the bulk of funds earmarked for the third pillar, that is, the pillar for employment, skills, and social cohesion – to “education, vocational education and training, and skills” (Greek Government 2021). The Ministry of Education's action plan for 2023 provides for targeted measures to upgrade all three levels of education, plus vocational training and lifelong learning (Ministry of Education 2023).

Citation:

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Israel

Score 5

The Ministry of Education budget accounts for 14% of the national budget. According to an OECD report, total expenditure on primary and secondary educational institutions as a percentage of GDP in Israel is 6.4%, compared to the OECD average of 5.1% (OECD, 2023). However, in per capita terms, national spending on education in Israel is 13% – 37% lower than the OECD average. This discrepancy affects teachers’ salaries, which are 10% to 15% lower than the OECD average (Knesset Research Center, 2023a).

There is a significant shortage of educators at all levels. Since 2018, the number of teaching and education graduates has decreased. Only 70% of those who graduate enter the school system. Meanwhile, there has been an increase in the retirement of veteran teachers and a decrease in the entrance of young teachers. Additionally, the share of young teachers leaving the education system increased from 13% in 2018 to 21% in 2021 (Knesset Research Center, 2023b).

The school curriculum does not align with labor market demand. Additionally, there are very few lifelong learning opportunities. The Ministry of Education department responsible for adult education offers limited programs and has suffered severe budget cuts over an extended period.

The government has several programs aimed at recruiting highly skilled educators. These include excellence programs in university faculties and providing benefits to high-tech workers who become teachers. However, these programs are very exclusive and small. As a result, the number of graduates from these programs does not meet the need for highly skilled educators.

To improve the education level of existing teachers, various incentives are provided to those who complete a master's degree. Additionally, secondary school teachers are required to hold a master's degree. The Ministry of Education promotes various training programs for teachers and offers financial incentives for completing these trainings.

There are some classes and workshops on sustainable development; however, this is not integrated into the school curriculum.

Citation:

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Poland

Score 5

The general conditions of the educational system in Poland have been challenging. Public spending on education decreased from 5.6% to 4.9% of GDP between 2004 and 2021 (Eurostat 2023). While local governments manage education funding, the national government provides them with resources through the state budget. However, local governments were reported to cover nearly 30% of education costs from their own funds as early as 2019 (Polityka Insight/Fundacja Przyjazny Kraj 2021). The Ministry of Education and Science, led by Przemysław Czarnek, attempted to centralize control and expand the powers of regional supervisors.

Increasingly strict state control and an unfavorable pay system have made it difficult to attract new teachers. In 2022, the number of teacher vacancies reached 20,000, with the figure peaking at 30,000 in 2023. Retired teachers and overtime work partly mitigated the shortage. The pay gap between public and private schools widened, with private schools offering better financial incentives. In public schools, it takes 42 years to reach the top salary range, and the starting salary for teachers was below €20,000 per year on a purchasing power parity basis (European Commission 2023). Additionally, rigid curricula have hindered educational innovation.

In collaboration with the Educational Research Institute, the Ministry of Education and Science has monitored labor market demands and published annual reports on shifting labor market needs. These reports have helped companies and schools align training and subsidies with market demand. Further education opportunities in the form of courses and postgraduate studies have been made available, supported by government and EU funding. About 7.6% of the adult population participated in lifelong learning in 2022, compared to the EU average of 11.9% (Euridice 2023).

Education for sustainable development is incorporated into the core curriculum for kindergarten through secondary school, covering subjects like science, technology, biology, chemistry, geography and social studies. Higher education institutions have also added “green” knowledge to their curricula.

Citation:

Eurostat. 2023. “Total General Government Expenditure on ‘Education,’ 2021 (% of GDP).” [https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=File:Total_general_government_expenditure_on_%27education%27,_2021_\(%25_of_GDP\).png](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=File:Total_general_government_expenditure_on_%27education%27,_2021_(%25_of_GDP).png)

European Commission. 2023. “Teachers’ and School Heads’ Salaries and Allowances in Europe 2021/2022.” <https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/4b900c13-6977-11ee-9220-01aa75ed71a1/language-en>

Euridice. 2023. “Poland.” <https://eurydice.eacea.ec.europa.eu/national-education-systems/poland/main-providers>
 Polityka Insight/Fundacja Przyjazny Kraj. 2021. “Usługi publiczne w kryzysie: edukacja do zmiany.” <https://www.politykainsight.pl/bibliotekaraportow/2111945,1,uslugi-publiczne-w-kryzysie-edukacja-do-zmiany.read>

<https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/sites/cf8409f1-en/index.html?itemId=/content/component/cf8409f1-en>

<https://www.datapandas.org/ranking/pisa-scores-by-country>

<https://eurydice.eacea.ec.europa.eu/national-education-systems/poland/national-reforms-school-education>

Portugal

Score 5

The latest results from the PISA assessment reveal that over 60% of Portuguese students are enrolled in schools experiencing a teacher shortage (OECD, 2023b). This reflects the aging of the teacher population, an issue identified several years ago but largely unaddressed. Portugal now boasts one of the oldest teaching populations in the OECD. Data for 2022 shows there were 1,397.5 teachers aged 50 or above for every 100 teachers aged under 35 at the post-primary level and 997 at the primary level (Pordata, 2023). This compares to 63.7 and 82.7 in 2002 and 186.7 and 150.2 in 2012 (Pordata, 2023). The aging demographic of the teaching workforce has resulted in a gradual rise in retirements, a trend not matched by an influx of younger teachers.

School directors have reported that the scarcity of educators adversely affects teaching capacity, which could partly account for the recent PISA findings. Frequent policy changes in the sector also contribute to this issue. The 2022 PISA assessment indicates a decline in education quality in terms of student performance, with the drop exceeding the average observed across OECD countries. This downturn marks a setback for Portugal, placing it below the levels achieved in 2009, despite consistent progress in preceding years.

Additionally, 27% of students attend schools where the quality of teaching is compromised by the presence of inadequate or underqualified teachers. Teachers’ unions have been vocal in asserting that enhancing the attractiveness of the teaching profession and improving working conditions are crucial. However, to date, there has been no concrete action from the government to address these issues. This lack of response highlights the need for focused efforts to resolve the challenges facing the teaching profession in Portugal.

In terms of educational attainment, despite improvements since the turn of the millennium, Portugal continues to exhibit low levels. It ranks at the bottom of the OECD for the proportion of the population with upper secondary education, with only 28.9% of individuals aged 25 to 64 achieving this level in 2022 – a modest 1.7 percentage point improvement from 2020 (OECD, 2023a). While Portugal performs relatively better in tertiary education (31.5% in 2022), it still lags about 10 percentage points below the OECD average.

Citation:

OECD. 2023. “Adult education level (indicator).” doi: 10.1787/36bce3fe-en
<https://data.oecd.org/eduatt/adult-education-level.htm>

OECD. 2023. PISA 2022 Results (Volume I): The State of Learning and Equity in Education. Paris: OECD Publishing.
https://doi.org/10.1787/53f23881-enhttps://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/education/pisa-2022-results-volume-i_53f23881-en

PORDATA. 2023. “Índice de envelhecimento dos docentes em exercício nos ensinos pré-escolar, básico e secundário: por nível de ensino – Continente.”
<https://www.pordata.pt/portugal/indice+de+envelhecimento+dos+docentes+em+exercicio++nos+ensinos+pre+escolar++basico+e+secundario+por+nivel+de+ensino+++continente-944-7743>

Slovakia

Score 4

The question of the extent to which policies and regulations in the education system hinder or facilitate high-quality education and training does not have any definite answer; however, important progress in some aspects can be reported for the 2022–2024 period.

Financial and human resources remain critical problems, independent of the circumstances of the poly-crisis period. Slovakia’s educational expenditures are very low – only Romania and Bulgaria spend less among EU countries. Despite a significant increase over the last few years, teachers’ salaries are still low, making the profession unattractive for graduates, particularly in the capital, Bratislava, where the salary is insufficient to cover standard living costs. According to RTVS (2023), the average gross salary of a teacher in March 2023 was €1,206, while the average salary of a master’s degree graduate was €1,782. Due to these factors – and the low social status of teachers – the recruitment of highly skilled educators is rather problematic. Many schools repeatedly announce vacancies and, in the interim, are forced to use non-qualified teachers to fill empty positions.

The results of Slovak pupils in PISA are systematically declining. According to 2022 results (OECD, 2023), performance in all three skills – reading, mathematics, and science – is below the OECD average. The state responded to the decreasing quality of primary education by implementing a large-scale educational reform, and in 2023, new national curricula were approved (Fico’s government promised to continue with this reform).

According to most evaluations, existing policies and regulations ensure continuous monitoring of labor market demands. However, this is not followed by the adaptation of education and training programs to provide relevant skills. Consequently, there is a disparity between the supply of graduates and the actual demand in practice, both at the secondary and tertiary education levels. Reforming the university system is a specific goal of the Slovak Recovery and Resilience Plan. One of its objectives is to align proposed study programs more closely with the needs of the national economy.

Individuals have good access to lifelong learning opportunities. The system of post-education training is coordinated by the Ministry of Education, which accredits training programs. However, the efficiency of these programs is not systematically evaluated.

Education for sustainable development is insufficiently integrated into the curricula at all school levels.

Citation:

Rádiožurnál. 2023. "Učiteľia majú o stovky eur nižší priemerný plat ako Slováci v iných povolaniach." <https://spravy.rtvs.sk/2023/03/ucitelia-maju-o-stovky-eur-nizsi-priemerny-plat-ako-slovaci-v-nych-povolaniach>

OECD. 2023. PISA 2022 Results The State of Learning and Equity in Education. Paris: OECD

Hungary

Score 3

The education system has undergone major changes since the second Orbán government took office in 2010. Government spending on education fell from 4.6% of GDP in 2010 to 3.8% in 2020. During this period, competencies and monitoring duties were centralized, private and religious schools were strengthened, and secondary education was restructured to emphasize vocational training. Education outcomes remain below the EU average and show wide disparities, and the system obstructs social mobility (Radó and Mikola 2023). Teacher salaries are still low compared to other tertiary education graduates. Regular PISA surveys have shown a marked decline in the quality of education in Hungary. In 2022, the country ranked 29th out of 30 in mathematics, with a score of 12.39, a sharp decline from 2018's score of 8.74. Overall, Hungary ranked 24th out of 30 countries in the PISA 2022 survey. Additionally, the content of school textbooks has been increasingly influenced by ideology. Pupils are educated in a nationalistic manner that celebrates the greatness of the Hungarian people and their "historic suffering," while often denying historical facts.

