

Slovak Republic

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Introduction

Language and Literacy

The official state language of the Slovak Republic is Slovak, one of the Slavonic languages from the Indo-European family. For centuries, Slovak was the language of the common people, while Latin, Hungarian, and Czech were used for official or liturgical purposes. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, several attempts to standardize the official form of the language occurred while the Slovak Republic was still part of the Kingdom of Hungary. The Slovak language, however, was not officially recognized or allowed in schools until an independent Czechoslovakia was established in 1918.

Currently, most students receive their education and training in Slovak. Schools in certain regions instruct students in the minority language of each area, including Hungarian (the most common minority language), Ukrainian, Ruthenian, and German.¹ Slovak language is a mandatory subject in schools with a minority language of instruction.

Overview of Education System

The education system of the Slovak Republic is partially decentralized. At the national level, the Ministry of Education, Science, Research and Sport oversees the administration of the public school system; develops education concepts and a unified education policy; and creates laws, general regulations, and documents related to education (e.g., curriculum documents). Federal oversight is exercised through the State School Inspectorate, which conducts independent school inspections to monitor and evaluate achievement in education and training in schools.² Most schools in the Slovak Republic are public, meaning they are operated and funded by the government. Private schools, which receive state subsidies and contributions from parents, and church schools are run by an individual, legal entity, or officially approved church.

Municipalities are responsible for administration of primary schools, preschools, and school facilities, while self-governing regions administer secondary and special schools. Each primary and secondary school is managed by a principal who primarily is responsible for curriculum implementation, integration of professional and pedagogical standards into the teaching process, evaluation and ongoing education of the teaching staff, budget management and effective use of school financial resources, and the first level of state administration for individual students (e.g., admission, exclusion, delayed enrollment, permission to follow an individual study plan). The

principal cooperates with the school board, which functions as a public monitor and comprises pedagogical and nonpedagogical school employees, parents, students (at secondary schools), and representatives of the municipality or self-governing region.³

The school year has approximately 180 instruction days, beginning in September of each year. The official teaching period ends on June 30 and is followed by holidays in July and August.

Structure of the Education System

The four main levels of the education system in the Slovak Republic are preprimary, primary, secondary, and higher education. Preprimary education (UNESCO's International Standard Classification of Education [ISCED] Level 0) is voluntary but is encouraged by a no-fee policy in the last grade.⁴ In the 2012–2013 academic year, the gross enrollment ratio of students in preprimary education was 87.3 percent.⁵ Considered part of the Slovak education system, preprimary education is organized according to official documents that have been approved by the Ministry. It is designed for children ages 3 to 6 and includes general Kindergartens (*materská škola*) and special Kindergartens for children with special education needs. In addition to preparing children for primary education, the goal of preprimary education is to help and encourage them to interact socially with peers, develop personalities, and develop a relationship to knowledge and learning through play. An important aspect of preprimary education is close cooperation with children's families. Children who have attended at least the last year of preprimary education prior to primary education are considered to have graduated from preprimary school.

