

Portugal

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Introduction

Overview of Education System

Education in Portugal is organized in accordance with the democratic principles established by the Constitution of the Republic, approved in 1976, especially with regard to the freedom to teach and learn and the guarantee of access to continuous learning for all citizens. These principles were fundamental for the elaboration of the Education System Act,¹ approved in 1986, which defines the objectives, structures, and modes of organization of education in Portugal. The Education System Act ensures that the Portuguese Republic cannot take upon itself the right of planning education and culture according to any philosophical, political, ideological, religious, or aesthetic directives.

The central government finances public schools and, where there is a shortage of places in public school provision (for example, when an existing public school building is not large enough to fit all students), supports private schools/institutions through contracts of association with the Ministry of Education. Nevertheless, there are independent private schools that are not financed by the state and that may or may not have pedagogical autonomy and parallelism.

The Ministry of Education is responsible for the definition, coordination, implementation, and evaluation of the national policies for basic and secondary education, higher education, and professional qualification and training. The Ministry of Education is also responsible for managing the network of preschool establishments.

In Portugal, the curriculum is determined at the national level and the Ministry of Education defines guidelines for teaching methods that are adapted by teachers in each school in close relation with the school education project.^a The school network is organized into school clusters,² which have their own administration and management bodies and are composed of several schools from different levels of education. Recently implemented reforms have extended cluster autonomy to curriculum management,³ promoting decentralization by assigning responsibilities to municipalities regarding investment, equipment, the maintenance of school buildings, provision of meals in establishments, and management of nonteaching staff.⁴

^a The school education project is the school's institutional and strategic planning document that clearly addresses the mission, vision, and general objectives of the school that guide its education policy within the scope of its autonomy.

Compulsory education lasts 12 years, between the ages of 6 and 18, or until the conclusion of upper secondary education (UNESCO’s International Standard Classification of Education [ISCED] Level 3).^b Public education is free and universal from age 4, which corresponds to the final years of preschool.

The Portuguese education system is comprehensive in structure, involving long basic schooling with vocational choices at the beginning of upper secondary education (ISCED Level 3). The system is organized into three main levels: preschool education, basic and secondary education, and higher education.

Preschool education covers children from ages 3 to 6, which is the age of entry for basic and secondary education. In 2020–2021, the preschool network served 251,060 students (90.4 percent of Portuguese children within this age group^c).

Basic and secondary education is compulsory for children ages 6 to 18, or until the completion of secondary education. Basic education aims to deliver general education for all children, providing the fundamental knowledge and skills required to pursue postsecondary studies and offering the following tracks: General Basic Education, Specialized Arts Education, Vocational Education, and Recurrent Education. The basic education level is composed of three sequentially ordered cycles of study, each of which must be completed in order to progress to the next cycle. During the first cycle, which corresponds to Grades 1 to 4, generalist teachers are responsible for teaching all subject areas except English as a Foreign Language, which is mandatory for all students in Grades 3 and 4 (implemented in the 2015–2016 academic year) and can be taught by specialized teachers. In the first cycle, the curriculum is based on reference curricula from the Ministry of Education that focus on the domains of Portuguese Language, Mathematics, Natural and Social Environment, Artistic and Motor Expressions, and English as a Foreign Language. In 2020–2021, 371,339 students were enrolled in the first cycle of basic education (97.4 percent of Portuguese children within this age group).

The second cycle of basic education corresponds to Grades 5 and 6 and focuses on the following multidisciplinary areas of study: Language and Social Studies (including Portuguese and English as a Foreign Language, history, geography of Portugal, and citizenship), Mathematics and Sciences, Physical Education, and Arts and Technology. In 2020–2021, 260,496 students were enrolled in the second cycle of education (89.0 percent of Portuguese children within this age group).

The third cycle, which corresponds to Grades 7 to 9, includes a second foreign language and separates the disciplinary areas of natural sciences and social studies (natural sciences and physical chemistry, geography, and history). The curricula at this level are taught by specialized teachers.

^b In 1986, the Education Act established nine years of compulsory schooling (Grades 1 to 9 or age 15). In 2009, compulsory education was extended to 12 years of schooling or age 18. (Law No. 85/2009 of August 27 established the regime of compulsory schooling for children and young people who are of school age and enshrined the universality of preschool education for children to age 5.)

^c This figure corresponds to the percentage ratio between the number of students enrolled in a given cycle of study (at normal age of frequency for this cycle of study) and the population of the same age range.

In 2020–2021, 327,913 students were enrolled in the third cycle of education (91.9 percent of Portuguese children within this age group).

The first and second cycles of Portuguese basic education correspond to primary education (ISCED Level 1), and the third cycle corresponds to lower secondary education (ISCED Level 2). Secondary education corresponds to Grades 10 to 12, or upper secondary education (ISCED Level 3).

