

# Azerbaijan

Zinyat Amirova

*Institute of Education of the Republic of Azerbaijan*

## Introduction

### Overview of Education System

The education system in the Republic of Azerbaijan follows numerous laws and legislative acts, including the Constitution of the Republic of Azerbaijan; the Law on Education of the Republic of Azerbaijan (2009);<sup>1</sup> education decrees, orders, and decisions; regulations of the Ministry of Education; other normative legal acts relating to education; and international agreements. The Constitution guarantees every citizen the right to education. The government guarantees free compulsory primary and secondary education.

Education in Azerbaijan is regarded as the basis for the development of society and the state, and has a strategic significance and priority. Azerbaijan's education system is built on democratic and secular national and international values.

The Ministry of Education of the Republic of Azerbaijan (MoE) is the central executive body that implements and regulates the government's education policy and manages the education processes. The Ministry cooperates with central and local executive bodies, local authorities, international and nongovernmental organizations, other individuals, and legal entities. The responsibilities of the MoE include:

- Implementing a single education policy throughout the country
- Developing the education system according to predetermined directions
- Providing state control over the quality of education, regardless of legal status and property type
- Organizing mental health services and social or pedagogical care
- Studying and disseminating advanced pedagogical practice and achievements in pedagogical and psychological sciences
- Identifying and training talented students
- Promoting innovative teaching methods and efficient management tools for school principals and education staff
- Strengthening education materials, facilities, and services

All citizens are entitled to nine years of compulsory education that includes general secondary education. Exhibit 1 presents the stages and levels of education as stated in the Law on Education.

There are two types of schools in Azerbaijan, classified based on their ownership: public schools, which belong to the state and do not directly seek outside funding, and private schools, which are funded directly through education fees.

**Exhibit 1: Levels of Education in Azerbaijani Schools**

Level of Education		Description <sup>2</sup>
<b>Preprimary</b>		Encompasses children from birth to age 6 and is not compulsory. It is provided in nurseries (children under age 3), Kindergartens (children ages 3–5 or 6), and schools (children ages 5–6).
<b>Primary</b>		Compulsory level of education that begins at age 6 and covers the first 4 years (Grades 1–4).
<b>General Secondary</b>	<b>Lower Secondary</b>	Also compulsory and covers groups of students ages 10–15 (Grades 5–9). At the end of Grade 9, students take final assessments to receive a document that is considered a basis for continuing to the next level of education. After completing this level students may choose to continue with vocational education.
	<b>Upper Secondary</b>	Includes students up to the age of 17 (Grades 10–11) and is not compulsory. After completion of this stage, students have to pass the final state attestation and then receive the Certificate of General Secondary Education.
<b>Primary Vocational</b>		Students who have completed lower secondary education can enroll in a 6-month, 1-year, or 2-year primary vocational education program leading to a certificate. The duration of the program is 2 years for Grade 11 graduates and 3 years for Grade 9 graduates.
<b>Secondary Vocational</b>		Admission to this level requires passing the examination administered by the State Examination Center. Those who are admitted to secondary vocational education institutions from the base of general secondary education (Grade 9) also get full secondary education. A document on secondary vocational education gives the right of admission to institutions of higher education and is treated as a sub-bachelor's diploma.
<b>Higher Education</b>	<b>Baccalaureate</b>	Graduates of the Baccalaureate level who have completed higher education receive a bachelor's degree. The duration of the programs leading to the bachelor's degree is normally 4 years.
	<b>Magistrate</b>	The duration of full-time master's degree programs is 2 years.
	<b>Doctorate</b>	The duration of the programs leading to the Doctor of Philosophy or Doctor of Science degree (introduced by the Law on Education in 2009) is 3–4 years.

### Use and Impact of PIRLS

Partly as a result of the impact of large-scale international studies, Azerbaijan has implemented a national assessment program. It has become commonly understood that the development of reading literacy is vital to further education. Azerbaijan's students had higher average achievement in PIRLS 2016 compared to PIRLS 2011. The percentages of students reaching the advanced and high international benchmarks also increased.

