# Cyprus

*Cyprus Ministry of Education, Sport and Youth*

## Introduction

### Overview of Education System

Education governance in Cyprus is centralized, and overall responsibility rests with the Cyprus Ministry of Education, Culture, Sport and Youth (MOECSY). The MOECSY is responsible for administering education, enforcing education laws, implementing education policies, preparing the education budget, and constructing school buildings. The MOECSY also determines public school curricula, syllabuses, and textbooks. The Educational Service Commission, an independent five-member body, is responsible for appointments, secondments, transfers, promotions, and discipline (including dismissal) of public school teachers and inspectors. Autonomy at the school level is very limited.[1]

Education is provided through preprimary, primary, and secondary institutions. Compulsory education lasts 10 years, from age 5 (preprimary education) to age 15 (lower secondary education). Public education is free for all students ages 5 to 18.[2]

Preprimary education is for children ages 3 to 5 years 8 months (with a gradual increase to age 6 starting in academic year 2021–2022) in public, community, and private schools.[3]

In public schools, primary education (Grades 1 to 6) is for children ages 5 years 8 months to 11 years 8 months. As of the 2021–2022 academic year, after the recent Decision of the Council of Ministers (No. 84.078/09.01.2018) and the amendment to the Law on Compulsory Education, children attend primary schools from ages 6 to 12.

Secondary education (Grades 7 to 12) for students ages 12 to 18 includes two 3-year levels: gymnasium (Grades 7 to 9, lower secondary education) and lyceum (Grades 10 to 12, upper secondary education). Gymnasium comprises general education, whereas lyceum allows for course selection. Tenth grade students choose two subjects that belong to one of four possible Subject Orientation Groups for in-depth study (two additional periods per subject beyond the hours for core subjects). These choices help students follow one of the six respective directions of study in Grades 11 and 12. As an alternative to lyceum, students may attend secondary technical and vocational schools in two directions, theoretical or practical.[4]

Students in Cyprus may attend private schools, which fall into three categories: Schools "of the same type" follow public school curricula and timetables; schools "of similar type" follow two-thirds of public school curricula in time and content, including the main courses and common core courses of public schools; and schools "of a different type" do not belong to the previous

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categories[5] and implement curricula and timetables that correspond to the education system of a different country.[6]

As discussed later in this chapter, policies on reading literacy and comprehension within this context mainly relate to the national curriculum for Greek (2010) and the corresponding Attainment and Adequacy Targets (AAT) for each grade.[7]

### Use and Impact of PIRLS

PIRLS 2021 is the second participation for Cyprus, with the first in 2001.[8]  The results of the first participation were published in a report.[9] Since 2012, the country has participated in international studies (e.g., Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study [TIMSS], Programme for International Student Assessment [PISA]) through the Centre of Educational Research and Evaluation (CERE). The typical approach adopted by the CERE after participating in international studies includes the preparation of a national report that is publicly available. The results of the country are disseminated further to stakeholders and the public through relevant published documents and presentations. The announcement of the results usually receives wide coverage by local media and stimulates extensive public discussion on the performance of Cypriot students, especially in comparison to students in other countries. Following the participation of Cyprus in international studies (e.g., TIMSS and PISA), the MOECSY prepared policy recommendations to improve learning outcomes.[10] It is expected that a similar approach will be adopted for PIRLS 2021.

## The Language/Reading Curriculum in Primary Grades

In 2010, the national curriculum for public schools for all subjects was revised; in 2016, it was restructured across all grades using Attainment and Adequacy Targets as a guiding framework.[11] Attainment Targets refer to the learning outcomes expected to be achieved by the end of each grade, whereas Adequacy Targets describe what needs to be taught for these outcomes to be achieved.[12] The AAT were subsequently revised in 2019.[13]