Secondary education is organized into various tracks that are aimed at continuing on to postsecondary studies or entering the labor market. The Scientific-Humanistic track prepares students for postsecondary education in the areas of sciences, technologies, humanities, or arts. Specialized Arts tracks prepare students to enter the labor market or pursue postsecondary education in the performing arts. Vocational, Educational, and Professional tracks prepare students to enter the labor market, also allowing for the pursuit of postsecondary education.

The higher education level is offered at public, private, and cooperative universities and at polytechnic institutes. This level is composed of three cycles of studies: the first cycle, equivalent to ISCED Level 6 (graduation or bachelor's degree); second cycle, equivalent to ISCED Level 7 (master's degree); and third cycle, equivalent to ISCED Level 8 (doctoral degree). The Portuguese higher education system follows the principles set forth in the Bologna Process with the goal of creating a common European higher education system with courses that may be transferred among institutions per the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS) and the Europass Diploma Supplement.

Use and Impact of PIRLS

PIRLS 2021 marks the third time that Portugal has participated in the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (participating for the first time in 2011). Primary school students' reading literacy improvement requirements have not been explicitly tied to previous PIRLS results.

The Language/Reading Curriculum in Primary Grades

Teaching reading is a major curricular goal of the first cycle of basic education. In Grades 1 to 4, the connection between orality and reading and writing assumes paramount importance. Reading and writing instruction constitutes a single domain in the Portuguese language curriculum, which supports abilities common to both skills. The Ministry of Education determines the minimum number of hours per week that instructors must devote to each of the major curricular areas during the first cycle.

In 2018, The Essential Learnings^{5,6} for Basic Education was approved in Portugal and the definitions of the various dimensions of the curriculum were established. The Essential Learnings are meant to be a set of curricular guidance documents based on the planning, implementation,

and evaluation of teaching and learning, and aim to promote the development of the areas of competencies listed in the *Profile of Students Leaving Compulsory Schooling*.⁷

Throughout the first cycle of basic education, the Portuguese subject allows students to develop, at different levels, progressively more demanding core competencies in specific domains: oral comprehension, oral expression, reading, literary education, written expression, and explicit knowledge of the language. Accordingly, out of a total of 25 hours per week devoted to the mandatory first cycle curricular domains (Portuguese, Mathematics, Natural and Social Environment, and Artistic and Motor Expressions), a minimum of 7 hours per week is devoted to the Portuguese language.⁸

The Portuguese language curriculum for the first cycle of basic education has five major domains: Orality, Reading, Literary Education, Writing, and Grammar. The domains are introduced in first grade and are taught in order of increasing complexity until the end of fourth grade. Exhibit 1 summarizes the content and knowledge, skills, and attitudes students should acquire and develop in the context of the Portuguese language curriculum for fourth grade.

Exhibit 1: Summary of the Portuguese Language Curriculum for Fourth Grade⁹

Domain	Knowledge, Skills, and Attitudes	
Orality	Comprehension	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Select relevant information ▪ Distinguish between facts and opinions, information implicit and explicit, essential and accessory, denotation and connotation
	Expression	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Plan, produce, and evaluate short oral speeches with varied vocabulary and complex phrases, individually or in a group ▪ Participate actively in oral expression activities, respecting specific rules and roles ▪ Make short presentations, from planning to presentation ▪ Express opinions and share ideas with good proper articulation, intonation, and rhythm ▪ Ensure eye contact with the audience (body posture, facial expression, look directly at the audience)
Reading	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Read texts with narrative and descriptive characteristics of greater complexity, associated with various purposes and with a variety of stimuli, such as graphs, figures, pictures, diagrams, tables, etc. ▪ Distinguish characteristics of an encyclopedia, dictionary entry, and warning (structuring, purpose) ▪ Make a fluent and safe reading that highlights the understanding of the meaning of texts ▪ Perform silent and autonomous reading ▪ Mobilize experiences and knowledge in the construction process of text meanings ▪ Explain key ideas in the text ▪ Identify the theme and subject of the text or parts of the text ▪ Express a critical opinion about aspects of the text (of content and/or form) 	