In addition, a new assessment framework for teaching reading and mathematics will be announced to the public. This framework defines the rules for conducting centralized assessment

of fourth grade students. The centralized assessment is funded from the state budget of the Republic of Azerbaijan and is free for students. The purposes are to monitor the quality of education, assess context changes in subjects at the level of primary education, and eliminate gaps identified during the analysis. These centralized examinations have no impact on students' final in-school assessment results.

## The Language/Reading Curriculum in Primary Grades

The National Curriculum of the Republic of Azerbaijan<sup>3</sup> (2013) dictates that reading is key to developing language sense and understanding the role of sentences and texts and the meaning of words in expression. It also increases the love for and interest in the beauty and richness of the language of instruction. This ensures an independent perception of texts written in different styles, and deepens interest in the mother tongue and in scientific and fictional publications in the language of instruction. Also, it serves to enhance the vocabulary of students to develop speech culture.

The fourth grade curriculum mainly considers enhancing a vocabulary foundation. At the end of fourth grade, students should be able to:

- Demonstrate understanding of new words
- Name things and events that they encounter for the first time and compare them to similar things and events
- Present words and terminology that they have learned
- Prepare a dictionary of the words and terminology that they have learned
- Demonstrate reading skills
- Read texts quickly, accurately, and consciously according to determined requirements
- Make presentations about fictional and scientific texts
- Determine the main idea of the text and analyze the characters
- Retell the text in a creative form

### Summary of National Curriculum

The content standards of general education state certain outcomes in a variety of subjects. The curriculum is a conceptual document that covers essential activities to fulfill education standards and determines learning goals and targets. While designing the curriculum, coverage of students' cognitive, informative, communicative, and noncognitive activities and the development of their thinking and emotional skills were considered. Mother tongue curriculum is one of the essential issues of national interest and statehood. Based on the outcomes for mother tongue as a subject, students should be able to:

- Read and write independently, accurately, quickly, and consciously
- Engage in dialogue, expressing their thoughts fluently
- React to texts they have read or listened to
- Choose important factors from different texts, classify them, and make up short texts
- Present primary information about the language of Azerbaijan and its history, values, culture, art, customs, and traditions in a simple way
- Use dictionaries and manuals

## Professional Development Requirements and Programs

The Methods of Teaching Reading contain a special module on professional development programs for teachers. It includes:<sup>4</sup>

- A 14-hour module on Teaching Reading Strategies in a 120-hour professional development program for primary school teachers who have passed diagnostic assessment in Baku
- A 20-hour module on Methods of Teaching Strategic Reading in a 120-hour Tamal professional development program for primary school teachers
- A 14-hour module on Methods of Achieving Standards of Reading in a 120-hour professional development program for Azerbaijani language teachers of Grades 5 to 9
- A 60-hour mentoring service for primary school teachers within the Zardabi—Development of Primary School Students’ Reading Skills project
- A 60-hour professional development program called Development of Students’ Reading Skills for primary school teachers from the regions

In order to improve primary school teachers’ professional capabilities in the instruction of reading, there has been an annual organized training series since 2016.<sup>5</sup> The main aims of the series are to help teachers facilitate their students’ reading and writing skills in primary schools, increase teachers’ knowledge regarding the methods of organizing online lessons, and support teachers with methodological assistance. The main participants are usually teachers from schools situated in 12 administrative districts of Baku. The other focus points of the training are topics such as using virtual school management technology, building virtual communication with students, working with different assessment tools, managing the classroom, and improving student behavior.

## Monitoring Student Progress in Reading

In the final grade of upper secondary education, eleventh grade students started taking part in centralized final examinations in academic year 2008–2009, while ninth grade students took centralized state examinations in the following academic year, 2009–2010. In both levels, the students were assessed in two different subjects, mother tongue (language) and mathematics.

