

Latvia

Olga Pole
Antra Ozola
Kristine Kampmane
University of Latvia

Introduction

Overview of Education System

The education system in Latvia is managed at the national, municipal, and institutional levels. The Parliament (*Saeima*), the Cabinet of Ministers, and the Ministry of Education and Science are the main decision making bodies at the national level. As the leading public administration institution in the fields of education and science, the Ministry implements a single national policy and development strategy in education; develops, organizes, and coordinates the implementation of education, science, sport, youth, and State language policies; drafts legislation regulating the sector; and drafts policy planning documents. Every municipality supervises and funds the maintenance of preschools, basic education schools, and general upper secondary schools in its administrative territory, and has a Board of Education to perform education functions. In addition, education policy is regulated by the Cabinet of Ministers; decrees, instruction, and methodology guidelines are issued by the Ministry of Education and Science. General education institutions follow laws and regulations that include the General Education Law (issued by Parliament), the Education Law, and their own bylaws.¹

General education is described in the following:

1. The State general education standard (issued by the Cabinet of Ministers)
2. Guidelines for State preschool education
3. Standards for general education subjects
4. General education programs
5. Curricula of general education subjects²

The major levels of education are preprimary education, including compulsory education for children ages 5 and 6; compulsory general basic education (Grades 1 to 9); general secondary education (Grades 10 to 12); and higher education. Basic education consists of two stages. The first stage comprises Grades 1 to 6, and the second stage comprises Grades 7 to 9.³

Basic education (which may be combined with an education program for ethnic minorities, including the native language of an ethnic minority and content related to the identity of ethnic minorities and integrating ethnic minorities into Latvian society) takes place in primary schools

and elementary schools. Basic education also may be acquired at vocational education schools, special education institutions, social correction education institutions, secondary schools (including State gymnasiums), and vocational secondary education institutions subordinate to the Ministry of Culture.⁴ General secondary education takes place in secondary schools (including distance education secondary schools) or gymnasiums (including State gymnasiums).⁵

During the 2020–2021 academic year, there were 314 general primary education schools (including 260 basic education schools, 24 of which were private), 54 primary education schools (12 were private), 281 secondary education schools (27 were private), 31 State gymnasiums, 6 gymnasiums, 1 evening (shift) secondary school,^a 6 distance learning schools, 1 school of social or pedagogic correction, 44 special education schools, and 4 vocational primary and secondary education institutions.⁶

Preprimary Education

Preprimary education focuses on comprehensive child development, socio-emotional development, critical thinking, and development of basic skills in the following fields: language, social and civic knowledge, cultural understanding and self-expression in art, natural sciences, mathematics, technology, and health and physical activity. Preprimary education's main aim is to prepare children for basic education.⁷

Assessment of learning performance is based on ongoing observations or final observations of the student's performance. Teachers must inform the child's parents or legal representative of their observations.

Children may enter preprimary education at age 1.5. Starting at age 5, preprimary education is compulsory. It is provided in preschool education institutions, special preschool education institutions, and preparatory groups of general education institutions, as well as at home. Children enter first grade in the calendar year when they turn 7 years old.

Special Education Programs

Special education programs consider general education objectives, tasks, and compulsory content specified in the State education standard and then form an individual plan for each student or student group according to their type of developmental disorder, ability, and health condition.⁸ Students with special needs may complete special education programs in general education classes, in special education classes of general education institutions, or in special education institutions.

During the 2020–2021 academic year, there were 44 special education schools (31 with Latvian language of instruction, 1 with Russian language of instruction, and 12 bilingual—Latvian/Russian languages of instruction).⁹

^a As of August 1, 2018, evening (shift) secondary schools are no longer established.

Use and Impact of PIRLS

Latvia has participated in four out of five PIRLS cycles: 2001, 2006, 2016, and 2021. PIRLS results indicate that the reading literacy level of fourth grade students in Latvia is quite high.