Education suffered severely during the COVID-19 pandemic, exacerbating educational, psychological, social and political tensions. The government has tightened its control over universities by "privatizing" them, placing these institutions under the oversight of ostensibly private but actually state-controlled foundations, and securing these foundations through constitutional amendments.

Highly dissatisfied with low salaries (Hungary ranks next to last in OECD statistics), a heavy workload and an increasingly ideologized curriculum, teachers began protesting and striking in 2022. The government's response was dismissive, rejecting the prospect of negotiation. It leveraged emergency powers to issue a decree limiting teachers' ability to strike during the pandemic.

In 2023, the government introduced what teachers refer to as a “revenge law” or “vengeance law.” This law reclassified teachers from public employees to “public education employees,” intensified performance evaluations, and increased workloads instead of reducing them. Some teachers even faced termination.

This conflict is ongoing. In a typical populist move, Prime Minister Orbán linked the issue of teachers' wage increases to the unblocking of European funds. Consequently, there was a significant average salary increase of 32% for teachers in early 2024 (About Hungary 2024). The situation in Hungary's education system is dire. The regulatory environment is hostile, there is a severe teacher shortage and the teaching workforce is aging. The curriculum remains politicized and outdated, leading to a decline in the educational system's performance.

Citation:

OECD. 2023. “Teacher's Salaries.” <https://data.oecd.org/teachers/teachers-salaries.htm>

Radó, Péter and Bálint Mikola. 2023. Illiberalism in Power: Educational and Cultural Policies. AUTHLIB Working Papers 2. https://www.authlib.eu/authlib_wp_2023_02_rado-mikola/

About Hungary. 2024. “Gulyás: Teachers' wages to rise by 32%.” <https://abouthungary.hu/news-in-brief/gulyas-teachers-wages-to-rise-by-32>

Indicator

Policies Targeting Equitable Access to Education

Question

To what extent does the current policy approach in the education system hinder or facilitate equitable access to high-quality education and training?

30 OECD and EU countries are sorted according to their performance on a scale from 10 (best) to 1 (lowest). This scale is tied to four qualitative evaluation levels.

- 10-9 = Education policies are fully aligned with the goal of ensuring equitable access to high-quality education and training.
- 8-6 = Education policies are largely aligned with the goal of ensuring equitable access to high-quality education and training.
- 5-3 = Education policies are only somewhat aligned with the goal of ensuring equitable access to high-quality education and training.
- 2-1 = Education policies are not at all aligned with the goal of ensuring equitable access to high-quality education and training.

Canada

Score 9

K–12 schooling in Canada is public, free, and widely accessible. Although Canada’s education system promotes equitable access in certain aspects, barriers remain in delivering quality education to all groups and regions. Some private schools serve religious minorities and the wealthy, but these institutions constitute a small fraction of the overall system. Public funding ensures that tuition remains affordable at the primary, secondary, and post-secondary levels. Needs-based financial assistance supports low-income students in attending university or college.

“Standardized learning benchmarks set across most provinces drive quality.”

Inequities in school outcomes based on income level and other socioeconomic factors persist. Variation in education quality across provinces and rural/urban locations is a problem, as are insufficient support services and resources for marginalized student populations. Student debt levels can still deter post-secondary participation (Campbell 2021).

While foundational elements like public schooling and financial aid facilitate access, gaps in equitable funding allocation, teacher quality distribution, and the depth of assistance programs lead skills and attainment levels to diverge sharply by income, region, disability status, and background. Access alone does not guarantee the quality learning critical for social mobility.

Citation:

Campbell, Carol. 2021. "Educational Equity in Canada: The Case of Ontario's Strategies and Actions to Advance Excellence and Equity for Students." *School Leadership & Management* 41 (4-5): 409-28. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13632434.2019.1709165>

Denmark

Score 9

The Danish educational system is largely publicly funded and freely available. This can help explain why social mobility is high in Denmark compared to other wealthy countries (Heckman and Landersø 2021). Despite this, Heckman and Landersø also find that social mobility is decreasing and social reproduction is increasing. They also observe that it is unclear exactly what the policy response should be, given that the Danish educational system is relatively well funded. Recently, the Rockwool Foundation, an independent research institute, has suggested that it is early in the educational system that children are sorted into different paths, given access to different types of jobs and hence different levels of income.

Citation:

Heckman, James and Rasmus Landersø. 2021. "Lessons for Americans from Denmark about Inequality and Social Mobility." *Labour Economics* 77.

Rockwool foundation. 2023. "Social arv og offentlige udgifter til uddannelse." *Samfundøkonomen* (https://rockwoolfonden.s3.eu-central-1.amazonaws.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/Social-arv-og-offentlige-udgifter-til-uddannelse_Samfundsokonomien_9_2_2023.pdf?download=true)

Norway

Score 9

There is a significant social gradient in school results: Children, especially girls from well-educated upper-middle-class families, achieve the highest grades and thus have privileged access to the most popular higher education programs. This reproduction of social and economic inequalities is viewed by all political parties as a breach of the objective of equal right to education for all.

The first element in the education chain is preschool, for children aged 1 to 4. Since 2003, all children have had the right to attend preschool, and 95% of all children do so. Parents pay a co-payment, determined at the national level, which is currently NOK 2000 per month per child. Low-income families and parents in peripheral geographical areas pay less. There are regulatory requirements for the ratio of children to qualified teachers.

Primary school (for children aged 6 to 16) and secondary school (for three years, typically for children aged 16 to 19) are free and wholly funded through public budgets. Completion rates for secondary school are significantly lower than 100%, approximately 75% to 80%. Considerable resources have been deployed to increase completion rates, with limited success.

State universities are free, and 40% of women and 30% of men have attained a university-level education. At all levels, private alternatives exist. These are heavily regulated, tax-financed, and not allowed to generate profits for the owners.

Citation:

Statistics Norway. 2023a. "Gjennomføring i videregående opplæring." <https://www.ssb.no/utdanning/videregaende-utdanning/statistikk/gjennomforing-i-videregaende-opplaering>

Statistics Norway. 2023b. "Karakterer og nasjonale prøver i grunnskolen." <https://www.ssb.no/utdanning/grunnskoler/statistikk/karakterer-ved-avsluttet-grunnskole>

Utdanningsdirektoratet. 2024. "Foreldrebetaling for barnehageplass og moderasjonsordninger." <https://www.udir.no/regelverk-og-tilsyn/barnehage/foreldrebetaling/>

Slovenia

Score 9

The Slovenian education system is based on the principle of accessibility. All levels of education – primary, secondary, and tertiary – are part of the public education system. Primary education is accessible to all inhabitants thanks to a large network of primary schools. This network is supplemented by branch schools, ensuring that all children can attend a school as close as possible to their residence.

All children have the right to a primary school education under the same conditions. Parents can choose whether their child should be educated in a public or private primary school or at home. Together with the municipality, the schools organize free transport for students who reside more than 4 km from the school. Regardless of the distance from the primary school, pupils in Year 1 and other grades are entitled to free transport if the relevant road traffic prevention authority determines that their safety is at risk on the way to school.

The school organizes childcare for students waiting for transport home. A textbook fund is set up at schools from which students can borrow textbooks and materials they need for lessons.

In June 2023, the National Assembly adopted amendments to the Law on Elementary School and the Law on School Nutrition. The amendments will ensure free lunch for all students by 2027, and a higher ceiling for lunch subsidies will come into force at the start of the 2024 school year, meaning more children will receive free lunch.

The proportion of children enrolled in kindergarten is gradually increasing. In the 2022 – 2023 school year, almost 82% of all children in the 1 – 5 age group were enrolled in Slovenian kindergartens, a 7% increase from the 2012 – 2013 school year. Parents who enroll two children in kindergarten simultaneously are exempt from paying for the younger child. Additionally, parents are exempt from paying kindergarten fees for the third and each additional child from the same family, regardless of whether they are enrolled in kindergarten at the same time as their siblings.

Citation:

Republika Slovenija. 2024. "Znižano plačevanje vrtca." <https://www.gov.si teme/znizano-placilo-vrtca/>

Republika Slovenija. 2024. "O šoli." <https://www.gov.si teme/o-osnovni-soli/>

A. S. 2023. "Brezplačna kosila za vse osnovnošolce šele leta 2027, z letom 2024 več subvencij." MMC RTV SLO, June 7. <https://www.rtv slo.si/slovenija/brezplacna-kosila-za-vse-osnovnosolce-sele-leta-2027-z-letom-2024-vec-subvencij/670990>

Finland

Score 8

By law, all people in Finland must have equal access to high-quality education and training. Basic education is free, and municipalities are responsible for providing educational services to all local children.

The Education Policy Report by the Ministry of Education and Culture (2021) sets the course for inclusive and high-quality education in Finland by 2040, addressing the challenges posed by growing skill requirements and shrinking age cohorts. It delineates the envisioned state of education and research in the 2040s, along with the requisite changes in resources, structures and guidance.

The key objectives of education policy are to elevate the quality of education and expand competences across the population, reduce learning outcome disparities, enhance educational equality, and position Finland as an internationally appealing hub for study, research and investment.

