

Czech Republic

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Introduction

Overview of Education System

Responsibility for schools in the Czech Republic is distributed among the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports (MŠMT), regional education authorities, and municipalities. The Ministry sets policies and assesses the development of the education system. For example, the Ministry defines compulsory education components; is partially responsible for funding public schools; and oversees the school register, which is a tool used to ensure that all students have access to appropriate educational opportunities. Among other responsibilities, the Ministry oversees institutions that provide professional development for teachers. The Ministry also retains direct control of several institutions related to institutional or preventive care, such as orphanages, detention centers for juveniles, and schools for students with particular physical needs or disabilities. The Czech School Inspectorate serves as the main state authority responsible for monitoring school quality at the preprimary, primary, secondary, and postsecondary levels.

From 2001 to 2003, regional education authorities were established to fundamentally decentralize the education system. MŠMT retained its policymaking responsibilities but transferred administrative responsibilities to the regions and municipalities. After decentralization, the regions assumed responsibility for secondary schools (International Standard Classification of Education [ISCED] 3), *conservatoires* (ISCED 2, ISCED 3, ISCED 5), and tertiary professional schools (ISCED 6). Municipalities are responsible for nursery schools (ISCED 0) and for basic schools (ISCED 1, ISCED 2), which provide compulsory primary and lower secondary education, and guarantee their funding (except for salaries and instructional equipment, which are funded by the central government indirectly via regional education authorities). Some schools are run by private entities or denominations and are required to fulfill a set of criteria in order to obtain state authorization and receive state funding.

Nursery schools provide education, usually for children ages 3 to 6, as part of preprimary education. Since 2017, attendance is compulsory for children who are 5 years old (the final year of preprimary education).¹ This final year of preprimary education is free of charge.

School attendance is compulsory for all children ages 6 to 15. Basic schools provide nine years of education at the primary and lower secondary levels: five years at the primary level for students ages 6 to 11, and four years at the lower secondary level for students ages 11 to 15. At the end of

the primary level (fifth grade), students may leave basic school to start an eight-year track of general secondary school (eight-year grammar school) or *conservatoire*, where they may complete their compulsory education within the first four years of study by age 15. Similarly, at the end of seventh grade of basic school, students may start a six-year grammar school after passing an entrance examination set by the school. All public basic schools are free of charge.²

At the primary level, one teacher usually teaches all subjects, whereas at the lower secondary level, teachers are specialists, generally in two subjects. The Framework Education Programme for Basic Education (FEP BE) sets objectives and the basic curricula content on which schools base their education programs.³

Three kinds of schools provide upper secondary education: grammar schools (called gymnasium), which provide general academic programs for 30 percent of students ages 15 to 19,⁴ culminating with a school leaving examination; secondary technical and vocational schools for 48 percent of students ages 15 to 19, also culminating with a school leaving examination; and secondary vocational schools for 22 percent of students ages 15 to 17 or 18⁵ that offer an apprenticeship certificate without a school leaving examination. Prerequisites for acceptance into upper secondary schools include successful completion of compulsory education and meeting schools' entrance requirements. Students must pass an upper secondary school leaving examination in order to apply for postsecondary education. Students completing vocational school with an apprenticeship certificate may apply for postsecondary education after completing two years of follow-up courses and passing a school leaving examination.

Private primary and secondary schools were established in 1990 and private universities were established in 1999. These schools are mostly secular and typically are established by for-profit or nonprofit grant-aided organizations.

Use and Impact of PIRLS

The Czech Republic first participated in PIRLS in 2001 and again in 2011, 2016, and 2021. After results were released in 2017, a national report was published⁶ and seminars for teachers and experts were held throughout the whole country to familiarize language education specialists with the PIRLS assessment framework and with the key PIRLS findings. The national center also published several secondary analyses and a publication that introduces the PIRLS methodology and released PIRLS passages with questions/tasks, including scoring guides with methodical comments and an expert review of student performance.⁷ The publications were distributed to schools free of charge, and the electronic version is available on the webpage of the Czech School Inspectorate. Moreover, another set of webinars for schools and teachers was prepared by the national center combining the knowledge and experience from the international surveys PIRLS and Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS). The webinars presented ways of supporting reading across all subjects using the released items from PIRLS and TIMSS.

