

Austria

Juliane Schmich

Federal Institute for Quality Assurance of the Austrian School System (IQS)^a

Mark Németh

Austrian Federal Ministry of Education, Science and Research

Introduction

Austria is a federal parliamentary republic consisting of nine provinces (*Bundesländer*), each with its own provincial government. Responsibility for legislation and its implementation is divided between the federation (*Bund*) and the provinces.

Austria's official language is German, with Slovenian, Croatian, and Hungarian as official languages in some districts in Carinthia and Burgenland.^b German also is the language of instruction except in districts with multiple languages. Primary school lessons in these districts are bilingual—German and either Slovenian, Croatian, or Hungarian must be used equally in instruction. Some compulsory secondary schools have a minority language as a required subject at the lower secondary level, and there is one Slovene secondary academic school in the country. Since the 2003–2004 academic year, Austria has introduced a modern foreign language course in all primary schools beginning in first grade.

Overview of Education System

The Austrian education system is hierarchically organized, centralized, and selective at an early stage. The Federal Ministry of Education, Science and Research is responsible for primary, secondary, and tertiary education, as well as for the University Colleges of Teacher Education (*Pädagogische Hochschulen*). Its supervisory responsibilities include all areas of school management, the organization of school instruction in public and private schools, and the service code of teachers employed by the Federal Ministry. It is also responsible for universities of applied sciences (*Fachhochschulen*).

Austria's nine provinces have legislative responsibility for providing Kindergarten and public sector compulsory education. They support local communities in establishing and maintaining these schools via the school construction funds they administer. Each province has a board of

^a Portions of this chapter are based on Austria's *PIRLS 2006 Encyclopedia* chapter, written by the Federal Ministry for Education, Arts, and Culture; Austria's *TIMSS 2007 Encyclopedia* chapter, written by the Federal Ministry for Education, Arts, and Culture and the Austrian National Research Center; Austria's *PIRLS 2011 Encyclopedia* chapter, written by Wallner-Paschon & Suchaň (http://timss.bc.edu/pirls2011/downloads/PIRLS2011_Enc-v1.pdf); and Austria's *PIRLS 2016 Encyclopedia* chapter, written by Wallner-Paschon (<http://timssandpirls.bc.edu/pirls2016/encyclopedia/>).

^b Apart from Slovenians, Croatians, and Hungarians, minorities include Czechs, Slovaks, and Roma people.

education, which is headed by a Director of Education. The board consists of an administrative department (*Präsidialbereich*), responsible in particular for personnel administration and accounting, and also a pedagogical department (*Pädagogischer Dienst*), responsible for school supervision and quality management for different education regions as well as for different content areas—for example, school quality, inclusion, and diversity.

Preprimary education is available to children up to age 6 via *crèches*, Kindergartens, and private childcare providers. Since 2010, one year of Kindergarten has been compulsory for all children age 5 before they start attending primary school in *Volksschule* at age 6. Education is compulsory for nine years (Grades 1 to 9). *Volksschule* encompasses Grades 1 to 4 for students ages 6 to 10.^c Parents of children whose sixth birthday falls before March 1 in the following calendar year may request earlier admission provided that the child is mature enough and has the required social competency to attend school. Six-year-old children considered insufficiently mature to attend school must attend preschool. Primary school comprises primary level I (preschool stage where required, and Grades 1 and 2) and primary level II (Grades 3 and 4). At the lower secondary level (Grades 5 to 8), students ages 10 to 14 can apply for entry to a lower level academic secondary school (*Allgemein bildende höhere Schule—Unterstufe*) or a compulsory secondary school (*Mittelschule*).

Austria has reformed lower secondary education (UNESCO’s International Standard Classification of Education [ISCED] Level 2) to reduce the effects of streaming students into different educational tracks too early.¹ The Austrian government introduced the compulsory secondary school scheme as a pilot project in academic year 2008–2009; Parliament passed the legislation in 2012. By academic year 2018–2019, all general secondary schools (*Hauptschulen*) were transformed into compulsory secondary schools.² A central feature of the compulsory secondary school curriculum is the broad implementation of a new learning culture based on individualization and inner differentiation.

The upper secondary level (Grades 9 to 13) comprises a general education branch and a vocational branch. General upper secondary education includes:

- Prevocational school (Year 9)
- Upper level of academic secondary school (*AHS-Oberstufe*) (Grades 9 to 12)
- The matriculation examination—Passing the examination allows students to study at universities or other higher education institutions.

