

Islamic Republic of Iran

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Introduction

The education system in Iran is a social and cultural institution that serves as the most important organization for the edification, dissemination, and transfer of culture in Iranian society, helping students to lay appropriate foundations and develop appropriate values.¹ Article 15 of the Iranian Constitution states that the official language of Iran is Persian (Farsi) and that “the use of regional and tribal languages in the press and mass media, as well as for teaching of their literature in schools, is allowed in addition to Persian.”² The population of Iran is approximately 85 million with a literacy rate of 85.5 percent among those age 15 and older.³

Iran is a diverse country with a population comprising many ethnic backgrounds, including Persians, Azerbaijanis, Kurds, Lurs, Arabs, Baluchis, Turkmens, and groups such as the Mazanderani and Gilaki. According to Article 3 of the Constitution, the government is responsible for providing free education and strengthening the spirit of inquiry and investigation in science, technology, culture, and Islamic studies through secondary school. Religious minority groups including Christians, Jews, and Zoroastrians are free to teach and practice their own religion.

Overview of Education System

Islamic principles and precepts form the basis of the Islamic Republic of Iran’s Constitution, which attributes great importance to education. The structure of the education system in Iran through the upper secondary level is highly centralized.

Iran’s Ministry of Education is composed of several deputy ministries, organizations, and centers with specific administrative responsibilities, including developing goals and strategies, conducting and supervising educational activities, developing curricula and textbooks, publishing and distributing educational materials, planning and conducting professional development and education for teachers, carrying out student assessments and examinations, and defining human resources policies within the Ministry (see Exhibit 1).⁴

Exhibit 1: Divisions in the Ministry of Education

Deputy Ministries	Organizations	Centers	Other
Primary Education	Educational Research and Planning	Performance Evaluation and Responding to Complaints	The Supreme Educational Council
Secondary Education	Renovating and Equipping Schools	Veterans Affairs	Ministry Headquarters in Provinces
Educational and Cultural Affairs	Private Schools and Public Participation	Department of International Affairs and Schools Abroad	
Health and Physical Education	Students with Special Needs	National Assessment and Quality Monitoring	
Legal Affairs and Parliament	Literacy Movement	Information and Technology	
Development and Management Support	Institute for the Intellectual Development of Children and Young Adults	Public Relations	
	Talented and Gifted Students and Young Researchers		
	Student Affairs		
	Parent-Teacher Association		
	Farhangian and Shahid Rajaei Universities		

The Supreme Educational Council, an autonomous legislative body, is responsible for adopting and communicating executive policies; designing mechanisms for achieving policy objectives; improving educational structures and processes; updating, amending, and coordinating policies; and monitoring the implementation of programs pertaining to the strategic reform of education. At the tertiary level, the Ministry of Science, Research, and Technology oversees universities offering nonmedical degrees; the Ministry of Health and Medical Education oversees medical schools and paramedical degrees; and the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs oversees informal vocational education.

The formal education system in Iran includes six years of primary education and six years of secondary education (see Exhibit 2). Each school year begins on September 21 and ends on June 21 of the following year. A high school diploma is required to enter university.

Exhibit 2: Overview of the Education System in Iran

Level of Schooling	Ages	Grades	Number of Years	Number of Sessions per Week
Preprimary	4–5		2	Varies by institute
Primary (two 3-year periods)	6–8 9–11	1–3 4–6	6	25 (45 minutes each)
Lower Secondary	12–14	7–9	3	30 (50 minutes each)
Upper Secondary	15–17	10–12	3	35 (50 minutes each)
Vocational	15–17	10–12	3	40 (50 minutes each)

The optional level of preprimary education prepares children for the compulsory stage of primary education. In addition to regular preprimary activities, a one-month course in Farsi is required in parts of the country where Persian is not the primary language. The Organization for Educational Research and Planning and the Welfare Organization are responsible for the supervision and educational preparation of preschool centers. Preschools may be public or private and may cater to only boys or girls, although many admit both. The main objectives of preprimary education are to:

- Contribute to the physical, mental, emotional, and social growth of children
- Promote children’s socio-emotional development, self-confidence, sense of the environment, and sense of aesthetics
- Provide children with opportunities to enjoy and be interested in group activities
- Strengthen religious and ethical values and national identity
- Promote desired social and individual behavior in children
- Promote oral language development and communication skills