International assessments like TIMSS, PIRLS, and the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) provide important information regarding student achievement to experts (i.e., researchers, teachers, nongovernmental organizations, and the Czech School Inspectorate) at the primary and lower secondary levels in the Czech Republic. Experts tend to use PIRLS survey results as a starting point when discussing the quality of reading literacy in the Czech Republic, especially when the results indicate a stable or even decreasing level of student achievement. PIRLS findings convey important information about the teaching process, achievement level, and results of education, and help MŠMT develop programs to support reading literacy in schools.

The Language/Reading Curriculum in Primary Grades⁸

Reading Policy

Reading development is considered to be one of the basic goals of primary education. The concept of reading in Czech primary schools has changed since 1989. While in the past only reading skills were stressed, the current concept of reading focuses on the functional use of reading—reading literacy development as a necessary means of communication and continuing education. Reading is understood not only as a means of acquiring a skill and using it but also as an important prerequisite for individual cultural and personal development.

Summary of National Curriculum

The Education Act of 2004 set a two-level structure for education programs. Since September 2007, teaching according to the Framework Education Programme for Basic Education (FEP BE) has been binding. This FEP BE was revised in 2016. The FEP BE, produced at the central level, specifies the objectives, form, length, and content of education and some general conditions for implementation. The school head draws up an education program in accordance with the FEP BE and the school's conditions. The FEP BE defines nine main education areas (consisting of one or more educational fields), cross-curricular themes, and supplementary educational fields.

The content of the educational fields includes the expected outcomes and subject matter. Within Stage 1 (Grades 1 to 5), the educational content is subdivided into Period 1 (Grades 1 to 3) and Period 2 (Grades 4 and 5). Expected outcomes are activity-based, practically focused, applicable in everyday life, and verifiable. The FEP BE sets the expected outcomes at the end of third grade (Period 1) as not binding and at the end of fifth grade (Period 2) as binding.

The Language and Language Communication education area occupies a pivotal position in the education process. The content of the educational field Czech Language and Literature is complex and interconnected in instruction, but for the sake of clarity has been separated into three parts: Communication and Composition, Language, and Literature.

After Period 1 (the end of third grade), students are expected to:

- Read texts of adequate length and difficulty fluently with comprehension

- Understand written and oral instructions of reasonable difficulty
- Read age-appropriate literary texts and recite them from memory with proper phrasing and pace
- Express personal feelings about a text
- Distinguish prose from verse and fairy tales from other types of narratives
- Work creatively according to personal abilities with a literary text following the teacher's instructions

After Period 2 (the end of fifth grade), students are expected to:

- Read texts of adequate difficulty with comprehension silently and aloud
- Recognize the main ideas and details in age-appropriate texts, taking notes on the main ideas
- Assess the completeness of a simple text
- Reproduce the content of a text of adequate difficulty and remember the main ideas
- Recognize manipulative communication in an advertisement or commercial
- Express and record personal impressions from reading
- Reproduce a text freely according to personal abilities and create an original literary text on a given topic
- Distinguish between various types of artistic and nonartistic texts
- Use elementary literary terms when performing a simple analysis of literary texts

The Czech Language and Literature subject matter for Periods 1 and 2 includes:

- Practical reading (e.g., reading technique, attentive and fluent reading, recognition of orientation elements in a text) and factual reading (e.g., reading for information, scanning, recognizing keywords)
- Listening to literary texts
- Experiential reading and listening
- Creative activities with a literary text (e.g., recitation of adequate literary texts, creative reproduction of a text that the student has read or listened to, dramatization, creation of original accompanying illustrations)
- Basic literary terms pertaining to literary styles and genres (e.g., counting rhyme, riddle, nursery rhyme, poem, fairy tale, fable, short story; writer, poet, book, reader; theater performance, actor, director; verse, rhyme, simile)

The development of functional reading is realized through the use of reading materials in all subject areas. The goals defined by the FEP BE stress new approaches and elements in reading instruction (e.g., active work with texts, reading and understanding, critical thinking). Although general awareness of the shift from technical reading toward functional reading has been growing, many Czech schools still follow the traditional approach.