The government's goal, as outlined in the 2021 Education Policy Report, is for Finland to have a cultural and educational foundation by 2040 rooted in effective and high-quality education, research and culture. This foundation is intended to form the bedrock of international competitiveness and citizen well-being. The report envisions improved educational equity and accessibility by 2040, positioning Finland's education and competence levels among the world's best. Education and research play pivotal roles in achieving broader societal sustainable development goals.

Key objectives and measures up to 2040 include addressing societal challenges such as demographic changes, regional disparities and technological advancements. The program emphasizes continuous learning and collaboration between work and competences with the aim of protecting individuals and providing a competitive edge for companies. Additionally, the report aims to eventually make early childhood education and care free of charge for a minimum of four hours per day.

Traditionally, the education system in Finland has facilitated equitable access to high-quality education and training. However, Finland has not been particularly successful in providing access to high-quality education for all migrant groups. This concern also extends to equal access to early childhood development, care and preprimary education.

Citation:

Ministry of Education and Culture. 2021. "Education Policy Report: Equitable Education of High Quality Essential for Growing Skills Requirements and Shrinking Age Cohorts in Finland." <https://okm.fi/en/-/education-policy-report-equitable-education-of-high-quality-essential-for-growing-skills-requirements-and-shrinking-age-cohorts-in-finland>

Sweden

Score 8

Sweden provides equitable access to education for all (SFS 2010, 800), which contributes to the country's strong performance in gender equity in educational attainment. Municipalities are responsible for pre-schools, elementary schools, special elementary schools, high schools, special high schools, municipal adult education, special education for adults, education in Swedish for immigrants, and after-school activities, unless otherwise stated. Pre-schools and schools are considered critical societal operations, and the law requires that they be maintained during times of crisis and heightened alert to the extent that prevailing circumstances allow (Skolverket, 2023a). The Swedish Education Act (SFS 2010, 800) regulates the recruitment of teachers, ensuring highly skilled educators. However, there is a persistent lack of qualified personnel in rural areas, especially in the north.

Sweden has a strong tradition of preschool education, and the government spent €8,294 million on early childhood education in 2020, the third highest expenditure in Europe after Germany and France (Eurostat, 2023a). Sweden was ranked fourth among OECD countries in terms of early childhood education for children aged between three and the starting age of compulsory primary education. It is also one of four countries where over 90% of children between ages 2 – 3 are enrolled in early childhood education (OECD, 2023).

Equal access to education is regulated by the Education Act (SFS 2010, 800). Gender-equal education is a key component of Sweden's equality targets. Currently, there are notable gender differences in study results, mental health, choice of education, and values. In 2021 – 2022, girls generally had grades that were 10% higher than boys' grades. Additionally, 78% of girls reported experiencing quite a lot or a high level of stress from schoolwork, while the corresponding figure for boys was 51% (Jämställdhetsmyndigheten, 2023).

Schools are obliged to prevent and remedy discrimination as regulated by the Discrimination Act (SFS 2008:567), which stipulates seven grounds for discrimination: sex, transgender identity or expression, ethnicity, religion or other belief, disability, sexual orientation, and age. In higher education, there are more female students than male students, but slightly more men than women are Ph.D. students. Higher positions at universities are less equal; for example, only three out of ten professors are women (Jämställdhetsmyndigheten, 2023).

Sweden ranks 15th in the PISA results concerning socioeconomic background (OECD, 2023). Students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds perform worse in

math, reading comprehension, and natural science. Math scores are not statistically significantly different from the OECD average, but in reading comprehension and natural science, the differences are larger in Sweden than the OECD average (Skolverket, 2023b). Students with foreign backgrounds generally achieve lower scores than those born in Sweden. However, the differences diminish after adjusting for socioeconomic background (Skolverket, 2023b).

Elementary and high school levels of education for adults are referred to as municipal adult education and are regulated by the Education Act (SFS 2010, 800). The purpose of adult education is to strengthen and stimulate lifelong learning, providing opportunities for knowledge and skills that enhance an individual's role in the labor market and society. Priority is given to those with the least education, with the educational approach based on the individual's needs and circumstances.

Sweden's policies are reflected in the increase in the population with post-secondary educational attainment over the last three decades. In the early 1990s, just over 10% of the population had some form of post-secondary education, while in 2022 (latest available data), this figure had increased to almost 50%. More women than men have attained at least a three-year tertiary education, whereas slightly more men than women have attained a doctorate degree. Sweden performs well in gender equity but less well in spatial terms. Educational attainment is higher in urban areas than in rural areas, likely reflecting the gap in employment opportunities. Finally, people born outside Sweden have a slightly lower level of education, though there are disparities within this group depending on country of birth, immigrant group, age, and reasons for migration (SCB, 2022).

Eurostat. 2023a. "Public Educational Expenditure by Education Level, Programme Orientation, Type of Source and Expenditure Category." https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/EDUC_UOE_FINE02__custom_1182194/default/table?lang=en

Eurostat. 2023b. "Ratio of pupils and students to teachers and academic staff by education level and programme orientation." https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/EDUC_UOE_PERP04/default/table?lang=en

Jämställdhetsmyndigheten. 2023. "Delmål 3: Jämställd utbildning." <https://jamstalldhetsmyndigheten.se/jamstalldhet-i-sverige/delmål-3-jamstalld-utbildning/>

OECD. 2023. Education at a Glance 2023: OECD Indicators. Paris: OECD Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.1787/e13bef63-en>.

SFS. 2008. Diskrimineringslag. https://www.riksdagen.se/sv/dokument-och-lagar/dokument/svensk-forfattningssamling/diskrimineringslag-2008567_sfs-2008-567/

SCB, Statistiska centralbyrån. 2022. Befolkningens utbildning 2022 Temarapport 2023:8.

SFS. 2010. "Skollag." https://www.riksdagen.se/sv/dokument-och-lagar/dokument/svensk-forfattningssamling/skollag-2010800_sfs-2010-800

Skolverket. 2023. Skolväsendets ansvar vid kris och höjd beredskap. Skolverket.

Skolverket. 2023. Pisa 2022: 15-åringars kunskaper i matematik, läsförståelse och naturvetenskap. Stockholm: Skolverket.

<https://www.skolverket.se/regler-och-ansvar/ansvar-i-skolfragor/skolvasendets-ansvar-vid-kris-och-hojd-beredskap>

Belgium

Score 7

Primary and secondary education are free in Belgium. Access to secondary schools is increasingly randomized to prevent privileged access. Tertiary education is offered at a low fee (less than €1,000 per year), but students receive allowances only under dire financial conditions. According to these “accounting” indicators, Belgium’s education policies are fully aligned with the goal of ensuring equitable access to high-quality education and training.

In terms of outcomes, the situation is less positive. The OECD’s PISA studies reveal high inequalities in most topics. The spread between high social status and less advantaged families is important: the European Commission’s Semester evaluation (p4) reads “[Belgium] performs very well and is making further progress on all SDGs on productivity [but it] is lagging behind on ensuring that people with a migrant background participate in the labor market and on tackling inequalities in educational outcomes linked to socioeconomic background.” Several hurdles face less favored families: first, the actual quality of education varies substantially across schools, and the knowledge about these is tacit. In other words, one must know how to pick a good school, which requires a good educational background. Second, education is not designed for non-native speakers: the study of languages, in particular, require a lot of parental support, and there is little extra-curricular support. Third, there is little financial support, for measures such as free meals for the poor at school. Fourth, many students end up failing (i.e., repeating) one or more years of schooling, and receive little specific support targeting their improved performance. Professional/technical education is far below the standards achieved in German-speaking countries.

The results of these inequalities in primary and secondary education is most visible at the university level, where all students with a higher secondary education diploma are granted access. Selection takes place in the first year, where fail rates are considerably higher than 50% in most disciplines. Moreover, classroom size can be well above 1,000, implying that external support, for example from private instructors, may be valuable. even if generally not affordable.

The European Commission (2023) identifies these inequalities as an important hurdle to clear in tackling labor shortages.

Citation:

European Commission. 2023. “Commission Staff Working Document. 2023 Country Report – Belgium.” COM(2023)601 Final; SWD(2023)600 final.

Czechia

Score 7

The Czech state educational system provides compulsory school education for all for effectively 10 years. However, three notable problems remain concerning equity and access.

First, there is poor provision for the earliest years. Preschool education is among the least accessible in the EU. The share of children between the ages of three and the starting age of compulsory primary education who participated in early childhood education and care was 79.8% in 2022, putting Czechia in 26th place in the OECD – with a much lower figure for those under three years of age.

Second, there is limited access to tertiary education. Although there are no fees for standard public higher education, additional support is limited. Grants are available at the discretion of the institution for those living away from the family home and for those from very low-income backgrounds. The total sum spent on the latter in 2022 was CZK 14.1 million, suggesting that there were few student recipients. Private universities, which account for about 10% of the total student number, receive government support only for the above forms of student aid.

Students can and do support themselves through working, frequently in flexible forms outside the standard employment contract, such as in catering, retail, and seasonal agricultural work. It remains unclear how far financial difficulties limit access to higher education.

The third problem for equitable access is discrimination against the disadvantaged Roma population. Roma children are disproportionately educated in special schools. They represent about one-third of the pupils in these institutions, with 10.3% of Roma children enrolled, compared to 2% of children overall. In 2007, the European Court of Human Rights delivered a landmark judgment, upholding an individual's complaint that he had been assigned to a special school based on ethnicity rather than ability. In February 2023, the Commissioner for Human Rights of the Council of Europe concluded that there had been only minimal change in outcomes, noting that the testing system remained biased against Roma.

Citation:

<https://www.msmt.cz/vzdelavani/skolstvi-v-cr/statistika-skolstvi/vyrocní-zpráva-o-stavu-a-rozvoji-vzdelavani-v-ceske-1>

<https://www.errc.org/news/15-years-after-DH-czechs-carry-on-segregating-roma-face-discrimination-in-every-aspect-of-their-lives>

Estonia

Score 7

The public dominance of educational provision at all levels (only early childhood education and care has tuition fees, limited to 20% of the minimum) results in increasing demand for public expenditures in education. This demand is intensified by the expansion of tertiary education, the principle of inclusive schooling, and the Soviet-inherited basic school network. The growing inadequacy of the latter has been the target of reform for decades (NAO 2022), and a funding formula to compensate for regional disparities has kept rural and urban divides in educational performance relatively low.

