

# Sweden

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## Introduction

### Overview of Education System

A fundamental principle of the Swedish education system is that all children and young people should have equal access to education, irrespective of gender, geographic residence, or financial circumstances. Parents pay a subsidized fee for preprimary education, but all subsequent education in Sweden is free of charge.<sup>1</sup>

The Swedish education system is highly decentralized. The parliament and government define the national curriculum, while national agencies and municipalities ensure that education activities are implemented in line with the legislative framework. The majority of school budgets is funded by municipalities.<sup>2</sup>

The Swedish National Agency for Education is responsible for the knowledge requirements for all subjects, national school statistics, and national school evaluations. The Swedish Schools Inspectorate provides supervision through inspection and grants permission for new schools, and the National Agency for Special Needs Education and Schools coordinates government support for special needs education.

Independent (private) schools must be approved by the Swedish Schools Inspectorate. These schools receive municipal grants based on the number of students enrolled each academic year, and they are permitted to make a profit. Approximately 15 percent of all students in compulsory schooling attended independent schools in 2020–2021.<sup>3</sup>

Preprimary education is available for all children ages 1 to 5 and follows its own national curriculum. The aim of preprimary education is to create favorable learning opportunities that stimulate children’s physical and mental development. In Sweden, 85 percent of all children ages 1 to 5 were enrolled in preprimary education in 2020.<sup>4</sup>

Beginning in 2019, a one-year preschool class is mandatory for all children during the year in which they turn 6 years old, followed by nine years of schooling for children ages 7 to 16. Preschool aims to provide a sound base for the first grade of compulsory schooling.<sup>5</sup> The compulsory education system also includes Sami schools for Sami-speaking children in Grades 1 to 6, special schools designed for children and adolescents who are deaf or hearing impaired in Grades 1 to 9, and schools for children with learning disabilities in Grades 1 to 9.<sup>6</sup>

Following compulsory school, most students in Sweden continue to a voluntary upper secondary education. Upper secondary education provides a foundation for vocational activities or further studies at institutions of higher education.<sup>7</sup>

Universities and university colleges are free of charge, and admission is based on merit ratings, a university admissions test (SweSAT), or a combination of interviews and tests. Students may also attend postsecondary vocational schools to prepare for a specific trade or occupation.<sup>8</sup>

### Use and Impact of PIRLS

Given the national representativeness and the possibilities for comparison, the findings from PIRLS and other large-scale assessments influence the general debate about school issues and have had an important impact on education reforms.

## The Language/Reading Curriculum in Primary Grades

The national curriculum for compulsory education was implemented in 2011. The curriculum has since been revised, and the new version will be used in schools starting in 2022. It contains general goals, guidelines, syllabi, and knowledge requirements.<sup>9</sup>

The Swedish language curriculum states that language is the primary tool for thinking, communicating, and learning. Through language, people develop their identities, express their feelings and thoughts, and understand how others feel and think. Rich and varied language is important in being able to understand and function in a society where different cultures, outlooks on life, generations, and languages interact.

Reading is part of the language curriculum, and a description of the aims that specifically address reading follows. Swedish language instruction should allow students the opportunity to develop their ability to:

- Express themselves and communicate in speech and writing
- Read and analyze literature and other texts for different purposes
- Adapt language to different purposes, recipients, and contexts
- Identify language structures and follow language norms
- Search for and evaluate information from different sources

The part of the syllabus that describes the overall goals is the same for Grades 1 to 9. The next part of the syllabus, a description of core content, is divided into three tiers: Grades 1 to 3, Grades 4 to 6, and Grades 7 to 9. The syllabus presents content in five categories that are the same for all three tiers: Reading and Writing; Speaking, Listening, and Talking; Narrative Texts and Nonfiction Texts; Use of Language; and Searching for Information and Critical Evaluation of Sources.

The specific core content of the Swedish language curriculum for Grades 4 to 6 is presented below.