Professional Development Requirements and Programs⁹

Qualification and continuing education of teachers of all education levels (apart from higher education) follow the Act on Education Staff. Teachers at the primary level (the first stage of basic schools, *základní školy*) and teachers of general and theoretical technical subjects at upper levels are required to hold a master's degree, which generally takes five years to complete at a school of education (typically comprising a three-year bachelor's degree program followed by a two-year master's degree program). Graduates of these programs are qualified to teach all subjects at the primary level. Some programs allow prospective teachers to specialize in a chosen subject, e.g., music, art, physical education, or a foreign language. Teacher preparation includes a training program (including in-school placement) that usually lasts 6 to 12 weeks, depending on the university.

Teachers of general subjects at the lower secondary (Grades 6 to 9) and upper secondary (Grades 10 to 13) levels also are required to hold a master's degree. Most secondary school teachers are specialists, however, and usually are qualified to teach at least two subjects. Secondary school teachers are educated at universities, either at schools of education or at faculties (or colleges), and focus on the subject they wish to teach (e.g., natural sciences, mathematics, or physics). Teacher preparation includes a training program (including in-school placement lasting four weeks per field of study). A teacher who is fully qualified at the primary or secondary level also may teach outside his or her area of specialization at the discretion of the head of school. A teacher, upon completion of studies, is qualified at ISCED Level 7, and upon passing a state final examination and defending his or her thesis, obtains a university diploma, a diploma supplement, and the academic degree of *magister* (master).

Requirements for Ongoing Professional Development in Reading for Teachers

After obtaining a master's degree, teachers are fully qualified to teach. The Czech education system does not offer an official induction program for first-year teachers; however, some schools hold their own induction programs. Forty-four percent of teachers reported that a formal induction program was available for all newly hired teachers at their school. Some schools also offer mentoring.¹⁰

All teaching professionals are allowed to use up to 12 working days per school year to meet professional development requirements. The Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports accredits educational institutions and programs dedicated to professional development. Most of these courses are offered by the National Institute for Further Education (*Národní institut pro další vzdělávání*), which was established during the restructuring of several education centers in 2004. The institute functions under the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports and receives funding from the state budget. Each of the institute's 13 regional workplaces offers a number of education programs in its region.

Data from the Teaching and Learning International Survey in 2018 (not limited to primary level teachers) show that 97 percent of Czech teachers attended at least one professional development activity in the 12-month period prior to data collection.¹¹

The Reading and Writing for Critical Thinking program plays an important role in further education in reading, leading to the use of new instruction methods in schools. Teachers attending workshops organized by the program learn to use methods such as quick orientation in unknown text, controlled reading, “folder reading,” literary groups or clubs, reading with foresight, keywords, and “reading against the grain.” Because reading skills also include writing skills, the program also is focused on the development of skills for creating meaningful texts. Experienced lecturers with the program have prepared a handbook to help advance reading literacy that was published on the Czech School Inspectorate’s website.

Schools also have the option of participating in the Helping Schools Succeed project to further train teachers in reading. This project offers teachers continuing education, methods to improve teaching quality, and inspirational examples of good teaching practices.¹²

Monitoring Student Progress in Reading

Students are assessed continually in individual subjects and receive a school report documenting their grades, assessment results, and behavior at the end of each semester. Teachers assess students based on oral and written work completed in class, homework, and tests to measure achievement. Student assessment results are reported verbally, in writing, or both. After 1990, the use of verbal assessment became widespread in schools, especially at the lower levels. Officially authorized in 1993, these verbal assessments were regulated by Decree 48/2005 of the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports. The school head decides on the evaluation format with the consent of the school council, while individual schools establish the assessment guidelines. Written marks are based on a grading scale of 1 to 5, with a score of 1 being “excellent” and a score of 5 being “unsatisfactory.” Students who do not pass all compulsory subjects must repeat the grade. Only one grade may be repeated at the primary level and one at the lower secondary level.