Still, additional demands to integrate Ukrainian refugees' children (there were 8,500 Ukrainian students in the Estonian school system in early 2023), public and “free” higher education, and security crises have placed a strong focus on the sustainability and quality of existing institutions, especially schools in remote areas. This has raised concerns over the shortage of teachers and their working conditions, but political promises to address these issues have proved hard to keep due to the security and energy crises, which have increased budgetary tensions.

The transition to Estonian-language education starting in 2024 – a long-needed reform to cope with the ethnic educational gap in Estonia (OECD 2023) – has created additional pressure in terms of requirements for teachers and the need for new investment.

Citation:

National Audit Office. 2022. “The Reorganisation of the Upper Secondary School Network Needs Clear Criteria.” <https://www.riigikontroll.ee/Kontaktid/T%C3%B6%C3%B6tajad/T%C3%B6%C3%B6taja/tabid/215/Audit/2549/WorkId/12/language/et-EE/Default.aspx>
OECD. 2023. PISA 2022 Results (Volume II): Learning During – and From – Disruption. Paris: OECD Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.1787/a97db61c-en>

Ireland

Score 7

The Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) Scheme provides early childhood care and education for children of preschool age, including a specific program for access and inclusion. Children can start ECCE at 2 years and 8 months of age and continue until they transfer to primary school, provided they are not older than 5 years and 6 months at the end of the preschool year. This scheme ensures access to a part-time early childhood development program that prepares children for primary school, with very high take-up rates. However, policy concerning access to earlier forms of childcare is limited, and overall investment in pre-primary education remains low relative to equivalent jurisdictions in Europe.

The education system generally seeks to ensure access to all levels of education for all, regardless of socioeconomic background. However, class issues (increasingly combined with ethnicity) affect the quality and equality of children's educational

experiences. There is an uneven distribution of need that is not always compensated by targeted policies such as DEIS (Delivering Equality of Education in Schools). Progress up the educational scale is correlated with social class. The secondary education system has a two-tier structure, with about 10% of pupils attending fee-paying schools. These schools, which charge up to €6,000 per pupil per year, are socially exclusive, achieve higher academic results, and have higher progression rates to tertiary education than non-fee-paying schools. This perpetuates inequality and lacks transparent and equitable entry criteria. National monitoring of Graduate Outcomes and Socioeconomic Status has highlighted inequality in third-level attainment, with almost one in five graduates from 2020 coming from affluent backgrounds and fewer than one in 10 from disadvantaged backgrounds (HEA 2020a).

The National Access Plan: A Strategic Action Plan for Equity of Access, Participation and Success in Higher Education 2022-2028 (HEA 2020b) focuses on students who are socioeconomically disadvantaged, students with disabilities, and students from the Irish Traveller community. It also targets specific cohorts of underrepresented or marginalized students, including mature students from disadvantaged areas, students with intellectual disabilities, members of the Roma community, those with experience in the care system, homelessness, the criminal justice system, survivors of domestic violence, students who are carers, “second-chance” mature students, migrants and refugees. Irish students at tertiary institutions are not charged fees for most undergraduate courses but do pay a “student contribution.” Following the 2022 budget, a significant increase in higher education spending was announced, and the €3,000 contribution will be reduced to €2,000 over several budgets. However, significant accommodation and transport costs remain barriers for third-level students.

The education system does provide second-chance education opportunities for individuals with very low levels of skills upon leaving education. However, means testing of second-chance adult education supports, an over-focus on labor market or vocational-oriented education, the absence of comprehensive adult education guidance, and a lack of other supports, including care and transport, can limit meaningful access.

Citation:

DEIS. 2020. “DEIS Delivering Equality of Opportunity In Schools.” <https://www.gov.ie/en/policy-information/4018ea-deis-delivering-equality-of-opportunity-in-schools/>

HEA (Higher Education Authority). 2020a. “Graduate Outcomes and Socio-Economic Status Report.” <https://hea.ie/statistics/graduate-outcomes-data-and-reports/graduate-outcomes-for-access-groups/2-foreword-gosdis-2020/>

HEA (Higher Education Authority). 2020b. “National Access Plan: A Strategic Action Plan for Equity of Access Participation and Success in Higher Education 2022-2028.” Government of Ireland. <https://hea.ie/assets/uploads/2022/12/National-Access-Plan-2022-2028-FINAL.pdfquality+education+and+training+ireland>

O’Sullivan, K., Byrne, D., Robson, J., and Winters, N. 2019. “Who Goes to College via Access Routes? A Comparative Study of Widening Participation Admission in Selective Universities in Ireland and England.” *Social Inclusion* 7 (1): 38-51.

Teachers Union Ireland. 2023. “News Bulletin.” 45 (6): 9. Dublin: TUI.

Japan

Score 7

The Japanese education system ensures reasonably equitable access to education for all children. Article 4 of the Basic Act on Education, revised in 2006, prohibits “discrimination in education on account of race, creed, sex, social status, economic position, or family origin.” As many as 53% of children at age two are enrolled in early childhood education and care, the highest reported share among OECD countries. Elementary school and junior high school are mandatory in Japan. As many as 56% of Japanese between 25 and 64 years old have received tertiary education, and this percentage is even higher among 25 to 34 year olds (69% among women and 62% among men). The gender gap in upper secondary school completion is negligible. In recent years, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology started promoting night classes at public junior high schools for those who had not completed their education due to war, poverty, bullying or illness.

The central and local governments subsidize education to facilitate access to all levels of education regardless of socioeconomic background. Private early childhood education centers are publicly subsidized and preschool education for all children between three and five years old is free. Education is compulsory up to junior high school, although not for foreign residents, and is free in public schools. In addition, pupils are provided with free textbooks. Moreover, students from low-earning families are eligible for tuition reductions, exemptions and scholarships for non-compulsory education. In December 2023, Prime Minister Kishida announced a plan to waive university tuition for households with three or more children, regardless of income, starting from FY2025.

Some controversies are related to the fact that cities such as Osaka and Tokyo started planning to remove tuition fees for all students, which would lead to unequal opportunities for students depending on their residential address. In addition, due to family responsibilities, women tend to participate less in lifelong learning. There are also significant gender differences in the distribution of university students across fields of study. In 2019, there were only 16% of women in the field of engineering, manufacturing and construction – the lowest share among OECD countries. Elite universities, whether public or private, usually only have 20% to 30% female students.

Citation:

Baseel, Casey. 2023. “Tokyo makes high school free for all families, even the rich ones.” Japan Today December 7.

“Families with three or more children to be given free university tuition.” The Asahi Shimbun, December 7. <https://www.asahi.com/ajw/articles/15077602>

“Night classes providing a second chance at missed junior high school education.” The Mainichi, November 12. <https://mainichi.jp/english/articles/20171112/p2a/00m/0na/008000c>

OECD. 2023. “Education at a Glance 2023.” <https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/docserver/e13bef63-en.pdf?expires=1702223598&id=id&accname=guest&checksum=43C5B09F634C976B33326CF2106120CE>

OECD. 2021. "Education at a Glance 2021: OECD Indicators: Japan." <https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/sites/1426642c-en/index.html?itemId=/content/component/1426642c-en>

Toda, Sayuri. 2023. "Osaka Pref. to make all high school tuition free, eliminate income limit in Japan first." <https://mainichi.jp/english/articles/20230826/p2a/00m/0na/016000c>

Latvia

Score 7

In 2024 the Ministry of Education continued developing a school network plan with a focus on setting criteria for accessibility. For students in grades 1-6, the principle of "Education Closer to Home" is proposed, where the travel time to and from school should not exceed 40 minutes using municipal transportation. In contrast, for students in grades 7-12, the distance between schools should not exceed 25 kilometers.

Additionally, the ministry's comprehensive solutions include introducing specific criteria to determine the establishment of good schools and optimal class groups, considering student density in municipalities. The requirements are recommended for grades 1-6, but combined classes are not allowed at this education level.

Conversely, for grades 7 – 12, the criteria are mandatory for all municipalities. The Ministry of Education's plan stipulates that in capital cities and administrative centers, there should be a minimum of 120 students in all four class groups. In municipalities outside administrative centers, there should be a minimum of 30 students in grades 1 – 3 and 4 – 6, and 60 in grades 7 – 9 and 10 – 12. In border and sparsely populated municipalities, there should be a minimum of 30 students in three class groups up to the 9th grade and 60 students in high school. It is worth noting that representatives from the education sector have expressed a desire for significantly lower criteria.

Citation:

Ministru kabinets. 2023. "Kompleksi risinājumi augstvērtīgai izglītības nodrošināšanai vispārējā pamata un vidējā izglītībā." https://tapportals.mk.gov.lv/legal_acts/b99cad00-260e-4139-8757-376634d98862

Lithuania

Score 7

Education policies are largely aligned with the goal of ensuring equitable access to high-quality education. The country exhibits an urban-rural divide, and there are notable disparities in educational achievements between girls and boys. According to Eurydice, an analysis of differences in the achievements of 15-year-olds showed that pupils from families from low socioeconomic strata studying in the same schools scored 46 points below the national average, equivalent to a 1.5-year gap. When compared with children from families at higher socioeconomic strata, the gap widened to 86 points, or 2.8 years.

The coalition government formed in late 2020 committed to both improving the quality of education and enhancing equity of access to it. Regarding access, the government undertook several projects, including dedicating additional attention and resources to families requiring social assistance for early childhood education services. It also emphasized inclusive educational initiatives for children with special needs, and focused on enhancing the quality of teaching and studies in schools for national minorities.

In the area of tertiary education, the government outlined plans to increase support for students from socially disadvantaged families and students with special needs. Additional investments in IT skills and technological upgrades for the education process could also contribute to more equitable access, particularly in rural areas.