Primary education, the first stage of formal education, comprises two 3-year periods from Grades 1 to 6 for students ages 6 to 11. The main objectives of primary education are to:

- Create an atmosphere for moral development
- Develop literacy and numeracy skills
- Develop social skills
- Teach students about personal hygiene
- Develop students’ talents, abilities, and physical strength

The subjects taught in primary school include the Holy Quran, Farsi (reading, writing, and dictation), mathematics, science, religious education, social studies (social studies, history, and geography), art, and physical education. Thinking and inquiry, technology, and occupations also are taught in sixth grade. Typically, one teacher is responsible for teaching all subjects except religion, art, and physical education in Grades 1 to 3.

The lower secondary stage of education lasts three years (Grades 7 to 9) for students ages 12 to 14. At this stage, students become familiar with various subjects in the physical and social sciences and in the humanities and art. The main objectives of lower secondary education are to:

- Develop moral and intellectual abilities
- Increase general knowledge
- Strengthen academic discipline and scientific imagination
- Identify individual preferences and talents in order to direct students toward suitable programs of study

Students in lower secondary school receive second language instruction in a language of their choice (English, French, or German), vocational education, and defense education (boys only) in addition to the subjects taught at the primary level.

Upper secondary education lasts three years (Grades 10 to 12) for students ages 15 to 17. At this stage, students choose among three programs of study: academic, technical and vocational, or *Kar-Danesh* (knowledge skill, a flexible vocational branch). These programs have different objectives and are intended for students with different abilities and interests. Academic programs prepare students to enter university; students who select these programs focus on mathematics, natural science, or humanities based on their education backgrounds and career interests. Both technical and vocational and *Kar-Danesh* programs prepare students for participation in the labor market after finishing high school, leading to a postdiploma (associate diploma) degree or a skill certificate diploma, respectively. Students who complete these programs have the opportunity to continue their education at a vocational college, where they may choose a program based on their capabilities and interests, or to take a university entrance examination after completing vocational college.

Schools in Iran may be public or private at all levels from primary school through university. Private schools must conform to the regulations of the Ministry of Education, though they are financed primarily through students' tuition. Public schools in Iran are free for all citizens.⁵

Use and Impact of PIRLS

Previous PIRLS results have impacted schools and research areas, and have led to evaluation of language teaching objectives and analysis of the factors that contributed to the results. Revisions to specific curriculum components are being considered due to updating of the teaching objectives. Informational texts have been added to primary school language textbooks, and the PIRLS framework and its objectives have been included in teacher's editions of textbooks. PIRLS released items have been distributed to teachers for incorporation into their classroom instruction. Professional development sessions have introduced the PIRLS framework and its objectives to teachers. Finally, potential research opportunities using PIRLS results have been presented to master's and doctoral students studying reading education and curriculum studies.

The Language/Reading Curriculum in Primary Grades⁶

According to the National Curriculum Document, the Farsi curriculum integrates linguistic skills; thinking processes; linguistic creativity; linguistic and literary texts, accounts, and considerations; and poetic forms. Farsi language is a collective domain and includes skills such as listening, speaking, reading, writing, and comprehension; grammar; and literary arrays. Reading literacy, including reading skills acquisition and comprehension of written texts, is one of the most important abilities students acquire during the first years of schooling. Playing a major role in the mental, social, and emotional development of each student, reading literacy provides a foundation for learning other subjects.

In addition to understanding the meaning of words, phrases, and sentences, comprehension involves deciphering authors' main objectives through verbal codes and symbols. Reading with persistence includes more than acquiring knowledge; students also acquire reasoning abilities.

