

# Slovenia

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## Introduction

### Overview of Education System

The education system in Slovenia comprises several levels: preschool education (preprimary education), compulsory basic education (elementary schools—a single-structure system—composed of primary and lower secondary level; UNESCO’s International Standard Classification of Education [ISCED] Levels 1 and 2), upper secondary education, tertiary education, and adult education.

Preschool education (*predšolska vzgoja*) is optional and encompasses center-based early general preschool education and care. Children can enroll from the age of 11 months and attend until they start basic school. Preschool education is organized in the form of public and private Kindergartens, giving parents the freedom to choose education programs in accordance with their personal views.<sup>1</sup> The Kindergarten curriculum<sup>a</sup> dates from 1999 (with some additions after 2002 for specific target groups, e.g., Roma children or children with autistic disorders) and consists of six main areas: physical activity, language, the arts, society, the natural world (science), and mathematics.<sup>2</sup> The curriculum consists of two cycles: the first for ages 1 to 3 and the second for ages 3 to 6. The curriculum promotes full-day, half-day, and short programs.<sup>3</sup>

Compulsory basic education (*obvezno osnovnošolsko izobraževanje*) is organized in a single-structure, nine-year basic school attended by students ages 6 to 15.<sup>4</sup> The basic school program is divided into three education cycles; each cycle covers three grades. Compulsory basic education is provided by public and private schools (fewer than 1 percent of students attend private basic schools), as well as educational institutions for children with special education needs (SEN) and adult education organizations. The basic school program is specified by the timetable and curricula of compulsory and optional subjects, as well as by guidelines and education concepts that define other methods of working with children (morning care, afterschool classes, extracurricular activities, outdoor school), cross-curricular content (days of activities, how to use libraries and information technologies), and other documents to guide the work of the education staff.<sup>5</sup>

Upper secondary education (*srednješolsko izobraževanje*) takes two to five years (typical age of students: 15 to 19). Education programs include vocational, professional, and *gimnazija* (general)

<sup>a</sup> The Kindergarten curriculum applies to public Kindergartens and private Kindergartens with concessions (municipalities can grant a private Kindergarten a concession to provide a public service and the same program as a public Kindergarten).

programs.<sup>6</sup> To finish this level of education and for enrollment in tertiary education, students need to pass the general or vocational (differs depending upon the education program) Matura examination.

Tertiary education (*terciarno izobraževanje*) includes short-cycle higher vocational education (*višje strokovno izobraževanje*) and higher education (*visokošolsko izobraževanje*) study programs. First cycle higher education programs include professional and academic study programs (typical age of students: 19 to 22). Short-cycle higher vocational education is provided by higher vocational colleges that offer two-year vocational education (typical age of students: 19 to 21). The first, second, and third cycle study programs are offered by public or private universities and single higher education institutions.<sup>7</sup>

Adult education (*izobraževanje odraslih*) is marked by its considerable diversity of programs and institutions.<sup>8</sup> Adult education comprises the education, training, and learning of individuals who have fulfilled the legal compulsory education obligation (a specific number of years spent in the basic program) and wish to acquire, update, expand, and deepen their knowledge, but who do not have the status of a regular basic school or upper secondary school student.<sup>9</sup>

Governance of the education system in Slovenia is shared mainly between the central government and schools. Education policy is defined by parliament and the central government. Municipalities establish public Kindergartens, basic music schools, basic schools, residence halls for students in basic schools, and adult education organizations. The central government establishes public upper secondary schools, short-cycle higher education colleges, educational institutions for special education needs, and upper secondary student dormitories. Parliament approves public higher education institutions and public student dormitories. From the central government, the Ministry of Education, Science and Sport is responsible for drafting, evaluating, and implementing regulations and has authority over preschool, compulsory basic school, upper secondary school, and adult and higher education. Most schooling decisions in the equivalent of lower secondary education are made at the school level (for example, in organization of instruction or resource management).<sup>10</sup>

All education levels in Slovenia are characterized by a certain degree of optionality and autonomy. Teachers are completely autonomous regarding subject-specific didactics and methods used for teaching. Optionality can be described in two ways: (1) optional/elective subjects that schools with different education levels need to or can offer and that students can choose, and (2) especially in vocational and professional programs at the upper secondary level, optionality is characterized by open curricula where part of the education program is determined by the schools themselves and with social partners, local and regional associations, and the economy. On the contrary, the content framework of the textbook (with the exception of tertiary education) is determined by the subject-specific syllabus (that is determined nationally). To have the status of an official textbook, approval by one of the Councils in the field of education is required. Therefore,

the level of centralization of the education system in Slovenia is challenging to determine; however, it is a more centralized system than not.