In 2022, the government adopted amendments to the Law on Education aimed at facilitating individual help for pupils who experience difficulties during the study process and who fail intermediary tests, which have also been reformed to signal earlier about such needs (The Government Annual Report for 2022, 2023). Additionally, throughout the year, financial and expert-consultation support was provided to improve equitable access to education, with 54 partnership agreements signed between municipalities, the National Education Agency and 90 schools.

Also, information and financial support were provided to refugees from Ukraine regarding educational opportunities and their practical use. According to the findings of Eurydice (2023), quoted in the government report on its 2022 activities, Lithuania is among the countries where more than half of all pupils and students who arrived from Ukraine have been integrated into local schools. In 2022, the Lithuanian government allocated €28 million to integrate refugees from Ukraine into the education system.

Citation:

Eurydice, <https://eurydice.eacea.ec.europa.eu/national-education-systems/lithuania/overview>

The Seimas. 2020. The Resolution on The Program of the Eighteenth Government of Lithuania (in Lithuanian), No. XIV-72.

The Government Annual Report for 2022, 17 May 2023 (in Lithuanian), <https://epilietis.lrv.lt/lt/naujienos/seimui-teikiama-vyriausybes-2022-metu-veiklos-ataskaita>.

Netherlands

Score 7

Despite political rhetoric, child care in the Netherlands is not free, tainted by the child allowance scandal. Simplifications to financial compensation rules in 2023 aim to improve access. Municipalities are investing in early childhood education, particularly language education. However, the number of students referred to special education remains consistent.

Several factors contribute to inequitable access. The teacher shortage results in large classes, especially in schools with vulnerable children (G5), raising concerns about resource distribution. In rural areas, declining populations lead to class and school

mergers, posing challenges in retaining qualified teachers. The influx of Ukrainian refugees strains the system, jeopardizing equal access. Efforts to address disparities in school advice and adapt the CITO examination aim to rectify issues. However, transition ease between lower and higher secondary schools hasn't increased, and access to higher education remains unequal, particularly for students from lower-income households or those with less-educated parents. Growing dissatisfaction with mainstream schools is reflected in the increasing applications to private unfunded schools.

The Netherlands mandates a minimum qualification level, the “starter qualification,” for all youth. Municipalities invest in adult education and low literacy through an earmarked funding program. However, assessing the quality of these offerings is challenging due to the mechanisms of public tenders. Large community colleges often offer one-size-fits-all classes in bulk, hindering the ability to tailor education to individual needs.

Citation:

<https://husite.nl/duurzaam/onderwijs-in-duurzaamheid-moet-meer-aandacht-krijgen-op-lerarenopleidingen/>

Trendrapportage Arbeidsmarkt Leraren po, vo en mbo. 2023. Ministerie van OC&W, December, Den Haag.

De staat van onderwijs 2023, Inspectie van het Onderwijs 2023

Dossier Duurzame ontwikkeling SLO. <https://www.slo.nl/thema/vakspecifieke-thema/natuur-techniek/duurzame/>

Verklaren verschillen in vaardigheden de verschillen in schooladvies naar sociaaleconomische status? 2022. <https://www.cpb.nl/verklaren-verschillen-vaardigheden-de-verschillen-schooladvies-naar-sociaaleconomische-status>

Een blik op de Nederlandse positie in internationale onderwijsrankings, December 2022, <https://www.cpb.nl/een-blik-op-de-nederlandse-positie-in-internationale-onderwijsrankings>

<https://www.onderwijsinspectie.nl/actueel/nieuws/2023/06/21/in-eerste-helft-schooljaar-kregen-veel-oekraïense-kinderen-onderwijs>

Poland

Score 7

Poland has made efforts to create a more inclusive and equitable educational system, ensuring that students have equal access to educational opportunities regardless of their socioeconomic background. The country provides 12 years of compulsory education, including primary and lower secondary education. Additionally, measures are in place to support students with special educational needs. Poland has a predominantly public education system, meaning the government funds education. This helps reduce financial barriers to access.

The PiS government made significant efforts to increase the availability of childcare, making this one of the most important elements of its family-oriented policies. In 2021, more than 90% of pupils from age three to the starting age of compulsory education at the primary level were enrolled in early childhood education, a figure close to the EU average (Eurostat 2023). Over the last decade, the number of

available places in preschools in Poland has been increasing. Residents of large cities and surrounding areas, as well as those in the western counties of Poland, have easier access to preschools than do other populations. Conversely, underfunded preschools are primarily located in the counties of the Podlaskie, Lubelskie and Warmińsko-Mazurskie voivodships, which are among the country's poorest regions.

The government introduced the Family Care Capital Act, which, as of April 1, 2022 provided subsidies for children under three years old to attend childcare institutions. The funds are transferred directly to municipalities, private entities, foundations, associations and individuals. The goal is to facilitate access to childcare institutions, particularly in areas that lack public services.

Despite these efforts, challenges related to equitable access have persisted. Socioeconomic factors continue to influence educational outcomes, and there are regional disparities in the quality of education. Additionally, issues such as the availability of resources, teacher quality and infrastructure affect the overall equity of the system. Among the biggest challenges have been access to higher education institutions due to high living costs in cities, along with insufficient support schemes for students.

Poland has also recognized the importance of providing second-chance education opportunities for individuals who may have left the formal education system with low skill levels. All types of adult schools – primary, secondary and post-secondary – are run by the state. In the case of post-secondary schools, most are private (Statistics Poland 2023). The state has established adult education centers (Ośrodki Kształcenia Ustawicznego Dorosłych, OKUD) that offer a variety of courses and programs aimed at adults who wish to improve their skills or obtain additional qualifications. There is also an emphasis on vocational education and training (VET). However, the validation of non-formal and informal learning systems does not work efficiently (Eurydice 2023).

Citation:

Eurydice. 2023. "Poland." <https://eurydice.eacea.ec.europa.eu/national-education-systems/poland/main-providers>

Eurostat. 2023. "Share of pupils from age 3 years to the starting age of compulsory education at primary level who are enrolled in early childhood education." [https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=File:Share_of_pupils_from_age_3_years_to_the_starting_age_of_compulsory_education_at_primary_level_who_are_enrolled_in_early_childhood_education,_2021_\(%25\)_ET2023.png](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=File:Share_of_pupils_from_age_3_years_to_the_starting_age_of_compulsory_education_at_primary_level_who_are_enrolled_in_early_childhood_education,_2021_(%25)_ET2023.png)

Statistics Poland. 2023. "Education in the School Year 2022/2023 (Preliminary Data)." <https://stat.gov.pl/en/topics/education/education/education-in-the-school-year-20222023-preliminary-data,13,1.html>

Spain

Score 7

Spain has improved access to early childhood education across all autonomous communities. Spanish legislation ensures that every child aged three and above has a legal entitlement to a place in an early childhood education institution. Royal Decree 95/2022 establishes minimum teaching standards for early childhood education,

declares the second cycle tuition-free, and outlines plans for extending free education to the first cycle, prioritizing students at risk of poverty and social exclusion.

Administrations are mandated to incrementally enhance the availability of public places in the first cycle. The RRP includes a commitment to creating 60,000 affordable public places for children under three by 2024, particularly in areas with higher risks of poverty or social exclusion and in rural regions.

Autonomous communities establish the curriculum for early childhood education and regulate complementary activities and school services. Financial support, admission processes, and the number of places vary significantly among communities. A sound monitoring system for quality is still to be established, and further cooperation is necessary to ensure equal access and quality.

Primary, secondary and post-secondary non-tertiary education are compulsory and cost-free. The Law of Education includes measures to ensure that students from low-income families are equally represented in public and semi-private centers. Extracurricular activities that require payment will not be allowed during school hours.

According to national framework legislation, the autonomous communities must encourage the quality, equity and social inclusion of students with disabilities, as well as equal opportunities and nondiscrimination. The role of the National Institute for Educational Evaluation could be fostered.

School failure is significant in Spain, with the percentage of students not achieving the compulsory education diploma below 15%. This proportion has stabilized after a decade of substantial decrease. Students who fail cannot continue and eventually leave formal education. The education law aims to increase educational and training opportunities for all, improve educational outcomes, and limit grade repetition. The Spanish government and autonomous communities are jointly implementing cooperation programs to promote second-chance education opportunities for students at risk of repeating grades or leaving school, through targeted pedagogical and psychological guidance. However, awareness of these opportunities for re-entry into education and training remains low.

Citation:

OCDE. 2023. Propuestas para un plan de acción para reducir el abandono escolar temprano en España. <https://www.oecd.org/education/propuestas-para-un-plan-de-accion-para-reducir-el-abandono-escolar-temprano-en-espana-9bc3285d-es.htm>

Eurydice. 2023. "Spain." <https://eurydice.eacea.ec.europa.eu/national-education-systems/spain/overview>

Austria

Score 6

The Austrian educational system does not perform to its potential. Given Austria's economic position, the country should have a significantly higher number of tertiary graduates. According to research institutions and experts such as the OECD, the reason for this underperformance lies in the early division of children into multiple educational tracks, which occurs after the fourth grade. Despite some improvements and the increasing role of the Fachhochschulen (universities of applied science, polytechnics), the Austrian educational system remains highly socially selective. Parents' social and educational status heavily influences students' ability to access higher education, aligning with Austria's low score in the OECD PISA assessment regarding the socioeconomic background of pupils (23rd out of 30 in 2022).

Inequity has long been an issue in higher education, particularly within university systems. Access to the Austrian university system remains highly unequal, with children of parents holding tertiary education degrees and/or higher incomes enjoying better odds of graduating from a university. The new university reform bill, passed by the ÖVP-Green governing majority in March 2021, has further increased social inequity in higher education. Among other changes, the law introduced a new regime requiring students to earn a higher number of European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS) points per semester to continue their studies, making it increasingly difficult to combine university education with employment in Austria.