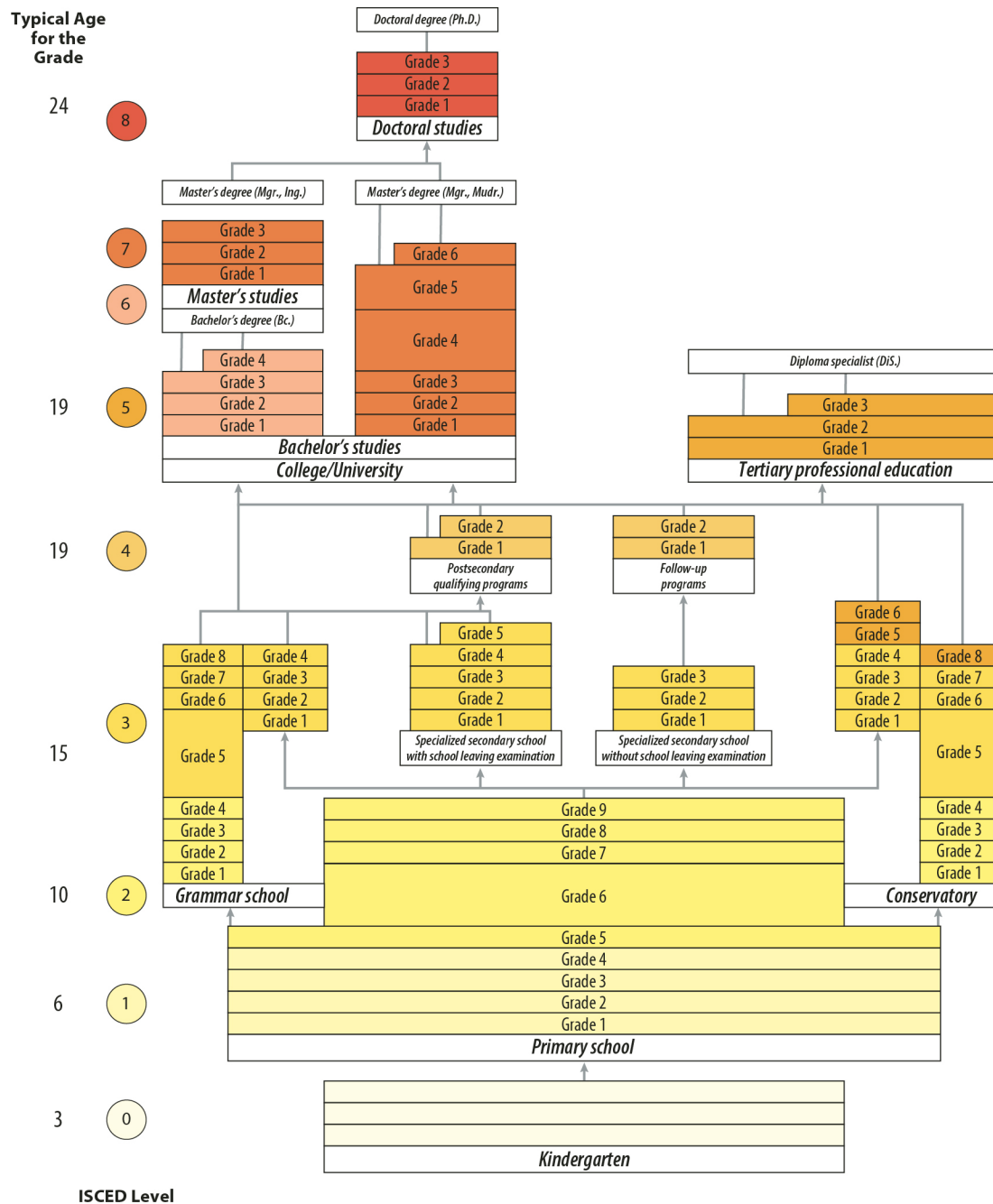
Compulsory education in the Slovak Republic begins in primary school (*základná škola*) and lasts for 10 years (ages 6 to 16). Primary school consists of two stages: The first stage (Grades 1 to 4) provides primary education (ISCED Level 1), and the second stage (Grades 5 to 9) provides lower secondary education (ISCED Level 2). Children from socially disadvantaged backgrounds who have not reached the maturity level necessary for primary school by age 6 have the option of attending an additional year of preprimary school, Grade 0. Students with special education needs can attend special primary schools.

Students take the national Testing 5 examination in fifth grade. Those with special talents in academic subjects or the arts can apply for enrollment in an eight-year grammar school or conservatory, both of which usually have their own entrance examinations. In ninth grade, students take the national Testing 9 examination in mathematics and their language of instruction (and Slovak for students who have studied in a minority language). Students may then apply to a secondary school, which may require them to pass an additional entrance examination.