### Use and Impact of PIRLS

Slovenia has participated in all PIRLS cycles (2001, 2006, 2011, 2016, 2021), in addition to the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA)'s Reading Literacy Study (1991).

At first look, the Reading Literacy Study and PIRLS 2001 had a relatively large impact on national education policymaking. Some results of the two studies, together with secondary analysis, were a foundation for preparing the National Strategy for the Development of Literacy in 2006. The PIRLS national research coordinator (NRC) at the time of PIRLS 2001 was named in the commission that prepared the Strategy (especially with regard to considering underprivileged groups, as identified in some PIRLS data).<sup>11</sup> Awareness of the importance of reading has become quite prevalent in recent years, and one could assume that PIRLS was a direct and indirect cause for this development. The National Strategy for the Development of Reading Literacy 2019–2030 is based on the Strategy from 2006 and has been updated in accordance with the advancement of the profession, based on the results of Slovenian students in the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) and PIRLS, as well as the results of Slovenian projects in the field of reading literacy.<sup>12</sup> The name of the Strategy from 2006 focuses on literacy while the newer Strategy added reading to its title. In 2021, the National Council on Reading Literacy was established. However, in Slovenia, the development of reading literacy is a matter of language policy.<sup>13</sup> This is why it is unsurprising that the Court of Audit report from 2020, *Reading literacy in children in the Republic of Slovenia*, considered PIRLS and PISA (most other large-scale student assessments were mentioned), as well as national developmental projects, secondary analysis, and language policies, to express an opinion that the Republic of Slovenia was partially efficient in developing reading literacy in children. The report also proposed several recommendations to improve operations in the future.<sup>14</sup> In the report, several results from various PIRLS cycles are interpreted.

Since Slovenia's first participation in PIRLS, many regional conferences on reading literacy have been organized by the Educational Research Institute. Teachers, school counselors, and school principals have warmly welcomed the PIRLS framework, as these conferences have exposed the need to educate teachers properly in assessing reading literacy and have called for far greater support from the Educational Research Institute and the National Education Institute Slovenia.<sup>15</sup> The first large pilot project in the field of reading literacy development in children in the Republic of Slovenia was the "Empowerment by improving reading literacy and access to knowledge" project implemented by the National Education Institute Slovenia in 2012–2013. This was followed in 2014–2017 with several trainings, as a result of the project by the same institution, that were offered to interested Kindergartens and schools, as well as regular support to local units of the National Education Institute Slovenia in the form of expert meetings for headmasters and/or

professionals and thematic conferences.<sup>16</sup> “Reading literacy and the development of Slovene language (tuition) – (ARLEM)” implemented in 2016–June 2022 is another huge developmental project (including trainings) with the following goals: designing and implementing pedagogical models for the development of reading literacy, supporting teachers in the implementation of approaches for better reading motivation, and creating diagnostic materials for reading literacy (Kindergarten and elementary school), among others.<sup>17</sup> Although it is not possible to indicate clearly how many PIRLS results or parts of frameworks were considered when developing and implementing these trainings, materials, etc., it is safe to assume that PIRLS was taken into account since the staff from the Educational Research Institute who conducted PIRLS were part of these two large projects.

In 2021–2022, the Educational Research Institute conducted an experimental program for approximately 10 percent of PIRLS 2021 school coordinators to train them on how to use PIRLS results. In the program, R Analyzer for Large-Scale Assessments (RALSA)<sup>18</sup> software was used to perform analyses on a country level with the PIRLS 2016 dataset. In the second part of the program, teachers had to design a study specifically for their own school using a quantitative or qualitative approach. The training was meant for teachers to use PIRLS results, and their own school-level study was used for their school’s self-evaluations in the field of reading literacy. For the PIRLS data analysis part, the intention of the Educational Research Institute was to motivate teachers to use the study’s data and teachers’ own findings in the future to adjust their instruction for optimal results. It has not yet been decided if this experimental program will continue, but there is interest from both the schools and the Ministry.