The Austrian dual system of vocational training, which combines on-the-job training and classroom education, receives better marks. This system is primarily aimed at individuals who want to start working at age 15 but is accessible up to age 18. Despite its proven strengths, critics have identified several weaknesses in comparison with the neighboring German dual system and pointed to the continued limited public appreciation of this educational sector.

There is an established system of second-chance education opportunities for individuals with very low skill levels upon leaving school. However, it has been criticized for being overly traditional and less effective than it could be.

Early childhood education is still lacking, partly because of the resistance of the ÖVP government and the socially conservative preferences of Austrians compared to Northern Europeans.

Citation:

<https://kurier.at/wirtschaft/karriere/warum-sich-ein-lehrabschluss-ueber-den-zweiten-bildungsweg-lohnt/401802811>

https://www.ots.at/presseaussendung/OTS_20210622_OTS0105/mega-bildungsstiftung-praesentiert-1-oesterreichischen-bildungsklima-index-anhaenge

<https://kurier.at/freizeit/leben-liebe-sex/die-corona-krise-wird-zum-turbo-fuer-die-schulreform/401184538>

<https://www.derstandard.at/story/2000127332990/auf-ab-und-quer-fuer-oesterreichische-universitaeten>

<https://www.derstandard.at/story/2000122916023/hat-oesterreich-tatsaechlich-das-beste-dualeausbildungssystem>

https://www.pedocs.de/volltexte/2017/15005/pdf/Dossier_2017_Brueckner.pdf

France

Score 6

Compulsory education in France begins at age three, which means 100% of these children attend preschool institutions. It ends at age 16, although 90% of the population is enrolled until age 17. There is a de facto training obligation until age 18. The overall child-teacher ratio is comparatively high at 23:1 (compared to 15:1 in the OECD overall), but the ratio falls 14:1 in primary schools, thanks to specialized preschool helpers.

Although public expenditure per student is above the OECD average at the secondary level, it remains lower at the primary level, despite catch-up efforts that have been ongoing since 2012 (Girard 2023).

The 2022 PISA study confirmed that French students' performance was more strongly correlated with socioeconomic status than was the case elsewhere. France places in the lower third of OECD countries regarding math attainment and socioeconomic background. It also has an above-average share of low achievers across all three PISA test categories.

A recent study suggests that the influence of socioeconomic status on performance is evident beginning as early as preschool (see Goudeau et al. 2023).

Citation:

Goudeau, Sébastien, et al. 2023. "Unequal Opportunities from the Start: Socioeconomic Disparities in Classroom Participation in Preschool." *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General* 152 (11): 3135–3152. <https://doi.org/10.1037/xge0001437>.

Girard. 2023. "Dépenses d'éducation: la France investit peu par rapport aux autres pays de l'OCDE." *L'Étudiant/EducPros*, June 1. Retrieved 11 March 2024 from <https://www.letudiant.fr/educpros/actualite/depenses-education-la-france-investit-peu-par-rapport-aux-autres-pays-de-l'ocde.html>

Germany

Score 6

School attendance in Germany is compulsory, with the number of mandatory years varying between nine and ten years depending on the state. Preprimary education, in contrast, is not mandatory. However, there are regulations ensuring that children have access to early childhood development and care (Edelstein, 2013).

On the federal level, Article 24 of Book 8 of the German Social Code – Child and Youth Services – regulates that children from ages one to three, as well as children from age three until the beginning of primary school, have a legal claim to early childhood development, care, and preprimary education. In March 2023, 90.1% of

children between the ages of three and six, as well as 36.4% of children below the age of three, were enrolled in child daycares. The childcare quotas vary across individual states. In Bremen, for instance, only 86% of children over three years old attend child daycare, while the percentage is considerably higher in Thuringia at 94.4% (Statistisches Bundesamt, 2023).

While children from the age of one on have the right to a childcare slot, the demand exceeds the supply of available slots, meaning not every child has access to preprimary education. This particularly applies to children below three years of age, as the need and actual rate of childcare for this group differ by 13.6 percentage points (BMFSFJ, 2023). A study by the Federal Institute for Population Research showed that disadvantaged families are disproportionately affected by this issue. Children below three from families vulnerable to poverty and with parents with low levels of education are less likely to receive a place in childcare. Furthermore, only 24% of children who do not speak German at home are in childcare, compared to 38% of children from primarily German-speaking households. These findings are problematic, as these children could particularly benefit from preprimary education (Bundesinstitut für Bevölkerungsforschung, 2023).

Nevertheless, the share of children enrolled in early childhood education systems in Germany is still above the OECD average and the EU25 average (OECD, 2023).

Regarding primary and secondary education, the previously mentioned compulsory schooling (Schulpflicht) is regulated by the school laws of the respective state, with the specific structure varying between states. Once schooling is no longer compulsory, secondary schools have mandatory attendance (Deutscher Bundestag, 2019). These regulations result in high enrollment rates in Germany, with a rate of 99% for the age group of six to fourteen and 88% for ages 15 to 19, which is above the OECD average (OECD, 2023).

During primary school, all children, regardless of socioeconomic background, attend the same educational institutions. Depending on the state, primary education extends from year one to year four or until year six. Secondary education is divided into different school forms with varying levels of education. Students receive a recommendation for secondary school based on grades and, occasionally, other criteria such as learning behavior (Schullaufbahneempfehlung). While it is not mandatory to follow this recommendation, some states require students to take an entrance exam or pass a probationary period if they choose a non-recommended type of school (Edelstein, 2013).

Equitable access to all levels of secondary and tertiary education, regardless of socioeconomic background, is an issue in Germany. For example, the probability of a child attending the highest level of secondary schooling (Gymnasium) is only 21.1% if no parent graduated with an Abitur and the family's net monthly household income is below €2,600. This probability increases to 80.3% if both parents have an Abitur and earn a net monthly household income of over €5,500 (Wößmann et al.,

2023). Similarly, only 27% of students from non-academic households go on to study at a university, while this share is 79% for students from academic households (Stifterverband, 2022).

Additionally, the German education system offers second-chance education opportunities (Zweiter Bildungsweg, ZBW). The ZBW is part of adult education and enables adults to obtain a school-leaving certificate later in life. This opportunity exists for all levels of secondary education. However, since the ZBW, like other parts of the education system, is regulated by the states, individual regulations and opportunities vary depending on the state. Despite the availability of second-chance education, the overall number of people obtaining school-leaving qualifications through this route is rather small, with around 50,000 participants (Käpplinger, Reuter and Pfeil, 2020).

Citation:

BMFSFJ. 2023. "92 Prozent der Kinder von 3 Jahren bis zum Schuleintritt besuchten 2022 eine Kita." <https://www.bmfsfj.de/bmfsfj/aktuelles/presse/pressemitteilungen/92-prozent-der-kinder-von-3-jahren-bis-zum-schuleintritt-besuchten-2022-eine-kita-228528>

Bundesinstitut für Bevölkerungsforschung. 2023. "Weiterhin Ungleichheiten bei der Kita-Nutzung." Bevölkerungsforschung Aktuell 2. https://www.bib.bund.de/Publikation/2023/pdf/Bevoelkerungsforschung-Aktuell-2-2023.pdf?__blob=publicationFile&v=2

Deutscher Bundestag. 2019. "Schulpflicht und Gestaltung des Schulwesens Zulässigkeit der Verpflichtung von Schülern zu gesellschaftlichem oder sozialem Engagement." <https://www.bundestag.de/resource/blob/678442/22ae33f7a7612a3560dfba57dd5a4549/WD-3-259-19-pdf-data.pdf>

Edelstein, B. 2013. "Das Bildungssystem im Deutschland." <https://www.bpb.de/themen/bildung/dossier-bildung/163283/das-bildungssystem-in-deutschland>

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Israel

Score 6

All children in Israel are eligible for free public education from age three until 12th grade. The education system ensures equal access until 12th grade regardless of a child's economic status (Knesset Research Center 2015).

Preschool teachers are qualified and supervised by the Ministry of Education. The preschool curriculum aims to prepare all children for primary education. Children from peripheral areas and localities with low socioeconomic status are also eligible

for after-school programs. In other localities, after-school programs are partially subsidized by the central government and, in some cases, by the local authority.

Most daycare services for children aged under three are private. Some semi-public daycare services are supervised and subsidized by the Ministry of Labor. Low-income families pay subsidized tuition based on various criteria. Private daycare services are not supervised. Recently, the government introduced subsidies for children aged three and under who attend private daycare, although primarily through tax exemptions that benefit high earners.

Alongside the public education system, there is a private education system for ultraorthodox children. Some schools within this system are not supervised at all by the Ministry of Education, while are partially supervised. Boys' schools that lack supervision do not teach mathematics or English. This contributes to severe inequalities, as graduates from these schools face challenges integrating into the labor market and society. The partially supervised schools offer minimal mathematics and English instruction, and their graduates also struggle to integrate into the labor market. Although girls' schools also lack supervision, they do teach mathematics and English, and their graduates often take the general graduation exams, allowing them to enroll in universities. Notably, the current government has decided to increase funding for unsupervised schools, despite the refusal of such schools to accept any supervision or changes to their curriculum.

The regular education system is divided into three branches: general, religious and Arab. Pupils in religious schools receive preferential budgeting of approximately 30% more compared to pupils in general schools, while pupils in Arab schools suffer from reduced budgeting of about 9% less compared to pupils in general schools (Knesset Research Center 2023).

Opportunities for second-chance education exist predominantly at the local level. These programs, typically operated by nonprofit organizations and subsidized by the Ministry of Education, receive minimal funding. Universities also offer second-chance opportunities. For example, students can enroll for an additional year before their undergraduate studies, with their grades from exams taken during that year serving as a substitute for general graduation exams.