The three types of secondary schools in the Slovak Republic are grammar schools (*gymnázium*), specialized secondary schools (*stredná odborná škola*), and conservatories (*konzervatórium*). Offering academic courses in a variety of subjects, grammar schools primarily prepare students to study at higher education institutions. Specialized secondary schools prepare

students for a range of professions, from manual vocations to professional careers in business and technical fields. Conservatories prepare students for careers in the arts or for higher education study.⁶ Depending on the type of secondary education students have completed, they may continue their studies via postsecondary education (ISCED Level 4), higher professional education (ISCED Level 5b), or university education (ISCED Level 5a). Exhibit 1 shows an overview of the education system of the Slovak Republic with the most common education pathways. For brevity, the parallel system of special schools has been omitted.

Exhibit 1: Overview of the Education System in the Slovak Republic



Use and Impact of PIRLS

The Slovak Republic has taken part in PIRLS since its first cycle in 2001. After each PIRLS assessment, a national report describing Slovak students' achievement compared to their international peers has been released. The report also highlights important findings concerning

the effects of home and school environments on students' reading literacy. These results and findings can serve as inspiration and motivation for parents, teachers, and higher authorities.

The PIRLS National Center, the National Institute for Certified Educational Measurements, has published electronic versions of released item blocks along with related excerpts from scoring guides that have been translated into Slovak and Hungarian on its website. Making the texts publicly available to teachers and parents was an effort to enhance students' reading literacy.

Several professional development courses inspired by PIRLS have aimed to help teachers support student reading literacy. These courses provide basic information on reading literacy: what it entails, which key competencies it includes, which strategies and methods can be used to support reading comprehension, and how to evaluate and assess reading comprehension. They also prepare teachers on how to develop their own literary and informational texts and tests to supplement standard instruction and assessment methods.

The Language/Reading Curriculum in Primary Grades

Reading Policy

Reading instruction is an integral part of language and literature instruction, which is considered the most important subject at the beginning of school. By the end of second grade, students are expected to have mastered basic reading skills. In the grades that follow, reading comprehension is closely connected with literature instruction through emphasis on reading for pleasure, forming good reading habits, and having a positive attitude toward reading.

Summary of National Curriculum

In 2008, the National Council of the Slovak Republic passed Act No. 245/2008 (the School Act), which mandates that education in schools be conducted according to the State Education Program (*Štátny vzdelávací program*) and the School Education Program (*Školský vzdelávací program*).⁷ The State Education Program defines the compulsory content of education in schools and relinquishes approximately 30 percent of the overall content to the School Education Program via a curricular document unique to each school that describes how the school will attain the required general achievement and content standards.

The School Act specifies the number of instruction hours per ISCED level rather than per grade and defines only minimal requirements. This reform was introduced and applied to Grades 1, 5, and 10 (i.e., the first grades of ISCED Levels 1, 2, and 3) during the 2008–2009 academic year and has been implemented gradually in all grades since then. In 2015, the Innovated State Education Program was approved, which gave schools new autonomy in defining the number of lessons for each subject throughout a three-year period. The schools have the liberty to determine the hours per lesson and topics in each cycle. Schools with Slovak as the instructional language can use up to 24 hours per week in the first cycle (approximately eight lessons per week in Grades 1 to 3) and up

to 12 hours in the second cycle (six lessons per week in Grades 4 and 5) of primary school for this subject. On the other hand, schools with minority instructional languages have at their disposal 35 hours per week for both the instructional language and Slovak in the first cycle (approximately 11 lessons per week in Grades 1 to 3) and 20 hours in the second cycle (approximately 10 lessons per week in Grades 4 and 5). Schools and teachers have the option to divide the hours between grades and to choose the structure of lessons, the time allocated for each thematic unit, the use of particular works of literature, and the forms and methods of instruction to achieve the required objectives.