For Greek, the national curriculum (Greek Language) and the corresponding targets were developed in consideration of interrelated components of language and the assumption that language comprises the basic means of communication, which evolves and changes over time. Language reflects and structures aspects of human cognition, history, civilization, and culture, as well as social reality (e.g., social positions, identities, values, relationships). In this regard, language is approached uniformly across all grades as a system of signs (e.g., words, images, sounds, gestures); a dynamic means of communication and action within a specific context; and the product of, but also the means to, the construction of social reality.[14]

Consequently, in primary education, the overall aim of language instruction is to enable students to independently understand and effectively use language as a structure, a function, and a system of values and ideas. The key objectives of language instruction address the ability to

functionally use language phenomena and grammatical structures; identify and functionally use various text genres; and understand, structure/develop, and critically evaluate texts (written, oral, digital, visual) in various sociocultural settings.[15]

Hence, the goals of primary education are organized on the basis of three axes: situating language in context (thematic, communicative, sociocultural); organizing language at the level of text, sentence, and word; and critically evaluating texts according to their content and forms of language.[16] The axes include the following objectives for students:[17]

- Decode, comprehend, write, and produce situated language (texts) that represent certain realities
- Recognize and use linguistic features and structures (e.g., phonological, morpho-syntactic, lexicological, and language conventions) as well as nonlinguistic elements and/or multimodality (e.g., images, font color/size), since both are equally important in constructing meaning
- Identify and apply grammatical rules and language conventions in various text types and genres, and identify the context in which these are developed
- Recognize the functional use of the various texts and/or produce texts (within and outside the school setting) directly related to their content, type, and structure
- Analyze and revise texts based on the key ideas students intend to communicate
- Recognize how texts (produced by either the students themselves or others) present certain assumptions about the world and explore underlying features such as whose experiences these texts relate to, whom they serve, and whom they exclude
- Read and write texts, taking into consideration the context of the events in the texts, among whom the events occur, and how this relates to society

Since the national curriculum emphasizes the parallel development of skills for the comprehension and the production of oral and written language, targets are indicated across four areas: listening, speaking, reading comprehension, and written language production.[18]

With regard to reading comprehension, students are expected to process the meaning of various texts, i.e., recognize and extract certain information, appreciate and synthesize meanings, interpret them according to their experiences, place them within a certain context, and critically explore them according to their own or other (given) criteria.[19] Targets for fourth grade reading comprehension relate to the following competencies:[20]

- Embedding texts in context
  - Identify direct, indirect, or implicit information in written texts (both the linguistic and semiotic features)
  - Situate written texts in certain communicative contexts/contexts of situation (inferring the topic of the text; connecting to specific thematic areas; and identifying features of the

communicative event, such as speaker or writer/addressor, audience, ends, norms, tools and means of communication, generic features, etc.)

- o Draw conclusions about the meanings and ideas of texts (by identifying the key idea, attributing meanings, and determining whether information is essential or nonessential)
- o Apply strategies to identify information in written texts (repetitive, silent, or loud reading; skimming/scanning; predicting; taking notes; using diagrams)

- Identifying structure and function of language at the level of text, sentence, and word
  - o Fluently and expressively read texts while acquiring grammar-syntax knowledge and vocabulary (e.g., structure of the sentence or paragraph; connecting words; vocabulary on topics such as school, family, environment, animals)
  - o Identify different types of text by making distinctions, such as literary and nonliterary or continuous (e.g., a letter) and noncontinuous (e.g., posters); identify text genre (e.g., fairy tale, poem, recipe, article) and type (descriptive, narrative, argumentative, instructional)
  - o Identify the tone of a given text and distinguish between formal and informal
  - o Understand the role and function of multimodality in descriptive, narrative, argumentative, and instructional texts (e.g., image/photo, font type/color)

The different types of texts are described as follows:

**Descriptive**
- o Appreciate and utilize linguistic elements to ensure clarity in descriptive text by recognizing and using linguistic elements, e.g., structure of sentences, action verbs, and orientation verbs
- o Identify and utilize the text structure of descriptive text (e.g., understanding that texts have three parts, namely introduction, main body, and conclusion)