Vocational upper secondary education includes:

- Part-time vocational school—Taken in tandem with company-based vocational training (Grades 10 to 13, but usually Grades 10 to 12)

^c Normally, children attend *Volksschule* from Grades 1 to 4. However, there are a few school locations where *Volksschule* also includes upper primary Grades 5 to 8.

- Secondary technical and vocational schools (Grades 9 to 12 at the latest)
- Colleges for higher vocational education (Years 9 to 13, ISCED Levels 3 to 5)

Colleges for higher vocational education, Kindergarten teacher education colleges, and training colleges for social pedagogues lead to the matriculation and diploma examination, which enables students to study at universities or other higher education institutions. Higher education institutions include:

- Public universities
- Universities of applied sciences (*Fachhochschulen*)
- Private universities
- University Colleges of Teacher Education (*Pädagogische Hochschulen*)

Use and Impact of PIRLS

Austria's experience with large-scale assessments began at irregular intervals with three International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA) international studies:

- The Computers in Education Study (1987 to 1993)
- The Language Education Study (1993 to 1996)
- The Third International Mathematics and Science Study (1993 to 1997)

Austria's participation in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's (OECD) Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) in 2000 was the beginning of regular participation in international assessments, not only in PISA but also in IEA studies. In order to complement the PISA data obtained at the end of compulsory schooling with data from the end of primary education, Austria's federal government decided the country should participate in PIRLS and Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) as well. Austria has participated in PIRLS 2006, 2011, 2016, and 2021, and in TIMSS 2007, 2011, and 2019.

PIRLS data are widely used in public debates and in practical work for developing educational programs (e.g., teacher education courses developed by the Coordination Center for Reading [*Koordinationsstelle: Lesen*]). The PIRLS results that attract the most attention relate to the percentage of students with sizable deficits in reading achievement, the association between socioeconomic status and student reading performance, the reading achievement of immigrant students, early reading socialization within the family and within preschool education, and reading socialization within school. As mentioned, the Coordination Center for Reading in the Federal Ministry of Education, Science and Research was established to coordinate a network of University Colleges of Teacher Education throughout Austria, thereby bringing together experts in preservice and in-service teacher education with teachers and others with expertise in the area of school supervision. Additionally, one essential purpose of the center is to disseminate PIRLS results among primary school teachers. The center has been working closely with the Austrian national

study center for PIRLS to achieve this aim. PIRLS results also have had an impact with respect to identifying topics relevant to teacher professional development in reading instruction offered by the University Colleges of Teacher Education. Moreover, PIRLS results have informed debates on educational standards in Austria. Austria's participation in large cross-national studies was an important starting point for fostering evidence-based policymaking as it provides a reliable source of data.

International studies have made education a prominent political issue in Austria and have drawn attention to areas of concern. These studies have highlighted strengths and weaknesses of Austria's education system, and the results have shown a need for reforms. Recent education reforms include the introduction of the "new secondary school" (now "compulsory secondary school"), a compulsory year of Kindergarten for all five-year-olds, the introduction of educational standards testing, the introduction of a standardized school leaving examination (*Standardisierte Reifeprüfung*), and a legislative decree on reading instruction.³ Legislation from July 2016 comprises the school entry and primary school package and aims to create a joint education area for students between the ages of 4 and 8 to enable a smoother transition from Kindergarten to primary school. This will be achieved, for example, with more exchange of information between Kindergarten and primary school teachers. In the future, schools also will be able to decide autonomously whether they can administer alternative performance assessments (e.g., verbal assessments).

The Language/Reading Curriculum in Primary Grades

Reading Policy

The national curriculum and a legislative decree on reading instruction reflect the current concept of reading literacy as a necessary means of communication and continuing education and as a basis for lifelong learning. The goal of literacy education is to learn basic literary theory and work on textual and contextual exercises connected to reading and writing. Reading development is understood to encompass acquiring and using reading skills and, in a wider sense, the ability to use reading as an important means of individual, cultural, and personal development. Engaging with a variety of texts enables students to appreciate national culture and to develop moral, aesthetic, and social values.

Introduction to reading starts with compulsory schooling at age 6. Students normally learn the letters of the alphabet by May or June of the first year of primary school, though different primers introduce the letters in varying sequence. The curriculum requires children to learn the whole alphabet by the end of the second year of primary school. Although reading and writing are developed simultaneously in most classes, some primers concentrate on reading before beginning the writing process. This is true for teaching block letters and script as well.