## The Language/Reading Curriculum in Primary Grades

The main objectives of compulsory basic education align with the ends of each of the three cycles—at Grades 3, 6, and 9. Reading is not a separate school subject but is included within the Slovene language subject, where the syllabus is prepared around those three cycles of compulsory basic education. There are no separate hours prescribed for teaching reading.<sup>19</sup>

The main goal of the Slovene language subject is to develop the ability to communicate, which comes from considering nonliterary and literary texts suitable for the age level of students in the three cycles. Nonliterary texts are used for 60 percent of the subject hours, and literary texts are used for 40 percent (the exception is first grade, where nonliterary and literary texts are used for an equal number of subject hours).<sup>20</sup>

Because awareness of the importance of reading is becoming more widespread, teachers of all subjects are now responsible for teaching reading and writing to their students. Indeed, the development of reading ability became one of the most important operational objectives in the new 2011 syllabus for Slovene language; in contrast, this was not explicitly stated in previous syllabuses.<sup>21</sup>

## Summary of National Syllabus for Slovene Language

Operational goals of the syllabus are distributed among three cycles (which makes the exact identification based on a grade level difficult) and between two areas: language teaching and literature teaching. The basis for the summary of the syllabus comes from comparing the summary from the *PIRLS 2011 Encyclopedia*<sup>22</sup> with a new syllabus from 2018<sup>23</sup> for the first cycle. Because fourth grade is part of the second cycle, the minimal standards also are examined (some of them are grade specific, although the majority of them are cycle specific and are not always possible to identify for fourth grade only). This is why the summary published in the *PIRLS 2011 Encyclopedia* for the second cycle is relied on, followed by checking the annual teaching preparation<sup>24</sup> of a specific teacher of Slovene language in fourth grade.

### First Cycle (Grades 1 to 3)

Students must achieve basic reading skills during the first cycle (up to third grade) and should be able to do the following:

- Read quietly, semi-quietly, or aloud
- Answer general questions after reading a text, such as recognizing the narrator and target audience, identifying the narrator's intention and recognizing basic facts (e.g., able to summarize topic and main information, identify the main and supporting characters in a story they have read)
- Distinguish between real and imaginary worlds, and explain the distinction between them (including past events from a fairy tale and the present [actuality of the events]); compare fictional persons or experiences to themselves or their own personal experiences
- Describe characters and their positive and negative qualities and begin to identify with character traits in terms of students' own experiences

### Second Cycle (Grades 4 to 6) with Focus on Fourth Grade

At the end of fourth grade, students learn to do the following:<sup>25</sup>

- Identify the speaker and addressee (and their social role), recognize the intention of the message, evaluate whether its manner is polite, and amend the text with the appropriate words and expressions when needed
- Answer teacher questions about the possible or expected reaction of a character and justify their opinions
- Give their opinions about the context of the text they have read on their own and discuss these opinions in class
- Read short informative passages (e.g., descriptions of their peers' lifestyles, description of an animal or a person, current news)
- Read and complete forms and read public announcements (e.g., prices on a list)

- Write short informative passages by themselves, such as a description of animals or their own experiences, by first writing a draft, adding detail, and finally writing a passage
- Read their own written work and compare it with their peers' work

The syllabus for fourth grade also describes reading competencies with respect to the literature. By the end of fourth grade, students are expected to read many literature genres on their own, including longer books (e.g., novels). Students also read poems, identify poetic rhythm, and interpret poems learned by heart. Realistic short stories and novels play an integral part at this first stage, when students have learned to read and are proceeding and encouraged to read independently. Other important genres include fantasy fiction and magical literature, fairy tales, and folktales. Family, childhood, and the world of animals are basic topics of the texts fourth grade students analyze. Generally, young readers at this level are able to do the following:

- Understand the plot of the story, even if the time perspective fluctuates (e.g., interchanging the past and present, chronological, or retrospective mood)
- Draw conclusions about the outcome if something is missing from or untold in the story
- Recognize topics, relate and compare text with a common topic<sup>26</sup>

Specifically, young readers are expected to be able to do the following by the end of fourth grade:

- Read text aloud and interpret content orally
- Connect fictional worlds with the real world and their own experience
- Identify the fictional characters, specific character traits (when concrete), or the circumstances in which characters' lives are similar to their own experiences
- Consider the author's point of view and perceive various perspectives of fictional characters, even if the students do not identify with these perspectives
- Detect different character traits (when consistent), identify and explain character reactions, even if a character's behavior is different from their own<sup>27</sup>