The State Education Program, in the framework of the national curriculum, emphasizes reading comprehension over academic linguistics in reading and literature instruction.⁸ At the end of fourth grade, students are expected to:

- Read aloud or silently texts with appropriate content, style, and vocabulary following preparation, doing so fluently and with understanding
- Read aloud with proper breathing, enunciation, and pronunciation
- Expressively read short excerpts from children's literature
- Expressively read poems and excerpts from prose
- Expressively reproduce direct speech in dramatic texts
- Remember important facts and definitions
- Explain the principles of learned facts and the relationships between them
- Write a synopsis of a text
- Find the main idea of a text
- Reproduce the content of a text
- Express personal feelings and impressions from a text
- Identify main and supporting characters, speech figures, and chosen features
- Use literary features in a simple text analysis
- Analyze characters and their relationships
- Distinguish between prose and poetry
- Distinguish between fiction and nonfiction
- Reproduce and dramatize part of a fairy tale, story, or folktale
- Finish an incomplete story by narration, dramatization, or illustration
- Write a short work of prose
- Create simple rhymes
- Stage a short dramatic text
- Be acquainted with the school and public libraries
- Build a home library

Professional Development Requirements and Programs

Teacher Education Specific to Reading

There are three stages of university education for prospective teachers in the Slovak Republic. The first stage usually lasts for three years and results in a bachelor's degree; the second stage usually lasts for two years and results in a master's degree; and the third stage lasts for three to four years and results in a doctoral degree. All primary and secondary teachers are required to complete a master's degree program. Preprimary teachers must complete the first stage of university education or graduate from a secondary pedagogical school or pedagogical and social academy.⁹

Education for prospective teachers of the first stage of primary school (Grades 1 to 4) usually takes place at Faculties of Pedagogy (university departments of education). At first, these prospective teachers complete bachelor's degree requirements together with prospective preprimary and leisure-time teachers^a; later, they proceed to a specialized master's degree program in which they prepare to teach all subjects at ISCED Level 1 (Grades 1 to 4) except for foreign languages. Teacher education students generally take several courses related to language and literature instruction covering topics such as orthography, phonetics, phonology, the official form of the language, grammar, didactics of language and literature education, and theory and history of literature. Some optional classes are devoted to enhancing students' reading literacy.

Prospective teachers of the second stage of primary school (Grades 5 to 9) and of secondary school typically specialize in a combination of two subjects. These students can attend other faculties within a particular subject area in addition to the Faculties of Pedagogy.

Pedagogical practice is an integral component of teacher preparation. It offers students an opportunity to test their theoretical knowledge in real instruction processes and implement basic practical competencies required for teaching. Pedagogical practice typically is completed in three consecutive phases: the "inspectional practice" phase, in which students observe the learning process in an active classroom; the "assistant practice" phase, in which students begin to teach lessons under the supervision of an experienced teacher; and the final phase of "coherent teaching practice," in which they become members of teaching staff. In this phase, they continue to work under the guidance of an experienced teacher, but with less supervision than during the assistant practice phase. Teacher education and training concludes when students complete a thesis and pass state examinations.

Requirements for Ongoing Professional Development in Reading for Teachers

A 2009 National Council act regarding pedagogical staff and professional employees established the rules of professional development for teachers. This act divides teachers into four categories: novice teachers, independent teachers, teachers with first authentication, and teachers with second

^a Leisure-time teachers provide a higher level of care at centers of leisure time that provide spontaneous or structured recreational and special-interest activities.

authentication. Over the course of their professional career, teachers are encouraged to proceed through these levels. Examples of ways teachers can earn the credits necessary to proceed to a higher level include attending certified professional development courses, authoring textbooks or other study materials, and conducting education research.¹⁰

Certified professional development courses are available at institutions such as schools, universities, educational organizations of the Ministry and other government administrative bodies, and churches.¹¹ For example, methodological-pedagogical centers currently offer about 480 certified courses covering a wide range of topics, some of which pertain to reading instruction.^b These courses mainly cover reading literacy theory, reading comprehension processes, teaching methods to enhance reading literacy, and the development of tests and tasks to measure reading literacy. Some courses are inspired by the theoretical background and reading literacy concepts of studies such as PIRLS and the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA).¹²

Reading Instruction in the Primary Grades

Reading instruction in the Slovak Republic officially starts in the first grade of primary school, although preprimary education gives children opportunities to develop basic reading skills. Initial reading instruction is divided into introductory, primer, and basal reader phases using the analytic-synthetic or synthetic teaching method. The introductory phase, which prepares children to read, varies in length depending on their specific needs. During the primer phase, students gradually learn to identify phonemes and syllables, and read words (including those with special phonemes). The basal reader phase deepens these skills, allowing students to learn to intonate, reproduce, and read silently. Students also learn to write in cursive. Reading and writing instruction is tightly connected, but since progress in reading is naturally faster than progress in writing in cursive, an asymmetry develops between the ability to read and the ability to write. To reduce this asymmetry, some schools teach writing in both cursive and in easier-to-learn uppercase letters.