Citation:

Knesset Research Center. 2015. "The Education System in Israel (Hebrew)." <https://m.knesset.gov.il/activity/info/mmmsummaries19/education.pdf>

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Italy

Score 6

Equity in education in Italy is a double-edged sword. While the system ranks highly in ensuring access to all education levels, except for pre-primary where there is a shortage of places, it is much less equitable in learning outcomes. Annual national tests reveal significant differences in learning outcomes between northern-central and southern Italy. Contributing factors may include the less common presence of full-time school programs and school meals in southern Italy, as recently documented by the SVIMEZ report.

Additionally, adult education participation is low, indicating underdeveloped second-chance education. Policies are designed to ensure equal access but not sufficiently to ensure equal results, with political attention often focusing on access and neglecting outcomes.

Citation:
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REV: Svimez annual report: <https://lnx.svimez.info/svimez/il-rapporto/>

New Zealand

Score 6

New Zealand’s education policy aims to facilitate equitable access to high-quality education and training.

Early childhood education (ECE) received a significant financial boost in the 2023 budget when the Labour-Green coalition announced an extension of the 20-hours-free ECE scheme to include two-year-olds. The government estimated this will save families about \$133 a week, or nearly \$7,000 a year. Additionally, the government altered the scheme’s conditions, requiring ECE centers to allow parents to enroll their children for only the free 20 hours rather than in larger blocks that forced families to pay for extra hours (Wiggins 2023). In 2018, the Labour-led administration under Ardern passed a policy making the first year of university education free. This policy resulted in a \$194-million decline in borrowing for fees through student loans between 2017 and 2018 (Gerritsen 2020).

The government also seeks to support and promote Māori education, recognizing the importance of cultural identity and language in providing equitable educational opportunities. For example, the 2023 budget committed \$225 million to Māori education initiatives, which according to estimates benefited 25,000 students in 325 Māori schools across the country (Wikaire-Lewis 2023).

Despite various policies and initiatives, New Zealand has one of the most unequal education systems in the industrialized world. According to UNICEF's 2018 Innocenti Report Card, which analyzes the gaps between the highest and lowest performing pupils in OECD countries, New Zealand ranks 33rd out of 38 in the area of educational equality across preschool, primary school and secondary school levels. The reading gap at age 10 between New Zealand's best and worst readers stands at 230 points, compared to 153 points for the Netherlands – the country with the smallest gap (UNICEF 2018). More recently, the 2022 PISA report showed declines in math and science performance, with Māori and Pasifika student performance falling faster than the average. Almost half (47%) of Māori students performed below the baseline PISA level in math in 2022, significantly higher than the 37% in 2018 (Cheng 2023).

The inequality of the education system also reflects in other indicators. Perhaps most concerning, Māori and Pasifika students are significantly less likely than Pākehā (New Zealanders of European descent) students to leave the education system with a degree. In the 2018 census, 80.6% of Māori and 83% of Pasifika 15- to 24-year-olds had at least a level 1 qualification or equivalent, compared with 85.8% of 15- to 24-year-olds nationally. Older age groups show an even larger difference, with 73% of Māori and 72.1% of Pasifika 45- to 54-year-olds having at least a level 1 qualification or equivalent, compared with 84.6% of 45- to 54-year-olds nationally (Stats NZ 2020).

Citation:

Cheng, D. 2023. "NZ school students' performance falling in maths and science: Pisa report." New Zealand Herald, December 6. <https://www.nzherald.co.nz/nz/politics/pisa-report-nz-school-students-performance-falling-in-maths-and-science/IRFO2WL2KNDABPJ2XA4CGNNJHQ/>

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Portugal

Score 6

Portugal offers equitable free education to students regardless of their socioeconomic backgrounds. Textbooks are free for students in public schools throughout the 12 years of compulsory education. Monthly scholarships aim to curb dropout rates, enhance qualifications, and offset increased costs tied to mandatory attendance. Higher education features relatively affordable fees, accompanied by means-tested support for low-income students.

However, this contrasts with disparities in the quality of education between public and private schools. The average school scores in the 2022 national exams ranged from 15.11 (out of 20) in the highest-rated public school to 7.83 in the lowest-rated public school (Público, 2023a). Disparities are more pronounced in private schools, where the top-performing school averaged 16.36 – over twice the average of the lowest-rated school, which was 7.09.

Additionally, the ongoing wave of teacher strikes is disproportionately impacting students in public schools. As of January, several public schools, particularly in the Lisbon and Algarve regions, are struggling to find teachers to fill remaining vacancies in their timetables. High rental prices in these areas are a significant deterrent for many teachers considering job postings. In response, the government has introduced an extraordinary income support measure: during 2024, teachers assigned to the Algarve and Lisbon regions who live more than 70 kilometers from their workplace will be eligible for a maximum monthly support of up to €200. This initiative aims to alleviate the financial burden for teachers and address the staffing challenges in these regions, although its actual effectiveness is constrained by the very high rent in these regions.

Regarding early childhood, the government has recently intensified efforts to ensure universal access to affordable and accessible childcare through the “Creche Feliz” program (DRE, 2022). However, stakeholders in the field have deemed these efforts insufficient (Público, 2023b).

Citation:

DRE. 2022. Ordinance No. 198/2022 – Regulamenta as condições específicas de concretização da medida da gratuidade das creches e creches familiares, integradas no sistema de cooperação, bem como das amas do Instituto da Segurança Social, I. P.
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Projeto de Lei 120/XV/1 – Propõe a criação de uma rede pública de creches como forma de garantir os direitos das crianças. <https://www.parlamento.pt/ActividadeParlamentar/Paginas/DetailheIniciativa.aspx?BID=121557>

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United Kingdom

Score 6

All education providers across the UK are subject to inspections and a regulatory framework designed to assure quality. In England, OFSTED is responsible for inspecting schools; in Wales, it is Estyn; in Scotland, Education Scotland; and in Northern Ireland, the Education and Training Inspectorate. These inspections evaluate school quality and can impose stringent recommendations and gradings,

aiming to provide parents with informed choices about where to send their children. However, following the suicide of a headteacher who received an “inadequate” rating – and a coroner’s verdict blaming the inspection outcome – OFSTED announced in December 2023 that it was suspending inspections to rethink its approach.

Despite these inspection regimes, geographical differences in school quality persist, often affecting local house prices. High-quality schools can be found in both affluent and deprived areas. Enhancing educational opportunities is part of the government’s “leveling-up” agenda, although equal access does not necessarily lead to equal outcomes. School exam crises in 2020 highlighted systemic inequalities in educational outcomes. The UK and devolved governments, in coordination with qualifications agencies, approved the use of an algorithm to modify teacher-assessed grades, which initially resulted in downgrading scores in deprived areas. Attempts to avoid similar public outcry in 2021 were successful, but the underlying inequalities remain (Kippin and Cairney 2023).

Entry to the best universities is competitive, and there has long been a bias favoring privately educated pupils at institutions like Cambridge and Oxford, as well as top universities in Scotland. Private pupils often benefit from greater familiarity with entry requirements, the quality of their schools, and family connections. However, in recent years, Oxbridge has made significant efforts to attract students from poorer backgrounds, reducing the proportion of private entrants, although they remain overrepresented. High fees and the terms of student loans are also mentioned as potential deterrents to university applicants from poorer backgrounds, although the steady increase in enrollments suggests otherwise.

Support for “second-chance” educational opportunities has faced funding cuts since 2010 and erratic policy changes, as highlighted in an FE Week article celebrating the 60th anniversary of the National Extension College, a key provider. While new initiatives in further education (see “Policies Targeting Quality Education”) may improve the situation, the offer has clearly been inadequate, and the recent rise in NEETs is a disappointment.

Citation:

<https://feweek.co.uk/national-extension-college-sixty-years-of-second-chance-learning/>

Sean Kippin and Paul Cairney. 2023. “COVID-19 and the Second Exams Fiasco Across the UK: Four Nations Trying to Avoid Immediate Policy Failure.” *British Politics* 18 (1): 151-72. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41293-022-00202-1>

Australia

Score 5

Australia’s educational resources and opportunities are not equally available to all students.

In schools, significant geographical and gender disparities exist, with boys underperforming relative to girls (Hare 2022). Geographic disparities reflect broader

inequities in resources available to government schools compared with non-government schools (Hare 2024).

Child care and early childhood development are mostly delivered by private providers. While heavily subsidized, fees remain a considerable barrier to uptake. State governments provide kindergarten for children aged 4, and in some states for children aged 3, typically under 16 hours per week. Fees vary across jurisdictions, and attendance is below 100% as kindergarten is not compulsory.

In the university sector, significant geographical divides persist, with urban youth more likely to attend university than rural counterparts (O'Shea 2023). Indigenous communities face significant educational disadvantages. However, the deferred-repayment system for levying tuition fees (the Higher Education Contribution Scheme and the Higher Education Loan Program) and the availability of income support for students in the form of Youth Allowance, Austudy and Abstudy, mean that barriers to attendance for disadvantaged students are relatively low (Norton 2023). The persistence of under-representation of students from disadvantaged backgrounds in higher education and other inequities, largely stem from sources unconnected to the higher education system itself, such as disparities in access to high-quality schooling.

There are multiple pathways to both vocational education and higher education, and mature-age entry into post-school education is common.

Citation:

Hare, J. 2022. "Why Australia's Students Keep Falling Behind." Financial Review September 30. <https://www.afr.com/work-and-careers/education/why-australia-s-students-keep-falling-behind-20220928-p5blna>

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Norton, A. 2023. Mapping Australian Higher Education 2023. Canberra: ANU Centre for Social Research and Methods. https://csrcm.cass.anu.edu.au/sites/default/files/docs/2023/10/Mapping_Australian_higher_education_2023_005.pdf

Hare, J. 2024. "Underfunding of Public Schools Fuels Achievement Gap, Analysis Shows." Financial Review January 23. <https://www.afr.com/work-and-careers/education/underfunding-of-public-schools-fuels-achievement-gap-analysis-shows-20240122-p5ez47>

Greece

Score 5

The share of Greek children (ages 3 – 5) in early childhood education and care increased rapidly from 77% in 2015 to 81% in 2022. However, compared to other OECD countries, Greece remains a laggard in this regard (Eurostat 2022a).