Summary of National Curriculum

The national curriculum is mandatory and comprises general instructions for teaching methods and specific instructions for subject content. Within the framework of the national curriculum, teachers are free to choose methods of reading instruction and technology use, but a balanced approach that connects learning to read, speak, and write is recommended. Students should achieve competency in reading skills according to their abilities. Teachers should use differentiated instruction based on individual student differences, including initial ranges of abilities prior to entering compulsory school, linguistic competency, motivation, interest in learning, learning ability, and social background. Special consideration is given to children whose first language is not German. The combined instruction time for German, reading, and writing is approximately seven hours per week.

Methods for developing reading and writing literacy should differ based on the creativity, thinking, experience, and independence of the students in the class. Teachers in Austrian schools may choose the whole language method or the phonics method to teach reading. The most frequent recommendations for motivating children to read include using a variety of texts, letting children choose texts, and using new media. Texts should be interesting and adapted to the development of the reader.

The national curriculum objectives in reading to be reached by the end of fourth grade include:

- Skillfully reading aloud and/or silently
- Developing an awareness of fiction and nonfiction text through reading, analysis, and explanation
- Reading aloud fluently and accurately with a speed and intonation close to real speech
- Demonstrating knowledge of various forms of literary work, such as folk poetry, tales, stories, instructional and popular works, articles suitable for children, and children's literature
- Using books and libraries, including familiarity with the content and form of books, periodicals, newspapers, and their place and arrangement in the library

Reading Instruction in the Primary Grades

Based on proposals drafted by curricular task forces, the Federal Ministry of Education, Science and Research establishes a curricular framework through a consultation process that includes provincial education organizations and teacher associations. Schools have some measure of freedom to adapt the curriculum to local needs. The curriculum provides a joint guiding framework that lays out general overarching aims, stating that teachers have pedagogical and didactical responsibility to select methods of instruction freely. Teachers also have some freedom in selecting teaching materials.

When planning reading instruction, it is essential to address students' individual needs and reading skills while also considering the long-term goals that students should achieve (e.g., reading to gather information or for entertainment). Children's individual reading strengths form the basis

of an ongoing process aimed at increasing their reading competencies. In addition to various reading exercises, individualized reading promotion programs offer specific exercises to build sensory, motor, language, movement, and social skills.

Teachers should appraise students’ individual reading preferences and interests, thereby encouraging students’ reading abilities and self-confidence as readers. The goal is to develop children’s skills and thus enable them step-by-step to be responsible for their own learning without supervision. For this to happen, children must learn strategies to read texts (e.g., underlining key words), allowing them to acquire and store information. Exhibit 1 provides an overview of the learning strategies within three distinct process domains: Cognitive, Metacognitive, and Resource Management.⁴

Exhibit 1: Learning Strategies

Cognitive	Metacognitive	Resource Management
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Repeating ▪ Elaborating ▪ Organizing 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Planning ▪ Checking/Monitoring ▪ Steering Their Own Learning Process 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Optimizing Their Learning Environment ▪ Cooperating and Organizing Support

Guidelines for first lessons in reading promote the practice of a mixed-method, analytical-synthetic approach to instruction. Elements of the whole language method (e.g., presenting whole words and short texts from the beginning to motivate children according to context) are used along with phonics to teach children to analyze the sound value of letters and syllables and to synthesize them as words.

Instructional Materials

Instructional materials are not part of the curriculum published by the Federal Ministry of Education, Science and Research. Teachers work with a variety of textbooks produced by different publishers. These textbooks and materials are developed according to various methods of teaching reading and generally are approved by the Ministry to ensure that they fit with standards and have the necessary methodological level. A list of approved materials (textbooks) exists for each grade level, but none are explicitly recommended. Textbook approval lies with a commission at the Ministry. In the context of the *Schulbuchaktion* (school book initiative), students receive textbooks from the approved list in addition to other materials free of charge (up to an individual financial limit).