As reading is a part of the curriculum, students' reading comprehension also is assessed. The monitoring process that focuses on getting insights on the current level of students' performance has been used since 2006. Because Azerbaijani language is taught in the public secondary schools as a subject, assessment of the students' language skills and abilities is considered as well.

Teachers mainly use results of diagnostic assessments to provide individualized instruction, define teaching strategies, and, when necessary, collect information about students' knowledge and skills.<sup>6</sup> Teachers mainly collect this information on student knowledge and skills at the beginning of the school year, when beginning new units and topics, or when students have transferred from other schools or classes. The results of these assessments are recorded in official documents: Formative assessment results are recorded in the formative assessment register and students' record books, and summative assessment results are recorded in the class register. Teachers perform small summative assessments upon completing units and topics in class, and consider these results when calculating semiannual grades.

## Special Reading Initiatives

The Zardabi—Development of Primary School Students' Reading Skills project was initiated by the MoE and implemented during the 2015–2016 academic year.<sup>7</sup> The objectives of the project involved instilling reading habits in students, developing writing skills, and providing instructional resources that are compatible with international assessment standards. The project also aimed to increase parents' knowledge as one part of the reading process while raising public awareness regarding the development of reading skills. Moreover, this project focused on improving the reading skills of primary school students. Reading Strategies seminars were held for primary school teachers during this period. Including those in Baku, 18,615 students studying in up to 800 classes at 204 schools were the target population.

Another project was a website<sup>a</sup> created to nurture the participation of teachers and students in the education process, provide an opportunity for them to use Information and Communications Technology (ICT) efficiently, and enable them to enjoy electronic books. By entering the portal, users are able to read schoolbooks online and offline, take notes on certain pages of the books, and search the text later. The portal has a total of 256 electronic resources, including 232 electronic textbooks, 22 teaching aids, and 2 extracurricular reading materials.<sup>8</sup> There are 28 textbooks enriched with video, graphics, audio, and other multimedia tools.

Besides the projects mentioned above, the MoE often announces different types of reading events for students. Examples include:

- Thinking Reader competition for students in Grades 5 to 9<sup>9</sup>
- Annual Reading Day on April 23<sup>10</sup>

<sup>a</sup> The website can be found at <http://www.e-derslik.edu.az/site/index.php>

- Literature Connoisseurs contest for students in Grades 5 to 8<sup>11</sup>
- Read and Have Fun competition for primary school students<sup>12</sup>

## Response to COVID-19 Pandemic

### Teaching and Learning During the COVID-19 Pandemic

The adaptation of education in Azerbaijan due to pandemic conditions occurred in several stages. Initially, the MoE generated an Action Plan to prevent the spread of coronavirus in educational institutions that was approved by the Cabinet of Ministers of the Republic of Azerbaijan on January 30, 2020.<sup>13</sup> The MoE established a 24/7 headquarters and collected information on the situation from each educational institution daily, which was followed by summarizing and sharing with the Operational Headquarters functioning under the Cabinet of Ministers.

On the basis of the decision of the Cabinet of Ministers of the Republic of Azerbaijan, schools terminated the provision of traditional (in-person) education in the classrooms until academic year 2020–2021.<sup>14</sup> In September 2020, face-to-face instruction resumed at the level of primary education of general education (Grades 1 to 4). However, due to the increasing number of coronavirus cases, schools closed again from October 19 to November 2, 2020.<sup>15</sup> After November 2, students attended classes based on the voluntary principle: They could join either remotely or in person. Furthermore, schools in large cities and districts remained closed until late April. Finally, the voluntary principle for distance education was canceled and all schools opened for traditional education in academic year 2021–2022.<sup>16</sup>

### Impact of the Pandemic on Student Learning

To measure and evaluate the impact of the pandemic on student learning, the Institute of Education of the Republic of Azerbaijan administered a national assessment in June 2021. A total of 251,487 students from all regions of Azerbaijan (except the Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic) participated in the online assessment using Microsoft Teams. The assessment was conducted to measure students' subject knowledge and to assess online learning during pandemic conditions. All classes in the Azerbaijani and Russian sections, except for Grades 1, 9, and 11, participated in the assessment process. The results have not been publicly announced yet.