Assessment of reading includes the evaluation of reading speed, correctness, fluency, and pronunciation. Teachers may use a commercial standardized test to evaluate these criteria or create a nonstandardized diagnostic test. Speed and fluency primarily are evaluated through reading aloud or answering simple questions based on a text. Teachers assess students’ interest in reading and their ability to work with text by evaluating their ability to complete reading literacy tasks and engage in dialogue with other students.

Students at the primary and lower secondary levels do not take national or regional examinations. However, the Czech School Inspectorate has used a computer-based assessment of students since the 2011–2012 academic year. The system enables a sample survey of learning

outcomes of students and serves as a tool for the evaluation of the education system and the self-evaluation of participating schools.

The Czech School Inspectorate also conducts a sample thematic survey focused on reading literacy. Reading was tested in 2017–2018 in ninth grade of basic school and in second grade of grammar schools; in 2019–2020, students in all types of upper secondary schools were tested; and in 2022, testing of reading, mathematics, language, and information and science will take place at the primary level and lower secondary level of basic schools. Summaries of results and analysis of these surveys are presented in thematic reports.

Special Reading Initiatives

Several long-term initiatives managed by the state and experts in reading are ongoing:

- State-managed initiatives—Covering organizations of MŠMT (i.e., the National Institute for Further Education, the Education Counseling Centre, and the Centre for the Continuing Education of Teachers)
- Expert-managed voluntary initiatives—Covering concerned associations that unite experts (i.e., researchers, scholars, and teachers) in their respective fields of research (e.g., the Association of Teachers of the Czech Language, Czech Language and Literature Teachers Society, or Association of Library and Information Professionals of the Czech Republic)

State-managed organizations focus on preparing and implementing education programs for pedagogical staff in all regions of the Czech Republic, developing educational materials for use in schools, and analyzing future needs in education (including reading education). Expert-managed voluntary initiatives aim to support and improve reading education, disseminate new knowledge from theory into practice, and popularize new methods of reading development. These initiatives include conferences and educational training programs for teachers from all school types. Various nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) funded by the European Social Fund or regional funds offer further support to schools in the form of educational materials and programs.

Emphasis on Reading Literacy

The Czech Republic currently has no national projects promoting reading, but several reading literacy projects have been organized at the regional and school levels. One important project is the Reading and Writing for Critical Thinking program, which provides in-service training to help teachers master the instruction methods that lead to the development of higher-order thinking skills necessary for functional reading. The program also implements reading workshops in which children read books of their choice at school in longer time blocks. Using notes they keep in a reader’s diary, students then discuss the book and their feelings about it and ask the teacher questions. The program uses innovative methods to develop children’s reading and writing skills outside of the workshops. Step by Step is another program with similar goals.

Since 2009, the program *I Am Already a Reader: A Book for the First Grader*, implemented through public libraries with the cooperation of schools, has promoted reading among children.¹³ Teachers participating in this program register children in the first year of school for library membership and facilitate their participation in various reading promotion activities (e.g., meetings with authors, book exhibitions, literary discussions, performances). Students who fulfill criteria such as mastering reading at the end of the year and participating in reading activities receive a special book that is not available in the standard market. Some students are awarded the book at a ceremony in the presence of the author and illustrator.

Since 2006, the *Every Czech Reads to Kids* family literacy program has emphasized the importance of reading aloud to children to support their emotional development and form a habit of reading.¹⁴ Parents participating in this program are encouraged to read aloud to their children every day for 20 minutes. Supported by people from the world of culture, art, and sports, the program arranges for celebrities to read to children in schools, libraries, and hospitals. Since 2011, the program has collaborated with publishing houses and other donors to provide bookcases containing children's books to hospitals and pediatricians' offices. The *Week of Reading to Children*, which takes place in different towns and villages every year, encourages systematic reading and children's affection for literature through a selection of valuable books to be read to children.