Basic materials used for reading development come from a range of reading books offering samples of literature from different genres for children. Teachers appreciate the variety of materials offered by *Österreichischer Buchklub der Jugend* (Austrian Book Club for Young People), a registered nonprofit organization that has been engaged in media, reading pedagogy, and social and cultural issues for more than 60 years. The main objectives of the *Buchklub* are to foster interest

in and enjoyment of reading and promote access to and use of books and multimedia. The Ministry often recommends particular media and teaching aids developed by the *Buchklub* to schools and teachers. Some books are provided in sets accompanied by materials such as worksheets, folding alphabet letters, and sheets for practicing writing. Spelling books and simple readers are available for initial reading, while new kinds of multimedia materials (e.g., discs, videos) and Information and Communications Technology (ICT) tools support reading development. The Austrian Red Cross also offers educational magazines for schools, including age-appropriate magazines containing a variety of topics and teaching materials.

School and class libraries seek to meet the needs of students. Schools are encouraged to cooperate with public libraries and with organizations like *Österreichischer Buchklub* and *KinderLiteraturHaus* (an initiative of the *Buchklub* aimed at bringing together young readers with children’s book authors and illustrators) or with publishing houses on various projects and reading campaigns. Teachers also can conduct lessons within the school library. Public libraries are regarded as an important key to literacy, and Austria has a comprehensive network of libraries. In 2020, more than 750,000 borrowers were registered in more than 1,300 public libraries.⁵ The libraries grant free and direct access to books, magazines, and digital media for children, adolescents, and adults and often organize special programs for young readers (e.g., holiday events, read aloud activities, reading workshops, traditional readings by authors).

Use of Technology

The use of modern communication and information technology, mentioned in the general didactical principles section of the curriculum, might contribute to activating and motivating students to learn (if the school has appropriate facilities). Individualized learning and differentiation are supported by appropriate facilities at school and in class with operational resources, technical media, modern communication, and information technology.

Role of Reading Specialists and Second Language Instruction

Austria has introduced an effective remedial system to detect students’ reading difficulties as early as possible. To ensure that students get a good start at school, the federal government sponsors language support at Kindergartens. Since the 2006–2007 academic year, primary school children requiring language support (including immigrant children) can receive up to 11 hours of small-group instruction per week. However, practical application varies from school to school and is not always feasible. The number of teachers has been increased to accelerate integration of these students into primary schools and to address the shortage of additional language support experts.

Accommodation Policies for Instruction and Testing

The Austrian compulsory school system (in general, ISCED Levels 1 and 2) is accessible to all students regardless of factors such as their first language or religious affiliation.⁶ Thus, every child

with permanent residence in Austria must attend school, and all public schools at ISCED Levels 1 and 2 are obligated to enroll all students regardless of their first language or language level in the language of instruction. At ISCED Level 3, after the end of compulsory education, it is not mandatory for the school to enroll all students; however, access can be granted by the head of school.

Students who enter the Austrian school system and who cannot follow regular instruction due to their lack of knowledge in the language of instruction normally are recognized as “nonregular” students. At ISCED Levels 1 and 2, the maximum time students can remain in this status is two years; at ISCED Level 3, there is no time restriction. In the 2020–2021 academic year (the year PIRLS 2021 was administered), 8 percent of students in primary school were nonregular.

Students who have a first language other than the language of instruction, who have attended school in another country, or who want to enter the Austrian school system as regular students later than first grade must take an examination demonstrating their language proficiency or undergo observation by teachers who, after a certain time, certify that the student is able to follow instruction as a regular student.

There has been an increased need for school-based support in Austria to help children from migrant backgrounds learn the language of instruction. This has been addressed by the expansion of school-based support of German language command for students with a first language other than German, along with the expansion of language proficiency courses for nonregular students with German as their second language and the expansion of lessons in mother tongue instruction. Students are entitled to receive the following support measures regarding the language of instruction:

- As of academic year 2018–2019, nonregular students at ISCED Levels 1, 2, and 3 have to attend German support classes/courses (*Deutschförderklassen/-kurse*) for 15 hours a week for a minimum of a half year and a maximum of two years.
- Mother tongue instruction following a fixed curriculum also is provided. It is offered at all levels in general education, in two to six weekly lessons. In vocational education and training colleges, first language instruction is offered within the framework of school autonomy.

Students with special education needs are taught in inclusive settings or in special needs schools for severe disabilities. Parents have the right to choose the kind of schooling they prefer for their child. Special curricula and/or adapted mainstream curricula are used in response to students’ individual needs. In compulsory education, students with special education needs are taught according to the regular education curriculum, provided they are generally capable of attaining the instruction objectives. In all other cases, they study a curriculum of a special school geared to their disability. There are special curricula for general special schools for students with learning difficulties, as well as for special schools for children who are blind or deaf or who have severe disabilities.