The current national curriculum for Farsi language in primary school is fully centralized and integrated. Reading instruction and its goals are incorporated with other components of language instruction.⁷ The main objective of reading is to develop accuracy, reflection, reasoning, and judgment skills with an emphasis on the ability to:

- Write with focus and accuracy
- Read aloud or to oneself
- Read rhythmically and harmoniously
- Identify the main idea of a text
- Recognize the connection among different parts of a text
- Use appropriate instruments that are suitable for reading
- Expand point of view through reading
- Acquire desirable reading habits

In the revised curriculum, reading is considered a conscious activity in which students collect knowledge about their favorite topics, satisfy their sense of curiosity, and gain personal enjoyment.⁸ Some of the principles undertaken to prepare Farsi curriculum are as follows:

- **Attention to local conditions and needs.** Although it is necessary for the Farsi curriculum to have a specific origin and a single structure for the whole country to preserve national unity, the revised curriculum considers the conditions and needs of the different provinces and districts and is more compatible with the conditions and facilities of bilingual areas.
- **Participation of experts and teachers.** A large number of specialists and experts in the fields of psychology, linguistics, children and adolescent literature, curriculum planning, Persian language and literature teaching, educational design, illustration, and calligraphy collaborated with teachers in the process of designing and evaluating the curriculum to ensure its success.

- **Flexibility in planning.** To address teachers' demand for opportunities to use regional and ethnic writings, use of free lessons in the Persian textbook is anticipated so that teachers can prepare appropriate content according to program goals and the students' environment. In addition to the suggested methods of evaluation for each component of reading in the curriculum (comprehension, meaning of phrases, linguistic and literary knowledge work in the group, etc.), teachers are encouraged to use any other assessment method at their discretion, according to regional and local conditions.
- **Integration of oral and written language skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing).** Each lesson in Farsi elementary textbooks consists of three parts: text, images, and activities. Activities in lower primary grades (Grades 1 to 3) include the following sections: look and talk, right and wrong, word formation, now you say, reading, playing, reading and memorizing, work in group, and reading and thinking. Activities in upper primary grades (Grades 4 to 6) have the following components: comprehension, vocabulary, linguistic and literary knowledge, listen and talk, anecdote, study workshop, read and memorize, and read and think. Additional writing activities are provided to strengthen transcription skills, spelling, practice of grammar and literary arrays, writing skills, and creative writing.
- **Fostering local talent.** Provision of free lessons in textbooks and the opportunity for local teachers to compile parts of textbooks allow local talent to grow.
- **Preparing a foundation for strengthening reading literacy.** Most of the texts selected to practice reading fluently have been from contemporary and simple stories that are interesting for students and indirectly create and strengthen the habit of reading. In the group work section of many lesson activities, an exercise for reading (in the form of a storybook) has been provided. At the end of the week, students can choose the storybook that was introduced in the Persian textbook and read it in class.

To achieve these revised curriculum goals, different teaching and learning approaches should be employed. Some of these approaches are:

- **Gestalt psychology approach.** Students should be taught the general forms of phenomenon first, after which their components are introduced through breaking down the whole into its constituent elements. An analytical approach, i.e., movement from part to whole, should be used to strengthen writing skills.
- **Activity-oriented approach.** Considering that a significant part of learning Persian language and literature uses skills that should be acquired by each student, an attempt has been made to pay sufficient attention to the various aspects of the students as individuals. Therefore, students should bring their whole selves while participating in activities.
- **Communication approach.** Language and literature are considered as means for understanding and establishing mutual and social relations among individuals. Hence, communication skills are given more importance than linguistic skills. As a result, students should have more opportunities with language and literature, increasing the interaction between individuals and groups.

- **Use of stories in teaching concepts and topics.** In current Farsi textbooks, concepts and topics are the basis for choosing stories. Texts are chosen to:
 - Teach values and religious concepts
 - Indirectly teach educational and moral tips and lessons
 - Expand vocabulary for use in life
 - Create a desire to study
 - Strengthen reading and comprehension skills
- **Teaching through learning activities.** In each lesson, sections called Look and Tell, Understand, and Tell Your Friends, and a study workshop are designed to help students learn some life skills such as self-assessment and collaboration and interaction with others through practice.
- **Fostering spelling skills.** In the revised Farsi curriculum, different approaches can be used for spelling lessons. Spelling previously was considered a passive lesson, and teachers used to practice word spelling by reading words aloud to students and having students write them. The revised curriculum considers various spelling approaches such as:
 - Exercises that include making a word with a letter
 - Completing a sentence with a word
 - Writing words from a lesson
 - Finding accented words
 - Arranging words in alphabetical order
 - Making a word with a prefix and suffix
 - Copying lesson sentences
 - Writing the words in a table
 - Having teachers use texts other than textbooks
- **Giving importance to creative writing.** In the past, essay writing mostly was taught separately from reading; students used to write and then read in class. Now, although current Farsi textbooks emphasize simple writing such as sentence or paragraph writing, students are encouraged to practice creative writing and are asked to write simple descriptions and memoirs.