It is not easy to determine how much the results of large-scale international assessments influence decisions about education in Latvia, in part because no explicit mention is made of them doing so, even if that is the case.¹⁰ Nevertheless, PIRLS is well-known among Latvia's education officials and policymakers, and PIRLS results are used to promote the quality of education. PIRLS results may have influenced the new competency-based curriculum that was developed in Latvia within the project *Skola 2030*, as well as a special reading initiative platform to promote students' talent that was created.^b

Following each PIRLS cycle, national reports have been published based on the results. Publications citing the results dating back to 2006 are available on the home page of the Institute of Educational Research, Faculty of Education, Psychology and Art of the University of Latvia. In addition, Latvia's PIRLS 2016 results have been reported and analyzed in several freely accessible publications, including those in the Suggested Readings section. PIRLS results also are used in students' scientific work. For example, several Latvian dissertations and master's theses have been based on analysis of PIRLS data.

Results of large-scale studies and other publications often are used as evidence to support some political initiatives in the education sector and by journalists who write about education. Analyses of PIRLS results have been presented in national and international conferences, seminars, and other events for teachers.

The Language/Reading Curriculum in Primary Grades

From October 2016 to October 2021, the National Centre for Education (NCE) developed a new, competency-based curriculum. The new curriculum's aim is to develop value-based knowledge, skills, and attitudes, which are necessary in the 21st century. Students tested in PIRLS 2021 were taught according to the "old" curriculum until third grade and then began the new curriculum in Grades 4 and 5. The old curriculum is described in the Latvia chapter of the *PIRLS 2016 Encyclopedia: Education Policy and Curriculum in Reading*.¹¹

The new curriculum is being implemented gradually over five years starting in 2019 at all education levels (starting from the age of 1.5, when children begin to attend preprimary education, and up to twelfth grade, when they graduate from secondary education). Implementing the new curriculum occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic, therefore challenging Latvia's education system like never before. The new curriculum states that students will acquire knowledge throughout all curricula, with Language and Literature as dominant fields.

^b For more information, see <https://atbalstsizcilibai.lv/lasit/>

New national preschool regulations for language development state that at the end of preschool education, a child is expected to have mastered the following basic skills in the field of language (which include values and virtues, cross-cutting skills, and knowledge):

- Explain why people use language when communicating
- Listen to the text and name people that are mentioned in the text
- Recount events
- Tell a continuation of the text
- Ask if something is unclear and answer a specific question
- Clearly and sequentially talk about what has been heard and experienced
- Do not interrupt the speaker during a conversation
- Use different speech intonations
- Distinguish and name sounds
- Mark the sound with the appropriate letter
- Read the words and understand what has been read
- Write letters¹²

A child who has completed an ethnic minority preschool education program in Latvian should be able to do the following:

- Answer questions about what he or she has seen and heard
- Ask for information
- Express his or her needs
- Engage in a conversation on topics related to everyday life and the learning process
- Pronounce sounds correctly
- Know printed letters
- Read short words that are used often in everyday situations and the learning process¹³

According to the “old” National Standards in General Basic Education, the aim of Latvian language instruction in basic education is to:

- Develop students’ competency in Latvian language
- Develop students’ ability to express themselves and communicate in Latvian language
- Be aware of the language’s role in the development of one’s personality, ethnic identity, and intercultural dialogue¹⁴

The new Regulations on National Primary Education Standards and Samples of Basic Education Programs does not explicitly state an aim of learning the Latvian language but discusses the following expected outcomes for students in the field of language learning: The student is interested in language learning, understands the role of Latvian and minority languages in forming national identity and preserving cultural heritage, understands the role of Latvian as a state

language in Latvian society and education, and understands the role of foreign languages in intercultural communication. In addition, students use language as a means of thinking, cognition, communication, and creative expression; expresses, understands, analyzes, and interprets information, concepts, facts, and ideas in texts of various formats and genres; and expresses his/her own thoughts, feelings, and opinions in oral and written form for emotional and intellectual enrichment.¹⁵

Fourth Grade Latvian Language Curriculum

In the new fourth grade curriculum for Latvian language, the content is organized around the following topics and ideas:

- How do you create your own text, e.g., description and business letter?
- How do you play with the language and how do you learn Latvian while playing games?
- How do you get information and how do you present it to others?
- How do you create a monologue, write an ad, and write a business email?
- How do you search for and evaluate information? How do you write a dialogue and a message using an address or a group of addresses?
- How do you express your opinion and justify it? What do you need to know and understand when writing instructions and recommendations?¹⁶