Professional Development Requirements and Programs

Admission to a teacher education program requires a general higher education entrance qualification obtained through the upper secondary school leaving examination (matriculation certificate) as well as completion of an aptitude test. Primary school teachers are educated at University Colleges of Teacher Education (*Pädagogische Hochschulen*). Primary school teachers are general teachers who usually teach almost all subjects of the primary school curriculum. Training is connected to students' classwork, and professional skills are organized according to four main domains:

- Disciplines Taught at Primary School
- Situations of Learning
- Behavior of the Class and the Diversity of Students
- Exercise of Educational Responsibility and Professional Ethics

Over several years, the Federal Ministry of Education, Science and Research developed a new plan for teacher education. Because the students who participated in PIRLS 2021 were still taught by teachers who had conventional teacher education, the following paragraph refers to teacher education prior to the 2017 Education Reform Act.

From the 2007–2008 academic year until the Education Reform Act, a six-semester (three-year) higher education program has concluded with a bachelor's degree in education. Course content consisted of general humanities subjects, the German language, mathematics, music, arts, physical education, and pedagogical and psychological subjects. In addition to completing their education, primary school teachers completed a supervised practicum in each of the six semesters during which they observed and practiced teaching under the supervision of experienced teachers and attended training at seminars as an essential part of their education. Students who received two successively negative reports were not allowed to continue their education. Upon completion of a thesis and the final state examination, teachers obtained a qualification certificate.

Since the 2015–2016 academic year, new professional training for the field of primary education has been available at University Colleges of Teacher Education nationwide. The minimum length of study for a teacher education degree at a college of education amounts to at least four years for a bachelor's degree plus 1 to 1½ years for a master's degree. The training curriculum includes lectures on the fundamentals of general education studies; elementary and primary education and methods; or fields of study that correspond to teaching subjects, departments, or subject concentrations. Moreover, targeted lectures on such topics as inclusive education, special and curative education, social education, career guidance, multilingualism, and media education are available. Various focuses will be offered at colleges of education in the new training programs, and a focus on inclusive education is always offered. New teacher education includes a yearlong induction phase when students are supported by mentors.

Teacher Education Specific to Reading

Because reading is embedded in the teaching of German language instruction, there are no specialized reading teachers in Austrian schools. Even though the German language is a disciplinary domain with specific content, it is approached from the following perspectives:

- Steps and methods for learning to read
- Analysis of textbooks
- Connection between reading and writing
- Evaluation of reading competencies

Requirements for Ongoing Professional Development in Reading for Teachers

Professional development primarily is offered at University Colleges of Teacher Education. Primary and compulsory secondary school teachers must attend 15 hours per year of professional development activities. No national statute regulates teachers' choice of courses; teachers may choose from courses in different fields such as general pedagogy, general didactics, German language, mathematics, science, physical education, media, science, or school development.

Professional development courses range from short one-day activities to courses over several semesters, and include lectures about children's literature and classes on reading disabilities and remediation. Teachers may attend a specific program and qualify as a reading expert for primary schools. The in-service training literacy program focuses on diagnostic tools, remedial reading concepts, local literacy programs, gender-specific literacy concepts, and the promotion of a broadly based reading culture at schools.

Monitoring Student Progress in Reading

In Austria, no formal external testing occurs during compulsory education that has consequences for individual students; only teachers assess student performance. Teacher-generated assessment is based on classroom participation as well as on the results of oral, written, practical, and graphical work. Primary school students take written school examinations in German and mathematics in fourth grade. In lower secondary schools, students are required to pass classroom examinations in German, mathematics, and the first foreign language (most commonly English). As a rule, progression to the next education level depends on achievement in all subjects. Students receive reports at the end of each term and at the end of the academic year.

Regarding the progression of students in compulsory secondary school (*Mittelschule*) in Grades 7 and 8, German, mathematics, and a modern foreign language are taught based on in-depth general education (the education objective of the lower level of *Allgemeinbildende höhere Schule* [AHS]) and basic general education (content at a less complex level). The achievement of education objectives is recorded in the end-of-year reports in Grades 7 and 8 with differentiation between in-depth and basic general education.