### Policy and Practice Changes

Starting on March 3, 2020, as part of the second stage in the provision of education in a pandemic, the instruction process in all educational institutions was suspended in stages until the end of the school year. A team of professional teachers was formed, which led to TV lessons at the general education level. Since high-speed internet access was a challenge in all regions of the country, especially in remote villages, the idea of TV lessons was the most appropriate option.

The TV lessons were introduced under a preannounced schedule for both Azerbaijani and Russian mediums and covered most subjects. These lessons also were broadcast live once a week, which allowed subject teachers to answer students' questions on a particular topic directly from the film studio and provide the necessary additional explanations. The main purpose of broadcasting lessons on television channels throughout the country was to provide accessibility for each student during the disruption in education. In addition, students could watch TV lessons and additional video materials on each subject on the electronic portal of the Ministry of Education<sup>b</sup> at any time that was convenient.

At the same time, the Virtual School<sup>17</sup> project (through Microsoft Teams) was launched by the MoE on April 2, 2020, as a new initiative. The project aimed to ensure the interactivity of the television lessons broadcast by the MoE and to increase opportunities for distance education in general. Each student, having registered on the Virtual School portal, was assigned to a class corresponding to his/her age, where he/she performed homework prepared by teachers on the topics that were taught via weekly TV lessons. New tasks on various topics and subjects were added to the portal every week. Moreover, the portal created an opportunity for teachers to educate students. The students could use the Chat function to communicate with their peers through video and audio. Virtual School provided more learning opportunities for students, as well as training and mentoring support for teachers. More than 1,000 teachers were involved in online distance learning trainings.

### Impact of the Pandemic on PIRLS 2021

Due to the new instruction regulations for schools because of the pandemic, the main assessment was administered in two separate stages. In the first stage, 115 sampled schools out of 200 participated in the main assessment between April 20 and May 15. These schools were not totally closed due to the lower rate of COVID-19 cases in their regions, and students could participate in the face-to-face instruction process a few times each week. In the second stage, the assessment was administered in the remaining 85 schools. These schools were situated in high-risk zones and were closed until May 17. After the MoE's decision to reopen these schools, they were able to complete the assessment process.

## References

- <sup>1</sup> Ministry of Education, Republic of Azerbaijan. (2009). *Education Law of the Republic of Azerbaijan*. Retrieved from <https://www.ilo.org/dyn/natlex/docs/ELECTRONIC/83429/92619/F1631389315/AZE83429.pdf>
- <sup>2</sup> Ministry of Education, Republic of Azerbaijan. (2009). *Education Law of the Republic of Azerbaijan*. Retrieved from <https://www.ilo.org/dyn/natlex/docs/ELECTRONIC/83429/92619/F1631389315/AZE83429.pdf>