However, the education system ensures equitable access to all levels of education, regardless of socioeconomic background, through tuition-free primary, secondary, and tertiary education. All Greek universities are public and do not charge any tuition for undergraduate or PhD programs.

The education system offers second-chance opportunities for individuals with low skill levels upon leaving formal education. For instance, there are “second chance” public schools for early school leavers who did not complete secondary education. Additionally, the Hellenic Open University – a public institution modeled after the Open University of the UK – provides university-level educational opportunities for high school graduates who entered the labor market directly rather than proceeding to tertiary education.

The educational opportunities and achievements of pupils vary according to their socioeconomic background. In the largest Greek cities, numerous private primary and secondary schools exist. Parents who can afford it often enroll their children in these private schools rather than the local public schools in their neighborhoods. The infrastructure and effective hours of schooling in private schools are almost always superior to those in public schools. Evidence shows the impact of socioeconomic status on educational achievement. In terms of PISA tests, Greece demonstrates one of the strongest associations between results in mathematics and economic, cultural, and social status (ESCS; PISA 2022) compared to other EU countries.

Success in the competitive entrance examinations to public universities, which 18-year-old students take, also depends on socioeconomic status. Public schools do not adequately prepare students for these highly competitive exams. To increase their chances of success, students from middle- and upper-class families enroll in fee-supported private cramming schools, where they receive more systematic instruction than they do in public high schools.

To sum up, although education in Greece is provided free of charge at all levels, allowing even the poorest strata to receive an education, the current policy approach in the education system hinders rather than facilitates equitable access to high-quality education and training.

Citation:

Eurostat. 2022. “Children in Formal Childcare or Education by Age Group and Duration – % Over the Population of Each Age Group – EU-SILC Survey.” https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/ilc_caindformal/default/table?lang=en

PISA. 2022. “PISA 2022 Results (Volume I), The State of Learning and Equity in Education, Figure I.4.13.” https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/education/pisa-2022-results-volume-i_53f23881-en <https://stat.link/4q3apj>

The website of the Hellenic Open University (EAP) is <https://www.eap.gr/en/>

Hungary

Score 5

Preprimary education in Hungary is traditionally very strong, with the country securing the top rank among OECD countries. Kindergarten attendance is compulsory from the age of three. However, the share of male teachers in this segment is extremely low.

In primary education, the socioeconomic background of pupils significantly impacts performance. The COVID-19 pandemic hit Hungary hard, causing already low numbers in 2018 to decline further in 2022, as shown by PISA surveys. The system tends to produce low achievers, and the number of early school leavers is comparatively high. Particular issues include a lack of digital and language skills. About 50% of early leavers aged 18-24 still find employment, which is average compared to other EU countries. The share of young people aged 24-29 who are neither employed nor in vocational training is relatively low. Vocational education and training programs often do not lead to tertiary education, necessitating bridging programs. Hungary provides opportunities to personalize the curriculum to individual needs and offers tools for the professional and social integration of vulnerable young people, but does less to reduce societal stigmatization (S2CENE 2022: 42). Incentives for teachers are provided to guide students to achieve outstanding results in academic competitions, but fewer incentives exist for teachers working with disadvantaged youth, whose efforts are not valued at the same level (S2CENE 2022: 51).

Providing teachers who work with underprivileged students, such as Roma children, with extra pay opportunities and incorporating inclusive education measures into teacher qualification procedures are steps in the right direction. However, efforts to tackle social exclusion, especially among Roma children and young migrants, remain underdeveloped and are somewhat hindered by government ideology. The regulatory framework does not tackle early school leaving with standalone regulation, but addresses the issue within the national strategy, the Public Education Strategy 2021 – 2030 (Köznevelési stratégia 2021 – 2030), adopted in 2020. The ministerial evaluation of the program's predecessor (2015 – 2020) cites success and improving numbers, yet these improvements are not reflected in internationally comparable data. Institutionally, the Educational Authority (Oktatási Hivatal) has established a system for monitoring and controlling teachers' work. Meanwhile, the Pedagogical Educational Centers (Pedagógiai Oktatási Központok) aim to coordinate, manage and monitor efforts at the local level. Despite some progress, national standards in this field are still underdeveloped, leaving it predominantly to individual schools to develop adequate frameworks. Nevertheless, awareness in this area is growing, as is the number of schools developing relevant schemes. On a macrolevel, schools will face significant challenges in the future due to the ongoing conflict between teachers and the government, which is expected to lead to higher quitting rates among teachers. Moreover, because of suboptimal performance in public schools and labor shortage issues, an increasing number of wealthy parents are opting for private alternatives. This trend exacerbates existing disparities in access to and quality of education (Radó 2018).

Citation:

Radó, P. 2019. "Market Reforms in the Hungarian School System: Impact of Changes in the Ownership Structure." NESET Ad Hoc Report.

S2CENE. 2022. "Framework for Second Chance Schools in Europe." Sofia: University of Sofia Press. <https://s2cene.eu/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/D.1.2-FRAMEWORK-FOR-SCS-IN-EUROPE-Report.pdf>

Switzerland

Score 5

While women and – with some exceptions – persons from peripheral regions have equal access to higher education, the Swiss education system continues to discriminate at all levels against students from families with low social status. A recent report summarizes the current state of research: “(N)ot all citizens enjoy the same level of participation in education, achievement and qualifications. Despite the expansion of the education system and increasing participation in more advanced levels of education and training (‘educational expansion’), education opportunities depend on factors that have little to do with performance, such as social origin, migration background or gender. This runs counter to the principle of equal opportunity enshrined in the federal constitution and to the generally accepted notion that goods and positions should be allocated on the basis of merit. Measured in terms of learning outcomes, the Swiss education system is therefore not only inefficient but also unfair. Equal opportunity remains a utopia” (Becker and Schoch 2018: 30). This is exacerbated by the fact that children are separated into different education curricula tracks very early on at school (at the age of 12) leading either to high school or to occupation training.

Higher education in Switzerland is also affected by the federal system. Whereas cantons such as Geneva, Basel-City and Ticino have followed international trends favoring general qualifications for university entrance, other cantons – in particular the German-speaking parts of the country – have focused on a split system of university and vocational education. Thus, in the canton of Geneva, around 34% of each age cohort acquires the *matura*, a high school exit diploma that allows the student to go directly to a university or university of applied sciences. In contrast, in the canton of Uri, only 13% gain direct access to a university or university of applied sciences (2019). In any case, the proportion of individuals obtaining this university-track high school diploma is low in European comparison. The recent report on education finds that not only does the probability of obtaining a university-track high school diploma vary between cantons, the probability of entering a high school (Gymnasium) in the first place does as well. “The cantonal entry rate for high schools varies between 12.8% and 48.6%” (SKBF 2023: 158). However, the effect of this “federal” discrimination is somewhat reduced by permeability within the school and university systems.

Citation:

Becker, Rolf, und Jürg Schoch. 2018. Soziale Selektivität. Empfehlungen des Schweizerischen Wissenschaftsrates SWR. Expertenbericht von Rolf Becker und Jürg Schoch im Auftrag des SWR (Politische Analyse 3/2018). Bern: SWR.

SKBF (Schweizerische Koordinationsstelle für Bildungsforschung). 2023. Bildungsbericht Schweiz 2023. Aarau: Schweizerische Koordinationsstelle für Bildungsforschung.

Slovakia

Score 4

Existing policies and regulations ensure equal access to pre-primary education. According to Law 209/2019, which amended the general schooling law (245/2008), all children under five – the last year before entering primary school – must attend kindergarten. Additionally, access to kindergarten from age three is guaranteed based on the amendment of the general schooling law from May 9, 2023 (this right will be implemented step-by-step until 2025). Access to early childhood development facilities (nurseries), however, is not guaranteed.

The education system ensures equitable access to all levels of education, regardless of socioeconomic background. According to the PISA 2022 report (OECD, 2023), Slovakia is significantly below the OECD average for the indicator “socioeconomic fairness.” Students with low social status also have poor results. In April 2023, the European Union initiated investigations at the European Court of Justice into Slovakia for continuing discrimination against Roma children in primary education. According to the EU, Slovakia is the EU member state with the highest rate of segregation of Roma in education, and the existing plans to address this problem are insufficient.

The education system does not provide regular second-chance education opportunities for individuals with very low skill levels upon leaving education, except for retraining. There is also a lack of education programs “preparing teachers for a non-mainstream educational process with non-mainstream pupils” (Lukáč and Lukáčová 2024: 34).

Citation:

OECD. 2023. PISA 2022 Results The State of Learning and Equity in Education. Paris: OECD.

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United States

Score 4

The U.S. education system exhibits high levels of inequality, largely due to its highly fragmented nature in both standard-setting and financing. Generally, poorer localities have fewer resources to allocate to their schools compared to wealthier ones, which only entrenches inequality further.

The federal government makes some efforts to correct these inequities, but they are insufficient. The Head Start program, a product of Lyndon Johnson's Great Society in the 1960s, provides preschool education to low-income children, as well as family support services and basic nutrition. Child Care and Development Block Grants (CCDBG) are funds the federal government disburses to state governments, which are then expected to develop programs to help fund quality childcare and early years learning, especially for low-income children.

Title I is a federal program that allocates additional resources to schools with high concentrations of children from low-income backgrounds. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 1990 (IDEA) builds on previous legislation and was designed to provide funding for resources that enable disabled children to integrate into mainstream schools rather than be educated separately. Millions of U.S. children receive educational support through this fund.

Community colleges offer individuals the opportunity to pursue further and higher education at a relatively low cost, thanks to public funding. However, access to these colleges, as well as the generosity and prevalence of their programs, is often tied to state or local funding issues. Many community colleges are also connected to adult education and literacy programs, such as Adult Basic Education (ABE) and English as a Second Language (ESL) classes. The General Educational Development (GED) program enables people who did not obtain their high school diploma to receive an equivalent through study and training.

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