At secondary schools, in addition to the assessment with numerical marks, an alternative form of performance motivating assessment (e.g., verbal assessment, learning objective catalogs, portfolios) is legally stipulated to be carried out at least twice every school year. Together with the school report, students are given an EDL (a supplementary differentiating performance description, short for the German *Ergänzende Differenzierende Leistungsbeschreibung*), which is oriented toward students' potential.

In 2009, the Austrian government mandated educational standards based on the core curriculum for German, reading, writing, and mathematics in primary school and German, mathematics, and English in secondary school. For these subjects, the Austrian Educational Standards determine the basic competencies students normally should have acquired by the end of fourth grade (primary school) and by the end of eighth grade (secondary school). The standards aim to strengthen teacher output orientation regarding planning lessons as well as conducting the lessons themselves. Furthermore, the standards provide a benchmark for student competencies with regard to diagnostic and individual support. The educational standards are required to be assessed fully throughout the nation. This mandated regular assessment is intended to foster quality within individual schools and to enable review of the education system (system monitoring). Therefore, teachers and schools receive external feedback about testing results. Specialists support the schools by interpreting the results and devising specific strategies for each school. Although the standards are objectives for teachers and are therefore incorporated when teaching and grading students, the results of the educational standards assessments must not influence student grades.

Baseline tests were conducted in secondary schools in 2009 and in primary schools in 2010 with a random sample of schools to obtain data about acquired competencies at the beginning of the process. From 2011 to 2019, the educational standards were administered with the help of the educational standards review (BIST-Ü) each year, alternating between the fourth and eighth grades in the subjects German, mathematics, and English.

With the new Educational Standard Ordinance, the legal framework for the conversion of the educational standard review (BIST-Ü) to the individual competency measurement PLUS (iKM^{PLUS}) was created. The new instruments of the iKM^{PLUS} will be used for the first time in the third grade in April/May 2022 and carried out across the board.

Diagnostic Testing

Reading instruction should focus on the early detection of possible reading disabilities, such as dyslexia, and students who are slower to develop reading skills. The Salzburger Lese-Screening 2–9 is a diagnostic tool that measures students' basal reading skills, enabling teachers to analyze students' abilities from Grades 2 to 9.⁷ Results from this screening process are available within a short time period (about three minutes per person), thus allowing remedial programs to be

implemented efficiently, individually, and more effectively. The tool is mandatory only in Grades 3 and 5 as part of a group screening.

If necessary, education and psychological counselors or schools' special teachers and psychologists investigate students' needs and provide an individualized remedial program. Such a program requires intensive cooperation with the student's teachers and family. Some schools provide dyslexic students with reading instruction in a separate working group. In other schools, teachers work with dyslexic students within the regular classroom as well as outside of regular class instruction. Some teachers develop (sometimes in cooperation with psychological experts) an individualized development program for students with reading difficulties, especially for slowly developing readers.

To determine students' phonological awareness, standardized reading tests often are administered at the end of the first school year or the beginning of the second to enable an exact diagnosis of reading difficulties. Tutors with special training assist students with reading difficulties in additional or integrated lessons. The amount of instruction varies from province to province, and there are differences even within provinces.

Moreover, since 2010, there has been a diagnostic tool for self-evaluation named *Informelle Kompetenzmessung*. This tool supports teachers in evaluating the competency of students according to the Austrian Educational Standards. Therefore, the tool can be helpful in determining the need for support and in organizing instruction. The tool is available for different grade levels and areas of competency, including reading instruction in primary school. The tool is optional but is used by nearly 70 percent of schools.⁸

Instruction for Children with Reading Difficulties

The Austrian strategic program promoting reading competencies of students with learning disabilities is based on the principle that the reading process needs to be embedded in the entire concept of instruction (i.e., networked learning). The promotion of reading should be planned as an integrated part of weekly instruction. Teachers also should consider students' individual needs, abilities, and interests.