Teachers are encouraged to use cards, maps, labels, magazines, and storybooks as other tools for instruction. Class libraries are recommended at some schools. These tools diversify reading and increase students' interest.

Professional Development Requirements and Programs

Individuals can qualify to become teachers through two methods. The first method is student teacher admission through the National University Entrance Examination. According to Article 1 of the Law on Service Commitments and Article 24 of the Civil Service Management Law, Farhangian and Shahid Rajaei Universities accept student teachers through the National University Entrance Examination in the required fields. The admission process for student teachers requires a specialized interview to assess applicants' capabilities, understand their level of motivation and interest, and evaluate their level of knowledge and their expectations of the teaching profession. The interview is used to get a sense of an applicant's personality, psychological and social characteristics, and motivation and interest in teaching. Passing a practical test is required for graduating the program.

The second method to become a teacher is through a recruitment test. According to Article 28 of Farhangian University Statute and Articles 42 and 44 of the Civil Service Management Law, qualified graduates of universities and higher education institutions (other than Farhangian and Shahid Rajaei Universities) can apply for a teaching position. The minimum requirement is an associate diploma in technical and vocational fields for vocational schools and a bachelor's degree for teaching nonvocational classes. Applicants participate in comprehensive national employment tests. To be hired, applicants undergo a specialized interview as mentioned above, participate in different education courses for at least six months, and also must pass the examination of general qualifications.

Short-Term Teacher Development Courses

The Ministry of Education's Bureau for the Scientific Promotion of Human Resources has developed short-term preservice and in-service training courses and workshops (face-to-face or virtual) to help teachers and other staff members develop their knowledge and skills. Preemployment training, training for promotion, teacher education regarding newly implemented policies, and computer literacy courses are mandatory for teachers. The Curriculum Development Center and other offices also assist language and literature departments and teachers.

All textbooks are accompanied by a teacher's edition, which includes recommendations for teaching, assessment methods, and student activities. A series of instructional videos for teachers is included with most new textbooks, introducing them to the goals and objectives of the program of study. Educational magazines produced under the supervision of the Organization for Educational Research and Planning are available to teachers for additional support.

Monitoring Student Progress in Reading

Prior to the start of primary school, a school readiness assessment is administered to determine whether students are ready to start first grade or need to be directed to a program for students with special needs. Schools issue descriptive report cards for individual students in January and June. Students who do not qualify for promotion to the next grade in at least three subjects must participate in compensatory sessions and complete further enrichment activities by the following September. Until sixth grade, students are continually assessed through observation of their in-class activities, oral or written examinations, and homework.

At the end of sixth grade, students take a regional examination developed by the Office for Assessment in the Ministry of Education in each province. Students who pass the examination receive an elementary school leaving certificate, while students who fail can retake the examination in September. Students who fail a second time may retake the examination the following year. The primary education grading system uses points earned through continual written and oral examinations that incorporate national criteria.

The system of promotion in secondary school is similar to the system in primary school, but grading is not descriptive. Students in secondary school receive report cards on which they are graded on a 20-point system in each subject. At the end of upper secondary education, students who pass a national final examination receive a high school diploma. Graduates who want to go on to further education take a university entrance examination administered by the National Organization for Educational Testing.

Special Reading Initiatives

The Fundamental Reform Document of Education in the Islamic Republic of Iran has identified 10 domains as key components of education and has defined education goals, basic competencies, and special objectives for each subject area.⁹ Accordingly, Farsi textbooks consider how the five components of knowledge—thinking, belief, ethics, morals, and practice—relate to oneself, others, creation, and creator (God). The approach schools in Iran take to language instruction goes beyond teaching listening, speaking, reading, and writing; it aims to foster and improve thinking skills such as critical reasoning.