- Reading and Writing
  - Reading strategies to understand and interpret texts from various media and to distinguish between explicit and implicit messages in texts
  - Strategies for writing different types of texts adapted to their typical structures and language features; creating texts where words, pictures, and sounds interact, both with and without digital tools
  - Different ways of processing their own and collaborative texts to create content and form
  - How to give and receive responses on texts
  - Handwriting and writing, organizing, and editing texts by hand and using digital tools
  - Structure of language and construction of sentences, main clauses, subordinate clauses, spelling rules, punctuation, word inflection, and parts of speech; structuring text by using linking words
  - How to use dictionaries and digital tools for spelling and understanding words
- Speaking, Listening, and Talking
  - Using arguments in different types of discussions and decision processes
  - Oral presentations and storytelling for different audiences on topics drawn from daily life and school; keywords, images, digital media and tools, as well as other aids for planning and giving an oral presentation; how gestures and body language can influence a presentation
- Narrative Texts and Nonfiction Texts
  - Narrative texts and poetic texts for children and youth from different epochs and from Sweden, the Nordic countries, and other parts of the world; texts in the form of fiction, lyrics, drama, tales, and myths that illustrate the human condition and questions of identity and life
  - Narrative text messages, language characteristics, and typical structures involving parallel action and flashbacks, descriptions of settings and persons, and dialogues
  - Some important literary authors for children and young people and their works
  - Descriptive, explanatory, instructional, and argumentative texts, including factual texts, task descriptions, advertisements, and letters to the press; textual contents, structure, and typical language features
  - Texts that combine words, pictures, and sounds, such as web content, games, and television programs; textual contents, structure, and typical language features
- Use of Language
  - Language strategies for remembering and learning, such as using mind maps and key words
  - Words, symbols, and terms used to express emotions, knowledge, and opinions; words and terms, their nuances of meaning, and connotations

- Differences in language use depending on audience and purpose, such as the difference between writing a personal text message and a factual text or posting on social media
- Responsible behavior when communicating with digital and other media, and in different contexts
- Use of language in Sweden and the Nordic countries; some variants of regional differences in spoken Swedish; some typical words and terms in Nordic languages, as well as differences and similarities between them; the national minority languages
- Searching for Information and Critical Evaluation of Sources
  - Information in different media and sources, such as reference books, interviews, and internet search engines
  - How to compare sources and examine their reliability from a critical standpoint

The final part of the Swedish curriculum contains knowledge requirements. Since there is no grading system until sixth grade, the knowledge requirements for Grades 1 and 3 refer to “acceptable knowledge” that all students should gain. Grades are given in sixth grade through ninth grade, and criteria are formulated for three of the five levels in the grading system (passing grades A through E, and F for failing). Examples of knowledge requirements for sixth grade are given below, since these are the requirements that fourth grade students are striving toward.

- Knowledge requirements for grades at the end of sixth grade
  - For grade E: “Students can read fiction and nonfiction texts for children and youth with ease by using reading strategies in a basically functional way. By making simple, chronological summaries of the contents of different texts and commenting on the main points with some connection to the context, students show basic reading comprehension. In addition, based on their own experience, students can interpret and apply simple and to some extent informed reasoning to clear messages in different works and in a simple way describe their reading experiences.”
  - For grade C: “Students can read fiction and nonfiction texts for children and youth with good ease by using reading strategies in an appropriate way. By making developed summaries of the contents of different texts and commenting on the main parts with relatively good connection to the context, students show good reading comprehension. In addition, students from their own experiences interpret and apply developed and relatively well-informed reasoning to clearly prominent messages from different works and in a developed way describe their reading experience.”
  - For grade A: “Students can read fiction and nonfiction texts for children and youth with very good ease by using reading strategies in an appropriate and effective way. By making well-developed summaries of the contents of various texts and commenting on the main parts with good connection to the context, students show very good reading comprehension. In addition, students from their own experiences interpret and apply

well-developed and well-informed reasoning to clearly prominent messages in different works and in a well-developed way describe their reading experience.”

## Professional Development Requirements and Programs

There are several professional development programs available for teachers in Sweden. There are no mandatory national programs or hours set for teacher professional development at the national level. Rather, school principals are responsible for ensuring their teachers get the professional development they need.

In 2014, the Swedish government initiated a national professional development program specifically concerning reading called *Läslyftet* (The Literacy Boost), which is available to teachers of all subjects. The program gives preschool teachers, primary and secondary school teachers, and school librarians scientifically proven methods to help them develop children’s language and communication skills and improve students’ reading and writing skills. The Literacy Boost is structured around collaborative learning, a type of structured collaboration between colleagues that aims to assimilate new knowledge into day-to-day practices. The National Agency for Education is responsible for developing and disseminating the program to participating schools.<sup>10</sup>

Since 2012, a program called *Lärarlyftet* (The Teacher Boost) has been available to teachers. The program does not specifically target reading but aims to raise students’ achievement levels by improving teacher competence. Teachers are provided with opportunities to build their capacity in subjects in which they lack necessary qualifications. Upon completion of the program, teachers may apply for new subject-specific accreditation. The National Agency for Education organizes program courses in cooperation with universities, and municipalities and owners of independent schools can apply for government grants to help cover the cost of reducing teaching hours for teachers who attend these courses.<sup>11</sup>