While the curriculum may vary depending on the particular learning disability, there are common reading instruction objectives and curriculum requirements for students with special education needs. These include:

- Making students aware of the necessity to read in everyday life
- Recognizing how language-related activities are affected by the interdependent link between speaking, reading, and writing
- Promoting reading as a significant means of obtaining information as well as its other functions (e.g., entertainment and gaining an understanding of oneself and others)
- Recognizing the significance of media and integrating reading education into other subjects taught

Special Reading Initiatives

In Austria, reading literacy is a fundamental component of primary and general education. The Federal Ministry of Education, Science and Research's reading promotion initiative (*Leseförderung—Literacy!*) aims to enhance all students' reading motivation and reading skills, effectively support weak readers, and develop a comprehensive reading culture in schools with support from teaching staff. The initiative builds on developmental processes taking place in classrooms and schools, whereby schools institute individual and needs-oriented measures to promote reading while considering girls' and boys' different motivations and reading habits, as well as the needs of students whose first language is not German. This initiative is supported by in-service teacher education programs, materials, and brochures for parents (distributed during school registration); materials for teachers; and school projects. The initiative includes obligatory implementation of a group screening for reading in the third and fifth grades using the Salzburger Lese-Screening diagnostic tool, which measures basal reading skills to identify potential reading difficulties.^d

Today, family literacy is considered fundamental to young people's reading skills, and international studies such as PIRLS have shown the importance of reading socialization in the family.⁹ In December 2019, PISA results again confirmed the lack of reading skills in young Austrian people, highlighting the systemic problem that, in Austria, reading skills and educational opportunities for children are closely linked to the socioeconomic status of their families. The Austrian Book Club has focused on family literacy projects in the past and thus has been able to launch a Family Literacy Initiative with the help of its network of volunteers and contacts with families in Austria.^e

Austria currently has several other family literacy activities, though in general these are single projects and not networked and therefore probably have neither lasting nor systemic impact. Many reading promotion projects and campaigns are implemented with a high degree of commitment but have the same problem: These projects tend to encourage already motivated children, and they do not consider or support children with reading difficulties.

Another measure to improve reading achievement is a coordination center for reading that was created to support primary school teachers and schools and offer nationwide programs. As a consequence of the PISA 2003 results, the Ministry founded the competency and advisory center *Koordinationsstelle: Lesen* to address issues related to reading. The center is staffed by a group of delegates from all nine Austrian provinces who were nominated by University Colleges of Teacher Education.

^d For more details, see the Diagnostic Testing section.

^e For details on this organization, see the Instructional Materials section.

Response to COVID-19 Pandemic

Teaching and Learning During the COVID-19 Pandemic

The timeline and impact that the COVID-19 pandemic had on Austrian schools follows:

- Academic year 2020–2021 started on September 7, 2020.
- On September 20, 2020, wearing a mask outside classrooms became mandatory for teachers and students 10 years and older (thus, students in PIRLS age groups were mostly exempted).
- From November 17 to December 6, 2020, distance learning occurred, as well as special offers for supervision and learning support. Tests and examinations did not take place during this period.
- From December 7, 2020, to January 6, 2021, face-to-face classes occurred; wearing a mask became mandatory for teachers and students 10 years and older (thus, students in PIRLS age groups were mostly exempted).
- From January 7 to February 8, 2021, distance learning occurred.
- From February 9 onward, face-to-face classes occurred, wearing a mask was mandatory within the school building (excluding one's own seat), tests and examinations were administered, and physical education and music lessons occurred only with specific restrictions.
- From March 19 onward, coronavirus tests occurred in schools three times a week (Monday, Wednesday, Friday).
- From April 6 to May 2, 2021, two Federal states went into lockdown (Wien, Niederösterreich), accompanied by distance learning from April 12–26, 2021.
- From April 12–18, 2021, one Federal state implemented distance learning (Burgenland).

Policy and Practice Changes

In general, no new or extra digitization was planned due to the coronavirus, but the measures outlined in the 8-point plan are/were accelerated or brought forward and received an extra boost. The 8-point plan specifies measures to digitally support teaching and learning. In elementary schools, digitization (e.g., Microsoft Teams) helped with parental contact and distance learning during the pandemic. This initiative is part of the 8-point plan for digital learning, which aims to equip fifth and sixth grades with digital devices for the 2021–2022 school year. (In academic year 2021–2022, the fifth grade has been equipped with digital devices.) The purposes of the initiative are to create the pedagogical and technical conditions for IT-supported teaching and to give students equal access to digital education. Ninety-three percent of schools are taking part in the device initiative. Schools can choose between Windows notebooks, Windows tablets, iPads, Android tablets, and refurbished devices. The teachers are provided with the same types of equipment as their students so that meaningful teaching is possible.