The Association of Library and Information Professionals of the Czech Republic organizes events for young readers such as *Library Week*, *Month of Readers*, *Reader of the Year*, *Night with Andersen* (in which children spend the night in a library participating in collective reading, theater performances, and other group activities), and the *Best Children's Library* contest.¹⁵

Growing with the Book is a reading support campaign to develop and deepen literary education and reading maturity in young readers and to improve and enrich their communication skills and knowledge of culture.¹⁶ The campaign organizes literary and reading contests, reading surveys, book exhibitions, author discussions, and workshops. It also is a part of the international reading group *EU Read*.

In 2011, the philanthropic project *Reading Helps* was created in response to unsatisfactory results in international surveys of reading literacy from previous years.¹⁷ With the goals of motivating children to read and improving their comprehension of written text, the project is funded by an annual donation of 10 million Czech crowns. Students who take part in the project choose a book to read among recommended titles and earn 50 crowns to donate to the charity of their choice after completing a test about the book. Books are categorized for primary, lower secondary, and upper secondary school students with each frequently updated category containing more than 120 books to choose from.

From 2016 to 2021, the National Institute for Education implemented the *Supporting Teaching Practice (PPUČ)* project.¹⁸ This project focused on developing reading literacy, mathematical literacy, digital literacy, and computational thinking (basic literacies) across learning. The

objectives of the project were to support teachers in helping children and students develop basic literacies, both in preschools and basic schools, and to foster a mutual view of quality in education across the school board and other relevant stakeholders.

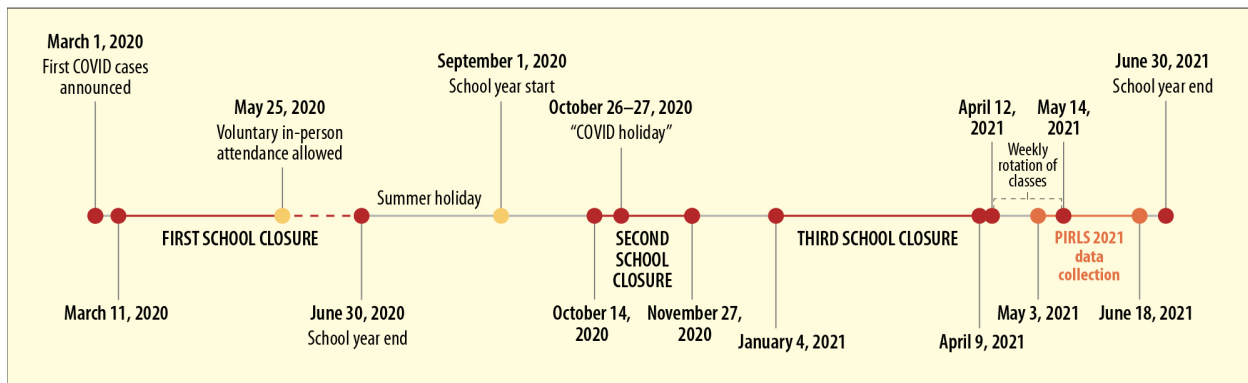
Response to COVID-19 Pandemic

Teaching and Learning During the COVID-19 Pandemic

On March 10, 2020, the Czech Republic announced the closure of all primary, secondary, and tertiary institutions, as well as professional schools, effective as of March 11.¹⁹ This was the first of three school closures experienced by Czech primary students prior to the PIRLS 2021 main data collection. The closure technically lasted until the end of the school year as the phased return of students was strictly voluntary and schools were allowed to have only up to 15 students per class.

The second school closure was announced six weeks after the start of the next school year, and the third closure started just after the beginning of 2021. In total, the majority^a of fourth grade students experienced 152 days^b (approximately 30 regular school weeks) of distance-only education and a five-week period of in-person instruction held every other week (see Exhibit 1).

Exhibit 1: School Closures Impacting Czech Grade 4 Students



To facilitate remote instruction, MŠMT created a website,²⁰ guidelines, and tools for educators, parents, and students from primary to tertiary schools, and published a set of best practices and materials.²¹ Schools were asked to provide printed educational materials to students without access to digital education. However, remote instruction mostly was taking place online (81 percent of primary schools reported online instruction for the majority of their students according to the comprehensive survey carried out by the Czech School Inspectorate).²² The Czech School Inspectorate published thematic reports about education and experience in distance learning in

^a The exception is students from small schools with multigrade instruction (approximately 10 percent of fourth grade students) who underwent 104 days of distance-only education.