Subsequent grades are dedicated to improving reading comprehension. Special attention is given to developing effective reading techniques, reciting poetry and prose, taking notes, using reference materials, and analyzing and evaluating texts read in class. Literature education is intended to stimulate interest in reading and enjoyment of literature, stress the ethical and aesthetic functions of reading and literature, and create positive personal attitudes and values in students.

^b Course offerings include: Active Usage of Reading with Comprehension During the Educational Process at Primary and Secondary School, Development of Reading Literacy at Primary Schools with Hungarian Instructional Language, Promotion of Primary School Students' Reading Literacy, Development of Reading Literacy Using Literary Sources at Primary and Secondary Schools, Developing Key Skills of Teachers in the Field of Reading Literacy by Usage of Texts Aimed at Personal Development and Ethical Aspects, and Development of Reading Literacy in Primary Education: Playful Reading for Text Comprehension.

Instructional Materials

Two types of textbooks are used in Slovak schools. Textbooks approved by the Ministry are free for all students, while those the Ministry has merely recommended must be purchased by schools or students. Under certain circumstances, however, Ministry-recommended textbooks also may be financially supported by the government.¹³

When the students tested in PIRLS 2021 were in first grade, teachers could choose from three approved primers. In subsequent grades, they used a textbook for language instruction and a basal reader containing excerpts from Slovak and international fiction for literature instruction. Teachers are encouraged to use other instructional resources such as children's magazines, books, encyclopedias, videos, and audiobooks. Teachers may use additional materials in the classroom depending on their lesson objectives and teaching method. Most schools have a library available for students, and sometimes a bookshelf is located within the classroom.

Use of Technology

The availability and use of technology in schools have changed extensively since the turn of the century. Several organizations provide Information and Communications Technology (ICT) equipment and training to schools. For example, the Infovek project (now called the Development of Regional Education Informatization project) was introduced in 1999 with the aim of equipping all schools with computers, multimedia classrooms, and internet connection.¹⁴ An important part of the project has been to educate teachers in the basics of working with ICT and its practical application in the education process. Participating schools—equipped with educational and technical software, ICT textbooks, laptops, and interactive whiteboards—receive free internet connections and antivirus software. Schools also can purchase ICT equipment with financial support from donors, EU funds, national organizations, or their own resources.

Previously, ICT was intended primarily for teachers' use, but the emphasis now is using it for students' work.¹⁵ Students use computers for the subject of informatics, which is mandatory during three of the four ISCED Level 1 grades. Depending on the facilities at their school, teachers of other subjects also may choose to use computers during instruction.

Role of Reading Specialists

A single class teacher usually teaches all subjects (except for foreign languages) to students attending the first stage of primary school (Grades 1 to 4), including language and reading. Generally, special preparation for reading teachers beyond basic teacher education and practice offered at teacher education colleges is not provided. However, some training institutions offer teachers opportunities for further education and professional development. Numerous optional courses aim to introduce innovative ways of teaching, including modern methods in reading instruction.

In 2009, an act defining the roles and responsibilities of school psychologists, school speech therapists, school special educators, remedial pedagogues, and social pedagogues was introduced.¹⁶ However, schools are not required to employ these specialists, and many cannot afford to do so.

Second Language Instruction

Slovak is taught as a second language for students with a different language of instruction. The official document in effect for students tested in PIRLS 2021 requires these schools to divide at least 21 hours of Slovak language and literature instruction per week among Grades 1 to 4.¹⁷

Students with Reading Difficulties

Diagnostic Testing

Students are not given a general screening test to identify reading difficulties. If a teacher notices that a student has problems developing reading skills, the teacher or a school psychologist recommends that the student undergo an evaluation at a center of pedagogical-psychological counseling and prevention. Psychologists at these diagnostic centers assess the student's intellectual abilities, and special pedagogues determine the severity of the reading difficulty or learning disorder. If dyslexia or another learning disorder is detected, a special pedagogue recommends a course of action.