Impact of the Pandemic on PIRLS 2021

The original national PIRLS testing window started on April 12, 2021, and ended on May 21, 2021. The testing window was extended to July 4, 2021, for those schools/classes that were not able to test within the original testing window due to distance learning in some Federal states (see above) and quarantine of individual classes/schools. This was the case for 10 classes in 8 schools out of 276 test classes. With this strategy, Austria was able to conduct all planned and designated 276 test sessions.

Suggested Readings

Federal Ministry of Education, Science and Research. (2021). *Nationaler Bildungsbericht Österreich 2021* [National Education Report Austria 2021]. Wien: Federal Ministry of Education, Science and Research. Retrieved from <http://doi.org/10.17888/nbb2021>

Federal Ministry of Education, Science and Research. (2022). *School system*. Retrieved from https://www.bmbwf.gv.at/en/Topics/school/school_syst.html

European Commission. (2022). *Austria: Overview*. Retrieved from https://eacea.ec.europa.eu/national-policies/eurydice/content/austria_en

Wallner-Paschon, C., & Suchaň, B. (2012). Austria. In I. V. S. Mullis, M. O. Martin, C. A. Minnich, K. T. Drucker, & A. R. Moira (Eds.), *PIRLS 2011 encyclopedia: Education policy and curriculum in reading* (Vol. 1, pp. 61–75). Retrieved from http://timss.bc.edu/pirls2011/downloads/PIRLS2011_Enc-v1.pdf

Wallner-Paschon, C. (2017). Austria. In I. V. S. Mullis, M. O. Martin, S. Goh, & C. Prendergast (Eds.), *PIRLS 2016 encyclopedia: Education policy and curriculum in reading* (pp. 1–14). <http://timssandpirls.bc.edu/pirls2016/encyclopedia/>

Wallner-Paschon, C., Itzlinger-Bruneforth, U., & Schreiner, C. (Hrsg.). (2017). *PIRLS 2016. Die Lesekompetenz am Ende der Volksschule. Erste Ergebnisse* [PIRLS 2016. The reading literacy achievement at the end of primary school. First results]. Graz: Leykam. Retrieved from <http://doi.org/10.17888/pirls2016-va>

References

- ¹ UNESCO Institute for Statistics. (2012). *International Standard Classification of Education ISCED 2011*. Retrieved from <http://uis.unesco.org/sites/default/files/documents/international-standard-classification-of-education-isced-2011-en.pdf>
- ² European Commission. (2017). *Support mechanism for evidence-based policy-making in education: Eurydice Report*. Retrieved from <https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2797/575942>
- ³ Federal Ministry of Education, Science and Research. (2013). *Grundsatzerlass Leserziehung* [Legislative decree on reading instruction]. Retrieved from https://www.bmbwf.gv.at/Themen/schule/schulrecht/rs/1997-2017/2013_11.html
- ⁴ Moschner, B., & Wagener, U. (2006). Lernstrategien—der Weg zum Lernerfolg? [Learning strategies—the path to successful learning?]. In *Grundschule*, 7/8 (pp. 48–50). Braunschweig: Westermann.

-
- ⁵ Library Association of Austria. (2021). *Statistik öffentlicher Bibliotheken in Österreich 2020* [Austrian statistics for public libraries 2020]. Retrieved from https://www.bvoe.at/oeffentliche_bibliotheken/daten_und_fakten/statistik
- ⁶ UNESCO Institute for Statistics. (2012). *International Standard Classification of Education ISCED 2011*. Retrieved from <http://uis.unesco.org/sites/default/files/documents/international-standard-classification-of-education-isced-2011-en.pdf>
- ⁷ Wimmer, H., & Mayringer, H. (2014). *SLS 2–9. Salzburger Lese-Screening für die Schulstufen 2–9* [Salzburger reading screening for grades 2–9]. Göttingen: Hogrefe Verlag.
- ⁸ Federal Institute for Quality Assurance of the Austrian School System (IQS). (2022). *Informelle Kompetenzmessung (IKM)* [Informal competence measurement]. Retrieved from <https://www.iqs.gv.at/ikm>
- ⁹ Wallner-Paschon, C., & Schneider, P. (2009). Lesesozialisation im Elternhaus [Reading socialization at home]. In B. Suchań, C. Wallner-Paschon, & C. Schreiner (Eds.), *PIRLS 2006. Die Lesekompetenz am Ende der Volksschule. Österreichischer Expertenbericht* [PIRLS 2006. The reading literacy achievement at the end of primary education] (pp. 128–146). Graz: Leykam.