<sup>b</sup> The web portal can be found at <https://video.edu.az/>

- <sup>3</sup> The Institute of Education. (2013). *Educational program (curriculum) in Azerbaijani language for general schools of the Republic of Azerbaijan (I-XI grades)*. Retrieved from [https://www.arti.edu.az/nodupload/editor/files/1\\_%20Az%C9%99rbaycan%20dili-Kurikulum%202013.pdf](https://www.arti.edu.az/nodupload/editor/files/1_%20Az%C9%99rbaycan%20dili-Kurikulum%202013.pdf)
- <sup>4</sup> Ministry of Education, Republic of Azerbaijan. (2016). *TƏHSİL İŞÇİLƏRİNİN PEŞƏKAR İNKİŞAFI İNSTİTUTU* [Institute of professional development of educational workers]. Retrieved from <http://www.tipii.edu.az/az/>
- <sup>5</sup> Baku City Education Department of the Republic of Azerbaijan. (2020). *İbtidai sinif müəllimləri üçün onlayn ixtisasartırma təlimləri* [Online in-service training for primary school teachers]. Retrieved from <https://baku.edu.gov.az/az/page/9/5211>
- <sup>6</sup> Cabinet of Ministers. (2009). *Azərbaycan Respublikasının ümumtəhsil sistemində Qiymətləndirmə Konsepsiyası* [The assessment concept in the general education system of the Republic of Azerbaijan]. Retrieved from <http://www.e-qanun.az/framework/16061>
- <sup>7</sup> Ministry of Education, Republic of Azerbaijan. (2016). *“Zərdabi” layihəsi çərçivəsində növbəti diaqnostik qiymətləndirmə keçiriləcək* [Further diagnostic assessment will be held within “Zardabi” project]. Retrieved from <http://edu.gov.az/az/page/9/11829>
- <sup>8</sup> Ministry of Education, Republic of Azerbaijan. (2020). *Ötən il 78 elektron dərslik yeniləri ilə əvəzlənib* [Last year, 78 electronic textbooks were replaced with new ones]. Retrieved from <https://edu.gov.az/az/news-and-updates/17819>
- <sup>9</sup> Ministry of Education, Republic of Azerbaijan. (2022). *“Düşünən oxucu” müsabiqəsinə start verilib* [The “Thinking Reader” contest has started]. Retrieved from <https://edu.gov.az/az/news-and-updates/17504-1>
- <sup>10</sup> Ministry of Education, Republic of Azerbaijan. (2018). *“Beynəlxalq kitab bağışlama” günü keçirilib* [International Book Donation Day was held]. Retrieved from <https://edu.gov.az/az/news-and-updates/14663>
- <sup>11</sup> Ministry of Education, Republic of Azerbaijan. (2019). *2019-2020-ci dərslər ilində “Ədəbiyyat biliciləri” müsabiqəsinin keçirilməsi barədə Azərbaycan Respublikası Təhsil nazirinin əmri* [The order of the Minister of Education of the Republic of Azerbaijan on holding the “Literature Connoisseurs” competition in the 2019–2020 academic year]. Retrieved from <https://edu.gov.az/az/esas-senedler/17677>
- <sup>12</sup> Baku City Education Department of the Republic of Azerbaijan. (2020). *“Oxu və əylən!” müsabiqəsinin keçirilməsi barədə Bakı Şəhəri üzrə Təhsil İdarəsi müdirinin əmri* [The order of the Head of the Baku City Education Department on holding the competition “Read and Have Fun”]. Retrieved from <https://baku.edu.gov.az/az/pdf/234/4732>
- <sup>13</sup> Ministry of Education, Republic of Azerbaijan. (2021). *Azərbaycan təhsilinin pandemiya sınağı* [A pandemic experience of Azerbaijani education]. Retrieved from <https://edu.gov.az/az/news-and-updates/18449>
- <sup>14</sup> Cabinet of Ministers. (2020). *Nazirlər Kabineti yanında Operativ Qərargah xüsusi karantin rejiminə dəyişikliklərə dair qərar qəbul edib* [The Operational Headquarters under the Cabinet of Ministers has decided to change the special quarantine regime]. Retrieved from <https://nk.gov.az/az/article/1007/>
- <sup>15</sup> Cabinet of Ministers. (2021). *Nazirlər Kabineti tədris ili ilə bağlı qərar verdi* [The Cabinet of Ministers made a decision regarding the academic year]. Retrieved from <https://nk.gov.az/az/article/1807/>
- <sup>16</sup> Cabinet of Ministers. (2020). *Nazirlər Kabinetinin 396 nömrəli Qərarına dair izah* [The Explanation of the Resolution of the Cabinet of Ministers No. 396]. Retrieved from <https://nk.gov.az/az/article/1131/>
- <sup>17</sup> Ministry of Education, Republic of Azerbaijan. (2020). *The Ministry of Education presents the “Virtual School” project*. Retrieved from <https://edu.gov.az/en/news-and-updates/18178>