**Narrative**
- o Understand and utilize linguistic elements in synchronous and causal sequence in narrative text (by recognizing and utilizing linguistic elements such as verb tenses, action verbs, time markers, etc.)
- o Identify and utilize the text structure of narrative text (e.g., purposefully organize the text in paragraphs for an interesting narrative structure)

**Argumentative**
- o Understand and utilize linguistic elements in argumentative text to support logic (e.g., verbs and phrases that express position/belief, evaluative adjectives)
- o Recognize and utilize the text structure of argumentative text (organize text in three parts: initial argument, supporting information for documentation, and conclusion or concluding remark)

**Instructional**

- Understand and utilize linguistic elements in instructional text that relate to various contexts (e.g., verbs in various tenses)
- Recognize and utilize the text structure of instructional text (preliminary introduction in continuous text of the topic for which the instructions are to be developed, a sequence of steps, possible concluding remark/phrase)

- Evaluating a text with respect to its function and content
  - Evaluate the effectiveness of texts based on the author's perspective (e.g., preferences/predispositions toward the topic under consideration, type and organizational structure of the text, coherence and cohesion, effectiveness, and appropriateness)
  - Evaluate how one or more texts address the same theme/topic (evaluating the author's perspective by comparing content; identifying vocabulary, representations, and symbols explicitly or implicitly directed toward the reader; and forming personal opinions about the meaning of the texts)

During academic year 2015–2016, a revised school timetable—involving changes in the distribution of teaching periods per subject—was implemented in public primary schools. For language/reading, teaching time increased by two periods across all grades.[21] Out of the 35 periods per week, language/reading instruction now comprises 12 periods in Grades 1 and 2, 10 periods in Grades 3 and 4, and 9 periods in Grades 5 and 6.[22]

## Professional Development Requirements and Programs

The MOECSY is responsible for in-service training for teachers, which takes place mainly through the Cyprus Pedagogical Institute.[23] Professional development for fourth grade primary teachers includes participation in courses, school-based seminars, conferences, and workshops on any thematic subject, including language/reading instruction.[24] Professional development that is not restricted to language/reading instruction includes the implementation of the professional learning strategy. All schools are expected to prepare professional development action plans focused on a specific issue that is set as a priority based on teachers' and students' needs. Enactment of this plan includes school-based training and activities.[25]

Greek language teachers are expected to review material that enhances the teaching of language and participate in training activities such as:

- Centrally organized training activities, either online or face-to-face, at the national level
- In-school seminars that present and analyze specific topics
- School visits by language advisors and teacher educators who offer guidance/support to individual teachers or groups of teachers

- Teaching exemplary lessons in the classroom, observed by and discussed with practicing teachers and school inspectors
- Using instructional material provided by the MOECSY
- Roundtable discussions to reflect on and further disseminate teaching practices
- Development of action plans at the school level, focusing on the effective teaching of language comprehension strategies in accordance with individual school needs[26]

## Monitoring Student Progress in Reading

In public primary education, assessment is considered an integral part of teaching and aims to improve student progress, teacher effectiveness, and the curriculum itself. Teachers are required to adopt a systematic approach to student assessment, employing different assessment types and techniques. Students are assessed based on the extent of their class participation; their results on oral and written tests prepared by their classroom teachers; and their results on work done in the classroom and at home, including project work. Three types of assessment are administered at the primary level in Cyprus: initial, or diagnostic; formative, or continuous; and final, or summative. At the end of each school year, each child is issued a progress certificate by the school stating whether the child should progress to the next grade. Students are awarded a school leaving certificate at the end of sixth grade.[27]