At this stage, however, students do not yet seek an explanation for character behavior beyond the literary passage (there is no need to rationalize and anticipate the hidden/unsaid trait(s) of a given character). Similarly, students are expected to detect the presence of the storyteller only if it is explicitly stated in the text (not yet expected to detect the storyteller that is implied by the use of literary techniques).<sup>28</sup>

Students also learn to distinguish between similar words by reflecting on context of usage. In addition, students are encouraged to encounter and understand unusual phrases not extensively explored until fifth grade or above.<sup>29</sup>



## Professional Development Requirements and Programs

The Ministry of Education, Science and Sport offers or financially supports many types of professional development programs for teachers and other professional workers at school: thematic conferences, regular teacher workshops organized by the National Education Institute Slovenia, licensing courses, and subject matter training courses at universities and other educational institutions. The Ministry motivates teachers to participate in lifelong learning by linking teachers' salaries to a three-tiered national system of promotion—mentor, advisor, and senior specialist. A teacher may apply for promotion every four to five years on the basis of points earned through a variety of activities, such as participating in professional development or other educational programs, writing articles or textbooks, overseeing school projects or mentoring students in Young Researcher programs, or preparing students for competitions.<sup>30</sup> In the last year the important aspects of professional development also have been projects implemented in accordance with the regulations governing the use of European cohesion policy funds. They are intended for the implementation of new pedagogical practices.<sup>31</sup>

Each professional worker's school is required to plan further education and training within the annual work plan for at least two days during the autumn or winter vacations and at least three days during the summer vacations (it also can be planned on free Saturdays instead of during vacation times).<sup>32</sup> In addition, teachers and other professional workers in schools can attend many other in-service (teacher) trainings, some of which are offered via the Ministry, while others are organized by other institutions; some of them are free of charge, and some are fee-based or partially fee-based.

### Role of Reading Specialists

Every school in Slovenia has a (so-called) counseling service, which is usually a team of two to four specialists (not always employed in only one school full-time), including psychologists, pedagogues, social pedagogues (special education teachers), or social workers, that offer specific assistance to students (and their families) in need. Although there are no professionals with a specialty in teaching how to read and write, there is a huge demand for dyslexia specialists all over the country.<sup>33</sup>

Generalist teachers (*učitelji razrednega pouka*; literally “classroom teacher”) are responsible for reading and writing instruction, especially up to third grade. Fourth grade teachers also can be specialist teachers in another subject (up to two subjects). They learn the basic approaches for teaching reading during initial teacher education; however, additional approaches and strategies can be acquired during in-service teacher education if they choose to do so or via participation in ongoing projects.

## Monitoring Student Progress in Reading

The grading system is a strong institution within Slovenia’s education system, with grades being perceived as a strong motivational factor. However, there is a dispute whether earning high grades has more recently become a student’s primary goal, as opposed to gaining knowledge.<sup>34</sup> This also is discussed often in the media and public discussions when grades from different generations are compared, with regard to possible inflation of good scores.

Rules on knowledge assessment, grading, and students’ progress to a higher class standing in elementary schools<sup>35</sup> define the grading system in Slovenia’s compulsory basic education—in Grades 1 and 2 of elementary school, the student’s knowledge is assessed with descriptive grades and from Grades 3 to 9 with numeric grades (where 5 is the highest grade and 1 is the lowest, meaning that the student does not achieve the prescribed minimal standards from the syllabus).

There are no rules regarding how to assess student progress in reading and no standardized tests for teacher use. Teachers often use reading aloud to assess student performance in reading, but this is extremely challenging (and potentially problematic) for assessing understanding. Every grade has prescribed books that students must read on their own, and teachers create tests to check their understanding.<sup>36</sup>

Teachers assess students based on objectives (and standards) written in the syllabus and the assessment procedure regulations. Teachers continually assess student achievement in written, oral, and applied forms, as well as through written tests. Rules define how many times per year students must demonstrate their knowledge in both written and oral forms. However, these rules vary across grades and are quite stringent, leaving teachers with a limited scope for decision making and authority in terms of classroom assessment. A significant handicap in assessing student knowledge (including reading) could lie in the rule that a practice assessment (*preverjanje*, literally “verification”) must precede every formal graded assessment (*ocenjevanje*). Several days prior to a graded assessment, a student completes a test with questions similar or identical to ones that will appear on the graded assessment. In effect, when assessing reading literacy, students might receive questions about content that enable them to learn the correct answer for the actual graded assessment, even without having read the material.<sup>37</sup> There is also a question about whether teachers ask questions primarily about explicitly stated information, demand straightforward inferences, or ask questions that demand higher order thinking (e.g., integrating and interpreting information across a passage, as in PIRLS).