Students begin to study literature as a separate subject in fourth grade. According to the new fourth grade curriculum for literature, the content is organized around the following topics and ideas:

- How do you create a literary image and discover the values of home and family?
- How do folklore texts (folk songs, riddles, beliefs, legends) form an understanding and kind attitude toward nature?
- How are interpersonal relationships and ethical values revealed in literary works of different times?
- How are the images, motifs, and insights about values in a literary tale used in other art forms?
- How does personification create an image by emphasizing essential qualities?
- How do the means and methods of expression used in literary and other works of art differ?
- How do you create a story about something important to you, using a vivid image created in your imagination or reality?

- How do writers' and people's experiences reveal the daily life of the school at different times?
- How do you get a sense of belonging to your homeland by learning about literary works and other sources about foreign countries?¹⁷

Professional Development Requirements and Programs

To ensure high-quality education, the State has stipulated specific requirements for teacher education and qualifications. Teachers must have a higher education degree and relevant qualifications in compliance with the requirements of the Ministry of Education and Science. Fourth grade teachers who provide reading instruction must have one of the following combinations of education qualifications:

- Higher education in pedagogy and appropriate qualification of the teaching subject
- Higher education in pedagogy or higher education and qualification of a primary school or primary education
- Higher education in the field of science related to the teaching subject and a teacher qualification or graduation from a teacher professional development program (a program of at least 72 hours, after which a person obtains a certificate in pedagogy). A teacher professional development program is held in a higher education institution.
- A master's or doctoral degree in pedagogy or education based on a thesis related to the primary school curriculum and didactics
- Higher education in the field of science related to the teaching subject and work experience under the guidance of a teacher mentor in one educational institution for no longer than one year¹⁸

Teachers are required to complete 36 hours of professional development courses over a three-year period.

Monitoring Student Progress in Reading

With the new competency-based curriculum, teachers are free to choose the most suitable assessment type and can decide how frequently to assess students. The three types of assessment are diagnostic, formative, and summative.

In Grades 1 to 3, student progress is evaluated using four levels: started to master, continues to master, mastered, or mastered in depth. At the end of the school year, students receive a detailed written explanation of their achievement based on the results. In Grades 4 to 9, assessment is based on a 10-point scale, with 4 being the minimal "passing" grade and 10 considered an "excellent" grade.

Students' progress in reading during the 2020–2021 academic year was monitored using the following national tests:

- In third grade, diagnostic assessment combined with subject content in:
 - Latvian language
 - the ethnic minority language for minority education programs
 - mathematics
 - Latvian language in minority education programs¹⁹
- In sixth grade, diagnostic assessment in:
 - Latvian language
 - the ethnic minority language for minority education programs
 - mathematics
 - Latvian language in minority education programs
 - natural sciences²⁰
- In ninth grade (State examinations for the acquisition of general basic education), compulsory diagnostic assessment in:
 - Latvian language
 - the ethnic minority language for minority education programs
 - mathematics²¹
- Optional diagnostic assessment specified by the educational institution in:
 - one foreign language of the student's choice
 - the history of Latvia
 - natural sciences
 - the ethnic minority language for minority education programs²²

Special Reading Initiatives

As mentioned above, a special reading initiative platform to promote students' talent that includes different tasks for children in preschool to ninth grade has been created. The platform also includes methodological guidelines for parents and teachers about the promotion of students' reading skills.²³

In 2020, 256 children's books were published in Latvia.²⁴ In 2001, specialists from the Children's Literature Center at the National Library of Latvia started a nationwide reading program called Children's Jury. As part of this program, a committee of experts selects a collection of the newest children's books to be distributed by the National Library of Latvia to participating regional libraries. The collection includes six books for four age groups (5+, 9+, 11+, and 15+) and four books for parents. Participants in the program read the books intended for their age group and complete a survey to evaluate each book. At the end of the year, the top three books for each age group are recognized at awards ceremonies around the country. In 2021, 857 schools

participated in this event.²⁵ The National Library of Latvia and regional libraries and municipalities have organized other events to support reading literacy.