Instruction for Students with Reading Difficulties

Based on the recommendations of a special pedagogue (if the school has one), teachers prepare individual study plans for students with reading difficulties, which then must be approved by the student's parents. For a student with a reading disability, these plans usually ensure that the student is not required to read aloud in class, that the student is able to work with adapted instructional materials, and that the disability is considered during assessments. Students with learning difficulties can receive additional lessons in the subject they are struggling with or be taught by a school psychologist, special pedagogue, or education counselor. Students also may regularly visit the center of pedagogical-psychological counseling and prevention to receive instruction from a specialist. Every few years, students with reading difficulties are reassessed to determine if it is still necessary to continue with the individual study plan.

Students with more severe difficulties, such as a visual impairment, may be integrated into a regular class with an individual study plan in place or may attend a special class within the school with students who have similar issues. Alternatively, these students may attend a special school devoted to students with physical or mental disabilities.

Monitoring Student Progress in Reading

Teachers conduct ongoing assessments of student progress using grades on a five-point scale, verbal assessment, or a combination of both. Verbal assessment as the sole means of assessment can only be used until the fourth grade. Continuous assessment based on observations, student activities, oral examinations, written examinations, and other assignments (e.g., homework and projects) is conducted throughout the school year. Students receive evaluation feedback based on this assessment at the end of January and the end of June. The final evaluation in June is presented as a report card.

Three national examinations are centrally prepared and administered on the same date throughout the country by the National Institute for Certified Educational Measurements. The first two examinations, Testing 5 and Testing 9, assess students in Grades 5 and 9 (the first and last grades of ISCED Level 2) in the language of instruction, literature in the language of instruction, and mathematics. The results from Testing 9¹⁸ can be a decisive criterion for admission to secondary schools, and there are plans for Testing 5¹⁹ to be among the criteria for admission to eight-year grammar schools. Students attending schools with minority languages of instruction also are tested in Slovak language and literature.

The third national examination is administered to students in the last grade of secondary schools that end with a school leaving examination (*maturita*). Among other subjects that depend on the school type and students' choice, the school leaving examination covers Slovak language and literature, the language of instruction (if different than Slovak), and foreign language. This examination consists of internal and external sections. The National Institute for Certified Educational Measurements is responsible for the written portion of the internal section (i.e., topics for writing composition that are evaluated within schools) and the entire external section, which covers language and literature and one foreign language. Students who choose mathematics as a school leaving examination subject also may take an optional test in mathematics.²⁰ Results from *maturita* are a decisive criterion for admission to certain universities.

In all national examinations, the test of language and literature includes text excerpts and tasks that assess reading comprehension. National statistics regarding reading literacy are supplemented by results from PIRLS and PISA.

Special Reading Initiatives

The Slovak Republic has a long tradition of projects and contests aiming to form positive attitudes toward literature and develop the literary interests of students. These projects, organized at the national or regional level, mainly have been focused on recitation (e.g., the *Hviezdoslavov Kubín* competition) or creative writing (e.g., Why I Like the Slovak Language, Why I Like Slovakia).

Projects specifically targeting reading activities often are supported by nonprofit organizations. An example is the well-known Reading with Osmijanko contest, which was established by the

nonprofit organization Osmijanko in 2004. Students ages 8 to 12 who participate in the contest are given literary riddles and creative tasks. To solve them, they must read several important works of Slovak and world literature over the course of six months.²¹

Libraries also play an important role in supporting reading activities. In cooperation with schools and the Slovak board of UNICEF, libraries organize an annual national reading marathon called Let's Read, in which participating children assemble in their local library and each child reads aloud one page of a chosen book. In 2019, the twelfth year of the project, 32,425 children participated.²² In addition to participating in national projects or adopting international reading initiatives (e.g., An Evening with Hans Christian Andersen), many libraries develop their own projects to promote reading literacy at the local level.