Parents can learn about their child’s knowledge and overall performance from teachers and school specialists. However, reporting on a child’s progress in reading literacy almost seems like an impossible task for now due to the lack of a standardized approach.<sup>38</sup>



## Response to COVID-19 Pandemic

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

In Slovenia, the first infection with the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) was confirmed on March 4, 2020. Slovenia's first school closure because of COVID-19 was on March 16, 2020 (for all education levels). For basic compulsory education, the timetable of reopening schools was as follows: On May 18, 2020, schools reopened for Grades 1 to 3; Grades 4 to 9 schools reopened on May 2, 2020. Schools for basic compulsory education stayed open until the end of the school year (end of June 2020). After the summer vacations, schools were open and started in September 2020. However, from October 19–23, 2020, Grades 6 to 9 schools were closed. October 26–29, 2020, was school vacation, but schools remained closed even after vacation ended. Schools reopened for Grades 1 to 3 on January 26, 2021, but only for 7 statistical regions out of 12, and from February 9, 2021, for all remaining regions. This was the first time when the reopening of schools was implemented based on the number of students infected with COVID-19 in each statistical region. On February 15, 2021, schools opened for the remaining grades (if they did not have vacations, as usually not all schools in Slovenia have vacations during the school year at the same time).<sup>39</sup> On April 1, 2021, schools closed again and reopened on April 12, 2021, for all schools and grades. The following weeks until the end of the school year (June 24, 2021, for Grades 1 to 8; ninth grade finishes school earlier) were characterized with quarantines of some students or teachers. A lot of discussion ensued about how to combine in-person instruction with remote teaching and learning at the same time.

During remote teaching and learning, schools regularly received messages and guidance from both the Ministry of Education, Science and Sport and the National Education Institute Slovenia on different points of remote schooling and on organizational aspects and health measures, as well as how to reduce prescribed standards/goals, what to grade and how, etc.

A number of resources to support remote teaching and learning were already available to schools before the COVID-19 pandemic, such as systems for reporting student grades, virtual learning environments, or learning management systems, the use of which increased with the enforcement of remote learning. Additional digital lessons or learning materials were developed by different stakeholders (e.g., teachers), and some publishing houses shared electronic and interactive textbooks and other materials. Digital devices often were issued by the school/state to those without access to a computer or the internet, but some volunteers also helped to ensure those devices got to those who needed them. The physical distribution of paper-based materials was offered to homes with no computer/internet or to families who were not easily contactable. National television broadcasts were used to support learning with content linked to syllabuses. Schools were required to use the above-mentioned resources to support remote learning. Three professors from the University of Maribor established a joint education support center to assist and provide guidance on the successful implementation of distance education (e.g., by collecting

materials produced for all school subjects at the level of compulsory education; providing individual help, explanations, and cooperation between students and teachers);<sup>40</sup> in October 2021, the center received a state award for this service.

### Impact of the Pandemic on Student Learning

The impact of COVID-19 and remote schooling is still under-researched in Slovenia, also for the topic of reading. The national assessment planned for Grades 6 and 9 (and experimentally for third grade) was canceled for the 2019–2020 school year.

The national assessment was conducted in 2020–2021, but the results for Slovene language for third grade are not comparable with previous school years because of the different designs of the tests. Although comparing trends for Grades 6 and 9 of national assessments in Slovene language is not statistically correct because other tasks are used between years, there is no noticeable decline in student achievement.

Student schooling from home also has increased during and after COVID-19. Before the pandemic, the numbers were increasing, but during the pandemic and now, the increase in the number of students whose parents demand homeschooling indicates an even faster rise of this trend.

### Impact of the Pandemic on PIRLS 2021

The pandemic affected data collection for PIRLS 2021 in several ways: (1) originally planned data collection started later, (2) some schools called off data collection totally or postponed it until the end of the school year, (3) more makeup sessions had to be conducted (due to missing students in classes), and (4) data collection coordination with schools was more challenging, because despite remote teaching, schools had to focus on the lost hours of instruction (it was clear that they did not process all the standards prescribed by specific syllabuses). In addition, because of the fear of infection when test administration is done by staff outside the school, test administrators brought forms to schools that showed they did not have symptoms or are vaccinated (or had a valid HAG [rapid antigen] test). However, in the end, data collection was successful.

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