Olympiads in various subjects are popular for talented students, starting at the school level and progressing through city and regional levels to international competitions.

Response to COVID-19 Pandemic

Teaching and Learning During the COVID-19 Pandemic

When schools were closed during the COVID-19 pandemic, schools pivoted to distance learning. Schools chose the platform (e.g., Zoom, Teams) and methodology (e.g., sending instructions, tasks, video instructions, and video tasks, contacting students and their parents by phone or another method). At the beginning of the pandemic, teachers had few teaching tools that were created for distance learning, so they had to adapt existing tools. Later, there were a large number of online learning platforms that teachers and students could use for everyday learning.^c During distance learning, a great help for children in lower grade levels were their parents, who were very involved in the ongoing education process.

Special needs schools were forced to switch to distance learning in March 2020 until the end of the school year in May 2020, and were reopened on September 1, 2020. According to the type of developmental disorder, ability, and health condition of students, the distance learning process was organized individually or in groups. Instructions were given online, in short videos, as written instructions to parents, or in another form (e.g., teachers called parents to inform them about assignments).

During the pandemic, teachers were provided with emotional and technical help and also were given financial support to assist with the work overload.

Impact of the Pandemic on Student Learning

On March 13, 2020, schools closed and were forced to switch to distance learning at all stages of education. Distance learning continued until the end of the school year, and schools reopened on September 1, 2020, for a short period—until January 2021. Due to the rapid increase in COVID-19 infection rates, schools had to decide whether to provide face-to-face learning or switch to distance learning. During the 2020–2021 academic year, schools switched to distance learning when government guidelines based on national and local COVID-19 infection rates and a Declaration of a State of Emergency necessitated it. Otherwise, schools were open for face-to-face learning. A Declaration of a State of Emergency was announced twice: from November 9, 2020, to April 6, 2021, and from October 11, 2021, to January 11, 2022.

When students went back to school they had to follow epidemiological safety measures, and face-to-face learning occurred whenever possible.

^c Examples can be found at <https://skolo.lv/>; www.e-klase.lv/; www.uzdevumi.lv/; <https://soma.lv/>; and <https://www.tavaklase.lv/>

Policy and Practice Changes

During the pandemic, the Latvian government provided students with devices needed for distance learning (such as smartphones and tablets) and improved the quality of the internet by signing a memorandum Powerful Internet for Every School in Latvia, in cooperation with partners.²⁶ With the help of teachers and the government, a variety of online learning platforms were created. The Latvian government also has signed the memorandum Computer for Every Child,²⁷ in which participants work to provide each student and teacher with a computer necessary for the learning process by the year 2025.

Impact of the Pandemic on PIRLS 2021

Despite the fact that sampled schools were willing to participate during the PIRLS 2021 field test, not all of them could take part in testing due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Because of the pandemic and school closures in the spring of 2021, Latvia administered the PIRLS 2021 main study to fifth grade students in the autumn.

The main study was originally postponed from April to May 2021, but it was still unknown if data collection could take place on schedule since children were studying at home and it was uncertain when they could return to schools. Latvia struggled to meet the advised participation rates for the PIRLS 2021 main data collection, as schools struggled to adapt to the new teaching-learning situation and already faced difficulties because of the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent distance learning. Data collection was eventually postponed again to September of the following school year because schools in the capital did not return to face-to-face learning until the end of the 2020–2021 academic year. Postponing allowed several additional schools to participate. However, in August, the National Research Center (NRC) received several refusals due to the lack of school resources (as teachers and other school staff were busy adapting to new conditions). The National Research Center was forced to use replacement schools to meet the advised participation rates. During testing, there were a few changed and postponed testing dates due to the absence of students resulting from the COVID-19 quarantine or sickness.

According to UNESCO data, the countries that were affected most by complete or partial school closures in Europe from February 16, 2020, to October 31, 2021, were Latvia, with 80 percent closure or partial closure during that time frame, followed by Slovenia with 70 percent and Czech Republic with 65 percent.²⁸

Suggested Readings

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