Domain	Knowledge, Skills, and Attitudes
Literary Education	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Listen to literary texts and express reactions to reading in a creative way ▪ Read narratives, poems, and dramatic texts in full ▪ Anticipate the topic(s) based on elementary notions of genre (fairy tales, spiel, poems, etc.), para-text elements, and visual texts (illustrations) ▪ Understand the internal and external organization of poetic, narrative, and dramatic texts ▪ Understand features that emphasize the meaning of the text (onomatopoeias, puns, interjections, comparisons) ▪ Dramatize texts and say memorized poems in public with expressiveness and confidence ▪ Participate in representations of literary dramatic texts in a responsible and cooperative manner ▪ Express ideas, feelings, and points of view raised by stories or poems heard or read ▪ Develop a reading project that integrates understanding of the work, questioning, and motivation of author
Writing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Write stories (with initial situation, incidents, and conclusion) with description and convey the speech of the characters through direct and indirect speech ▪ Use planning and review processes, carried out individually and/or in groups ▪ Use complex sentences to express sequences and relationships of consequence and purpose ▪ Overcome problems associated with the writing process by proofreading with a view to improving the text ▪ Write texts with correct use of the forms of written representation (spelling, punctuation and text wrapping, graphic configuration, and auxiliary writing signals) ▪ Write texts organized in cohesive, coherent, and adequate paragraphs
Grammar	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Identify the word class: determinant (interrogative), preposition, pronoun (personal, in its tonic and unstressed, possessive, and demonstrative forms) ▪ Conjugate regular and irregular verbs in the past tense imperfect in the indicative mood and in the imperative mood ▪ Recognize different processes to form the feminine of nouns and adjectives ▪ Recognize nominal and adjectival inflection in terms of number and degree ▪ Apply unstressed forms of the personal pronoun in affirmative sentences, in sentences with negation, and with preverbal adverbs ▪ Intentionally and appropriately use diverse connectors in oral and written texts ▪ Apply processes of expansion and reduction of sentences ▪ Infer the meaning of unknown words from the analysis of their internal structure (base, stem, and affixes) ▪ Deduce connotative meanings from words and/or expressions that do not correspond to the literal meaning ▪ Understand rules of derivation of words and forms of lexical organization (word families) ▪ Recognize onomatopoeias ▪ Explain spelling rules

Professional Development Requirements and Programs

In Portugal, teachers require a professional qualification and a Postgraduate Certificate in Education.¹⁰ This is obtained after having attended and passed an initial teacher education course offered at higher education institutions, structured in accordance with teacher-education profiles.

Such courses lead to a master's degree-level professional qualification according to terms in the law governing teaching qualifications for teachers in preschool, basic, and upper secondary education.¹¹

The law also specifies that a professional teaching qualification is essential to teach in public, private, and cooperative education and teaching establishments that provide preschool, basic, and upper secondary education, including specialized music and dance artistic education tracks.

Newly certified teachers must complete one year of supervised practicum and probationary teaching with at least a grade of "Good." The probation period takes place at the school where the teacher is working and focuses on his or her capacity for integration, adaptation, and participation in educational community activities, as well as the didactic, pedagogical, and scientific abilities required to achieve high levels of proficiency that inexorably contribute to the success of students and the education system. During this period, the teacher is accompanied by an experienced teacher for assistance with the didactic, pedagogical, and scientific plans.

After being appointed for teaching duties, teachers are required to enroll in duly certified short-term training programs for professional development. These programs are managed by the Ministry of Education in partnership with higher education institutions and professional associations that have been certified by the Ministry of Education for this purpose.

Monitoring Student Progress in Reading

According to Decree-Law no. 55/2018, July 6, student assessment includes formative and summative assessment. The internal summative assessment at the end of every term is the responsibility of teachers, as well as school academic management and administrative bodies. At this level, the progress of students at the primary level of basic education is evaluated according to their level of achievement in comparison to the acquired knowledge, as well as the skills and attitudes developed within the scope of the areas of competency registered in the *Profile of Students Leaving Compulsory Schooling*.

Progress in reading, as well as in all other areas of the curriculum, is assessed periodically by schools' or individual teachers' tests and classroom observations, and students must receive approval following the internal assessments in all major subject areas in order to progress to the following grade. Internal summative assessment in the first cycle of basic education is descriptive, as well as qualitative, in all areas (Very good, Good, Satisfactory, and Unsatisfactory). Before the beginning of each school year, the school's pedagogical council defines the assessment criteria for each cycle of education and grade, which schools then implement when the school year begins.

In the 2015–2016 academic year, the high stakes examinations previously in place for students in Grades 4 and 6 were replaced by low stakes tests at Grades 2, 5, and 8¹² in order to assess curriculum development in basic education and provide regular information for the education system, schools, students, and parents about learning development. Students' and schools' results

and performance in these low stakes tests are recorded in the Individual Testing Report (RIPA) and the School Testing Report (REPA) sent directly to schools. The RIPA describes the student's performance, considering the relevant parameters of each of the subject areas, subjects, and domains assessed. The REPA describes the performance of the class group and school in each of the areas or domains assessed.

A national examination for the Portuguese language is in place for students in Grades 9 and 12. Students who complete ninth grade are awarded a basic education diploma, while students who complete twelfth grade are awarded a secondary education diploma. The secondary education diploma is required for students to pursue higher education studies.