In language/reading, assessment is used to monitor students' literacy development. As there is no national standardized testing (either at the classroom level at the end of the school year, or at the individual level after completing thematic units), individual teachers are responsible for student assessment. Teachers are expected to employ formative and summative assessment during and at the end of each thematic unit.[28] Formative assessment should be functionally embedded in everyday teaching, allowing both students and teachers to use it directly to promote students' literacy development. Summative assessment indicates final performance but also contributes to the goals of formative assessment.[29] Summative assessment resembles the AAT on the first and second axes discussed above (i.e., situating language in context and organizing language). Formative and summative assessment practices include activities for language production/comprehension, provision of opportunities for self-assessment, text transformation aligned with children's authentic communication needs, and accumulated experiences within the broader learning sociocultural context (e.g., provision of instructions/directions).[30]

## Special Reading Initiatives

As mentioned above, an important national reform on teaching reading restructured the national curriculum based on AAT, and the subsequent revision of the primary school timetable led to an increase in teaching time by two 40-minute periods per week for each grade.[31] With reading

comprehension relating to one-third of the AAT, training activities and action plans were implemented with this particular focus. In addition, paper and digital teaching material on reading comprehension was developed and distributed to schools.[32] In addition, the MOECSY has set the development of reading for pleasure as an important dimension of the wider plan to prevent and tackle illiteracy.[33]

Two additional national initiatives pertinent to reading and closing achievement gaps are implemented on an annual basis: the identification of students "at risk" for functional illiteracy[34] and the program Learning Greek as a Second Language.[35] The first initiative involves all students in third and sixth grade and aims to identify students at risk so they can be supported further. The second initiative seeks to measure the level of competency in the Greek language of immigrant students and provide appropriate support. Through these initiatives, the MOECSY seeks to operate proactively, with a view to preempt academic failure and social exclusion. Differentiated instruction is employed to reduce the gap between different groups of students. Thus, considering various parameters such as the differences among students in terms of readiness, learning styles, prior knowledge and experiences, and social and emotional characteristics, as well as how these parameters impact students' engagement in teaching/learning, the gap between groups of students is no longer approached as a difference in standards; rather, it is construed as a social and cultural difference associated with experiences acquired outside the school context. Rather than perceiving these differences as an obstacle, the MOECSY sets out to capitalize on them.[36]

## Response to COVID-19 Pandemic

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

The Cyprus government decided to close all public and private schools at all levels on March 11, 2020.[37] From May 20 until the end of the school year (June 26, 2020), students could attend school in person in two alternating groups. However, despite guidelines by the MOECSY, many students did not fully return to school. In fact, a large number of students did not return to schools until September 2020 (in the new academic year). Between September and November 2020, in-person teaching was suspended for approximately 14 days due to COVID-19 cases being detected or individual teachers and students being traced as close contacts. All primary schools (public and private) suspended the operation of schools and resorted to online teaching and learning from December 21, 2020, to February 8, 2021. In addition, from March 16–31, 2021, all primary schools in Limassol, the second biggest district in Cyprus, suspended in-person education due to a local outbreak of COVID-19.[38]

During periods when schools were not fully operational (i.e., when they either were completely closed or provided face-to-face instruction to alternating groups of students), teaching was asynchronous (e.g., teachers uploaded educational material on the school website), whereas students in Grades 4 to 6 received synchronous teaching (e.g., through Microsoft Teams). To

support teaching/learning, the MOECSY developed digital material for all primary school grades. This material aimed to facilitate language instruction for Grades 2 to 6 and help students work with the Attainment Targets. Teachers used this material flexibly according to their students' needs.[39]

### Impact of the Pandemic on Student Learning

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on learning (and on reading in particular) of fourth grade students at the national level has not been evaluated formally. However, informal discussions between the inspectorate and school principals/teachers on the consequences of the pandemic on students' reading have focused on the apparent widening of the gap among students from different socioeconomic backgrounds and the challenges related to learning in students with a migrant background.[40]

### Policy and Practice Changes

Legislation allowing for distance education already has been set. Distance education as a mode of teaching now can be implemented in exceptional cases upon approval of education authorities. The establishment of regulations on distance education have led to the collaboration between the MOECSY and various agencies (e.g., the Cyprus Telecommunication Authority).[41]

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