Response to COVID-19 Pandemic

Teaching and Learning During the COVID-19 Pandemic

In the 2019–2020 academic year, classes were suspended on March 16, 2020. This was initially planned for two weeks but was extended until June 1, 2020, or June 22, 2020, depending on the region and the decision of the principal (i.e., about three months in total). Classes were obligated to resume for the last week of the school year. In the 2020–2021 academic year, classes were suspended on January 11, 2021. Schools gradually reopened starting on February 8, 2021, where the so-called COVID automat^c allowed it based on the epidemiological situation.

The Ministry of Education, Science, Research and Sport initially issued the following revised rules on student assessment, timetables, and grade repetition:

- Continual assessment during the disrupted teaching process (i.e., prolonged breaks caused by COVID-19) is done verbally instead of using grades.
- During an emergency situation, students in all grades of primary school may receive their final evaluations in verbal form.
- In case of disruption during the academic year, it is not recommended to assess students with tests or written examinations.
- When school resumes, written and oral examinations shall not be conducted for at least three weeks after students have restarted school in person.
- In times of emergency, students may not be given a “failing” or “unsatisfactory” grade in any subject, i.e., students cannot repeat a year, except under certain circumstances.

On April 28, 2020, the Ministry of Education, Science, Research and Sport issued a Guideline on the Content and Organization of Education in Primary Schools During an Extraordinary Interruption of the School Year for the 2019–2020 Academic Year that included the following:

^c See <https://korona.gov.sk/covid-automat-na-slovensku/> for more information about the COVID automat.

- The weekly schedule for the main subject areas (Language and Communication, Mathematics and Digital Education, Man and Nature, Man and Society) consists of 8 to 10 lessons. Other subjects are to be taught as complementary beyond the mandatory schedule. It is recommended to combine two main areas of learning in one day.
- When planning the content of education in the main learning areas, it is recommended to focus on the core curriculum of the year and the curriculum that is a prerequisite for understanding the curriculum in the following year. Students are not expected to have mastered all the prescribed content.
- All subjects in the subject area of Language and Communication will focus mainly on the promotion of literacy, development of linguistic competency, and communication objectives.
- Education will be delivered in the form of distance learning, the specifics of which are up to each primary school based on the resources of students and teaching staff (online platforms, communication by phone or mail, or other forms of delivery and receipt of tasks and assignments to and from students). The school shall, as much as possible, ensure that all students have access to education.

Several initiatives by government and nonprofit organizations supported teachers in these new and unprecedented circumstances. A distance learning web portal for teachers included information on legislation, regulations from the Ministry, links to online learning platforms, and educational software to support the online teaching process. Teachers also could find a plethora of materials on a new educational platform called Viki. Additionally, the time devoted to primary school students in the public television broadcast has been expanded (from 45 minutes to 100 minutes daily). The broadcasts are dedicated mainly to students with special education needs.

Schools organized so-called summer schools for students during the summer holidays so students could learn and practice material not covered by distance learning during the regular academic year. These schools were funded by the Ministry.

The Ministry also funded a project called Smarter Together to help primary schools create the necessary conditions for improving their students' knowledge and skills in lessons outside the classroom through quality and accessible tutoring within a specified number of hours. The Ministry of Education, Science, Research and Sport also has allocated millions of euros to improve the internet connection in schools to ensure teachers can teach successfully during the distance learning process.

Impact of the Pandemic on Student Learning

The impact of distance education on primary school students was monitored by the State School Inspectorate through a survey.

Policy and Practice Changes

Distance education has resulted in amending the School Act, which equates full-time and distance education; introducing a new school digital coordinator position in schools; allowing for the transfer of unlearned material from one year to the next; and significantly strengthening the theme of inclusion in education.

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- ²² UNICEF. (2021). *Čítajme si 2016* [Let's read 2016]. Retrieved from <http://www.ldi.sk/podujatia/citajme-si/>