^b This does not count the prolonged Christmas holiday or the so-called COVID holiday preceding the regular autumn holiday.

the Czech Republic.²³ There were several efforts aiding both schools and students as they adjusted to the new reality. For instance, the We Teach Online (*Učíme online*) project, involving over 600 expert volunteers who have helped approximately 1,000 schools put online education into practice, was established by the NGO Cesko.Digital (*Česko.Digital*).²⁴ A similar project, *#LearningRemotely* (*#UčímeSeNaDálku*), which offered consultations with experts, was set up by the O2 Foundation in collaboration with MŠMT.²⁵ Webinars introducing the tools and principles of distance learning and different materials and blogs to support teachers,²⁶ as well as a tech support group on Facebook, were established through the National Pedagogical Institute and its System of Professional Development Support for Teachers and Directors (SYPO). In addition, to support remote instruction, the National Pedagogical Institute has prepared webinars around the possibilities of using released items from international surveys PIRLS, TIMSS, and PISA. The Czech School Inspectorate offered schools the possibility of methodological consultations to discuss issues related to the organization, forms, and content priorities for distance education, as well as evaluation and the remote learning of students with special education needs.

Primary school students were supported by the project Let's Include Everybody,^c which offered tutoring by students of education faculties.²⁷ Students with special education needs also were supported online through individual consultations with the support of a teaching assistant. Some schools have introduced regular online tutoring for these students for an individual approach. Schools that offered extra support measures to students with specific needs received funding to cover the cost of such measures.

Moreover, Czech Television (public service television) broadcast daily educational programs and launched an online library of lessons with educational videos.²⁸ With the focus on basic and upper secondary schools, the broadcaster also launched a dedicated portal offering a wide range of documentaries.²⁹ The Czech Academy of Sciences prepared tips for parents and children on home experiments, e-resources, electronic versions of various journals, online exhibitions, and educational videos.

Impact of the Pandemic on Student Learning

The national effort to evaluate the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on learning concentrated on (1) the conditions and methods of instruction; (2) the perception of remote instruction by students and their parents; (3) the impact on students' well-being; and (4) the impact on student achievement (reading literacy, mathematics).

Regarding the impact on reading, a study by PAQ Research and Kalibro indicated that due to remote instruction, students lost an equivalent of three months of learning. Researchers from Kalibro tested fifth grade students (using standardized tests) in 88 primary schools in spring 2020 and 2021, before and after the three school closures. The findings showed a deterioration in results

^c For more information, see [Zpojmevsechny.cz](https://zpojmevsechny.cz)

in 60 percent of schools. The decline was more pronounced in schools where there were a large number of students with lower socioeconomic status and in schools with a lower proportion of parents with a university degree.³⁰

Policy and Practice Changes

To alleviate the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on learning, MŠMT, in cooperation with the National Pedagogical Institute and nonprofit organizations, launched the National Tutoring Plan before the beginning of the 2021–2022 academic year.³¹ The aim of this long-term program is to help mitigate the negative effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. The website of the National Tutoring Plan is a practical guide and inspiration for principals, educators, tutors, and parents. Currently, it offers tips mainly to teachers, nonprofit organizations, and students of pedagogical faculties in the form of videos in which their colleagues share their know-how and provide guidance not only on tutoring, learning environment, or aids to better understand the subject but also how to reach students and rouse their interest in tutoring.

The school's obligation to provide distance education to students in the event of another school closure (or if students' school attendance is prohibited) was approved during the summer holiday of 2020 after the first school closure. This change in legislation also requires students to attend distance education as part of their compulsory education.

Thanks to the financial intervention of the state, the technical experience of schools and their digital technology equipment have improved. The release of 984.5 million Czech crowns was approved for the acquisition of technical equipment for schools to provide distance education. The total amount is nearly 1.3 billion Czech crowns. Distance education significantly contributed to the development of the digital competencies of teachers and students.

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