Special Reading Initiatives

Reading at the basic and secondary education levels is promoted by the nationwide School Libraries Network (RBE, or *Rede de Bibliotecas Escolares*^d) and the National Reading Plan (PNL, or *Plano Nacional de Leitura*^e). The National Reading Plan focuses primarily on schools—starting with preprimary schools and progressing through basic and secondary education schools—but also focuses on individual families. The National Reading Plan, launched in 2006, was the institutional answer to the concern with the levels of literacy of Portuguese people in general, and of young people in particular. Over 16 years, it has implemented a set of measures aimed at developing competencies and reading habits of the Portuguese population, with a special focus on the school community. Some of the National Reading Plan activities in schools include the promotion of daily reading practice periods, silently and aloud, by students and teachers both in school activities and in class; the promotion of oriented reading in the classroom; reading activities in school libraries; student reading plans; autonomous reading; and voluntary reading.

Response to COVID-19 Pandemic

Teaching and Learning During the COVID-19 Pandemic

In Portugal, similar to what happened in other countries all over the world, the COVID-19 pandemic led to the temporary closure of schools and a widespread implementation of distance learning.

On March 11, 2020, the government, through Decree-Law no. 10-A/2020, approved a set of exceptional and temporary measures relating to the epidemiological situation of COVID-19, including the suspension of face-to-face academic and nonacademic activities and the adoption of a distance learning regime in all establishments, levels, and teaching modalities.

^d See <https://www.rbe.mec.pt/np4/home.html> for more information.

^e See <https://www.pnl2027.gov.pt/np4/home> for more information.

The suspension of face-to-face classes on March 12, 2020, led the Ministry of Education to organize and launch two main actions: defining guidelines and recommendations for schools to organize teaching and learning, and using the public television station to broadcast a set of education content under the official designation #EstudoEmCasa.

In Portugal, primary and secondary schools (except Grades 11 and 12) remained closed until June 2020 (inclusive), that is to say, the end of the 2019–2020 academic year. During this entire period, teachers had to implement varied strategies for distance learning according to the resources and structures of each school. To support school leaders and teachers, the Ministry of Education also promoted and made available specific training for principals and teachers and various resources for teachers on the Support to Schools website.

During this first lockdown, the Ministry of Education launched specific legislation¹³ establishing additional measures regarding the realization, evaluation, and certification of learning at all levels of education, as well as the extension of the school calendar, the cancelation of external assessments in basic education, the postponement of national examinations, and their application only as entrance examinations to higher education.

To assess the current state of learning, the Ministry of Education established the administration of a diagnostic study to evaluate, in a transversal and integrated way, the scientific, reading, and information and mathematics literacies of students enrolled in Grades 3, 6, and 9.¹⁴ The importance of characterizing the context of the teaching and learning process, the environment, and school practices, as well as the individual and family circumstances of students during the first lockdown, was recognized through this study.

At the end of January 2021, schools closed again until the beginning of the third period of classes (by March 15). During this period, all students transitioned to a distance learning regime in all establishments, levels, and teaching modalities. Considering the suspension of the 2021 national external assessment of basic education (low stakes tests at Grades 2, 5, and 8) due to the uncertainty in the functioning of schools and in the development of the curriculum caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, it was decided to carry out a sample study using the assessment instruments designed for the written assessment tests for Grades 2, 5, and 8.¹⁵

In these two school years impacted by the pandemic, the national external assessment (low stakes tests) and national examinations have changed. The national examinations for ninth grade and the low stakes tests for Grades 2, 5, and 8 were suspended. The national examinations at Grades 11 and 12 were implemented in both school years but are subject to change in structure and effect on final classifications of the students. These examinations were redesigned to include a set of mandatory items and another set of optional items in order to ensure that all students will be able to take the examination despite possible discrepancies in the fulfillment of programs or in the consolidation of contents that have arisen from the exceptional conditions of distance learning.

At the level of international assessments, Portugal could not carry out the field test of the PIRLS 2021 cycle due to school closures from March 2020 until the end of that school year.

Impact of the Pandemic on Student Learning

The preliminary results from the diagnostic study implemented in January 2021¹⁶ seem to indicate that there are significant differences in the learning outcomes of students from different grades and in different domains. It seems that these learning outcomes also were affected by students' socioeconomic background and gender. The school and teacher strategies also seem to have had an impact on the learning outcomes of students.

On the other hand, the information collected in the sample study implemented in June 2021¹⁷ indicates a lower level of student performance compared to the results obtained from the 2019 low stakes tests (prepandemic period). These findings may be an indicator of the greater difficulty felt by students in developing their skills over the last two school years, during which schools were closed and face-to-face teaching activities were suspended because of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The analysis of the impact of the pandemic on student learning in Portugal does not end with the results of these two studies. To truly assess and comprehend the potential impact, a deeper and ongoing analysis needs to be done.

Suggested Readings

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