## Monitoring Student Progress in Reading

In Sweden, students are monitored and assessed in compulsory school through a system of national tests, diagnostic materials, and written reports with individual development plans and grades. The national tests have been developed and constructed by several of the country’s universities on behalf of the National Agency for Education, and they have two main purposes: to support teachers in monitoring and assessing student progress according to the curriculum and syllabus, and to support teachers in assigning grades. National tests are provided for students in third grade (in the subjects of Swedish or Swedish as a second language and mathematics), in sixth grade (in the subjects of Swedish or Swedish as a second language, mathematics, and English), and in ninth grade (in the subjects of Swedish or Swedish as a second language; mathematics; English; one of the three science subjects [biology, physics, or chemistry]; and one of the four social science subjects [civics, history, religion, or geography]).<sup>12</sup>

Each school decides how to assess further progress in different subjects. At least once a semester, students and their parents receive progress reports and meet with teachers to discuss student progress and how learning can be stimulated and supported (these meetings are referred to as individual student development dialogues). Progress reports are regulated by law. Parent-teacher meetings serve as a substitute for annual progress reports and grading until sixth grade and continue throughout compulsory school.<sup>13</sup>

## Special Reading Initiatives

Swedish policymakers have focused on strengthening the reading skills and the interest in reading in children and young people. Findings from national and international evaluations of students' knowledge have resulted in several initiatives connected to reading.

In 2019, a guarantee for early support in reading, writing, and counting was launched at the national level to identify achievement gaps and provide support to students who need it. Between the preschool class and third grade, the National Agency for Education provides compulsory diagnostic materials and assessment support materials that are intended to identify the strengths and needs of individual students, help teachers monitor student progress, and make objective assessments and provide support.<sup>14</sup>

The National Centre for Literacy Development (*Nationellt centrum för språk-, läs- och skrivutveckling*) encourages preschools, schools, and school leaders to work actively with literacy to promote students' language and knowledge development. The work is conducted through regional networks and through individual training courses in developing literacy offered to teachers.<sup>15</sup>

Since 2015, Sweden has had a school holiday called the Reading Holiday. This government-supported holiday aims to inspire and motivate students to read. In 2018, the National Agency for Education promoted this holiday by developing and communicating materials to schools, principals, teachers, and school librarians.<sup>16</sup>

## Response to COVID-19 Pandemic

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

Primary schools in Sweden have generally remained open throughout the pandemic. Only a few primary schools have had brief closures due to local outbreaks of COVID-19. The government provided additional financial support to municipalities and owners of independent schools during 2021 to ensure that all students received the education they are entitled to despite the pandemic.<sup>17</sup>

## Impact of the Pandemic on Student Learning

The National Agency for Education has been assigned the task of evaluating the impact of COVID-19 on the Swedish education system. The latest report from May 2021 describes the impact so far as follows:<sup>18</sup>

- Access to and participation in education is relatively high at most levels of the Swedish school system, either because schools have remained open or due to access to digital distance learning.
- A higher level of absence noted at some school levels and the use of more digital distance learning have resulted in the risk of an education gap.
- Schools' abilities to ensure equal opportunities, as well as to provide education for students with special needs, have been hampered by the pandemic.
- Schools and teachers have received different forms of support during the pandemic so far; nevertheless, it is necessary to plan for continued support.

## Policy and Practice Changes

A hybrid model of digital distance learning and face-to-face learning has been used to a varying extent across regions and municipalities in Sweden depending on the COVID-19 context. This model has mostly been used by schools with lower or upper secondary grades.<sup>19</sup> Fourth grade students have not been affected to the same extent. This practice has been based on the recommendations of the Public Health Agency of Sweden and on a new regulation from 2020.

When using a hybrid model of digital distance learning and face-to-face learning, students with special needs have been prioritized for face-to-face learning, along with students in their final year of lower or upper secondary education. Practical and assessment needs have also made face-to-face learning a priority at times. School principals and teachers have been working to counteract the education gap that the pandemic could potentially cause, both on a general level and for specific students. Examples of such work have been providing extra lessons during school holidays, providing homework and mentoring support, implementing increased support from student health teams, monitoring individual students' needs, and investing in more teachers and school staff.

## Impact of the Pandemic on PIRLS 2021

In Sweden, primary schools, which include fourth grade, mostly have remained open throughout the pandemic. Even so, the implementation of PIRLS 2021 has been affected.

The COVID-19 pandemic started to affect Sweden during the PIRLS 2021 field test in March 2020. To alleviate stress on schools at this time, the collection of the field test data had to end before all schools had the opportunity to participate.

To prepare for the main data collection in Sweden, the National Agency for Education had to make some administrative changes. School coordinator training was conducted online, and

national quality control program participants had to adapt to travel restrictions and restrictions on allowing external visitors into schools.

The Agency had to accept some late refusals to participate due to the absence of too many students and staff members. Finally, some schools were not able to conduct their makeup test sessions because of time constraints and absences.

## Suggested Readings

National Agency for Education. (2018). *Curriculum for the compulsory school, preschool class and school-age educare* (revised 2018). (English version). Stockholm. Retrieved from <https://www.skolverket.se/publikationer?id=3984>

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