The Khaanaa School project Integrating Participatory School-Based Fostering of Four Language Skills and Life Skills (IPSFFLLS) is an educational transformation package of the Islamic Republic of Iran, designed and implemented by the Deputy of Primary Education. The Khaanaa development package seeks to strengthen children's four language skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing and to prepare them for social life. In changing the approach from knowledge-based to skills-based, this plan was first introduced to a group of head teachers at the national level. The project was piloted in 5 percent of schools and has the following goals:

- Short-term objectives of this project are improving and enhancing students’ four language skills, etiquette, life skills, and ability to learn other subjects.
- Midterm objectives of this project are promoting the Islamic Republic of Iran in international literacy studies.
- Long-term objectives of this project are strengthening the national language (Farsi) in bilingual regions, developing education equity, and strengthening Iranian Islamic identity throughout the country.
- Qualitative goals include improving the quality of primary education in preschool and primary school; developing listening, speaking, and social skills of preschool students; improving the quality of students’ reading (correct reading, comprehension, critical reading, commenting, independent presentation, etc.); improving the quality of students’ writing (spelling; calligraphy; expression of thoughts, feelings, and desires; and creative and critical writing); and improving and promoting students’ etiquette and life skills (politeness, honesty, self-esteem and responsibility, discipline, cheerfulness, anger management, counseling, problem solving, critical and creative thinking).

Response to COVID-19 Pandemic

Teaching and Learning During the COVID-19 Pandemic

The Ministry of Education’s slogan “School is closed, but education is not closed” has been applied to all facets of education since the pandemic affected Iran. The Ministry has created opportunities to continue teaching-learning processes by allocating time for virtual and long-distance education, presenting activities through various radio and television networks, and establishing an education network for students (Shaad).

Impact of the Pandemic on Student Learning

The years when children are in primary school are some of the most sensitive and important years of their lives. This is the time when the foundations of their personality and mental, physical, and social development are formed. These aspects have been affected by the pandemic and by the social and physical separation from other students. Some socially and/or economically disadvantaged and marginalized students fell behind in learning due to lack of access to required infrastructure for virtual and long-distance education (which was not foreseen before the pandemic). Research is to be done to measure these impacts.

Policy and Practice Changes

Some actions taken by the Ministry of Education are as follows:

- The Primary Education Deputy, in accordance with the policies of the Ministry of Education, deployed the capacities of mass media, created a virtual space (Shaad), and produced educational packages to compensate for the absence of students in school. Each province

could choose a suitable educational package among those suggested after considering the province’s education needs and diversity (in terms of climate, geography, economy, culture, etc.).

- In 2021, the Primary Education Deputy implemented the Khaanaa transformation package in 5 percent of the country’s schools to improve the language skills (reading, writing, listening, and speaking) and life skills of students. Based on positive results, the package is planned to be implemented in 25 percent of schools in academic year 2021–2022.
- During the 2020–2021 academic year, a survey was conducted on student access to education modes (face-to-face, virtual, long-distance) throughout the country in order to summarize and prepare an accurate information atlas.
- Measuring students’ learning is important and necessary to make education decisions and plan for interventions. Consequently, deputies within the provinces were asked to send results of the assessment of primary students in the core courses, including Farsi, for all grades to the Primary Education Deputy within the Ministry of Education. Results showed the need for interventions, which led to providing learning opportunities through a TV education network during the summer and providing tutorials to students with the two lowest performance levels of “need more training and effort” and “acceptable” (as noted in reported school evaluation) to compensate for and consolidate learning and prevent dropping out of school (especially in the first and second grades of elementary school). Students who are slow learners, who lack access to face-to-face or virtual education, or who are orphans also were supported with tutorials. Appointed committees evaluated the academic progress of students involved in these programs.
- One of the main basic goals of the Ministry of Education is providing “access to quality formal education for all children in the age group of 6–11 years.” To achieve this important goal, the Primary Education Deputy intends to identify all children in that age group who dropped out of school and who are subsequently in need of education.
- Teachers are asked to use various assessment tools such as workbooks, self-assessments, paper tests, etc., and to provide ongoing feedback to students using tools in the Shaad network.

Impact of the Pandemic on PIRLS 2021

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the administration of PIRLS 2021 was delayed to 2022.

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