Hungary

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Introduction

Hungary is an independent democratic nation in Central Eastern Europe in the Carpathian Basin. It borders Slovakia to the north, Ukraine to the northeast, Romania to the east and southeast, Serbia to the south, Croatia and Slovenia to the southwest, and Austria to the west. The landlocked country covers 93,036 square kilometers and has 9.97 million inhabitants, with a population density of 107 people per square kilometer. The population is decreasing at a rate of 0.25 percent per year.

Unlike other countries in the region, Hungary is relatively ethnically homogenous. However, in addition to the Hungarian majority, Hungary is home to Roma, Germans, Slovaks, Croatians, Romanians, Ukrainians, Serbians, and Slovenians. Croatians, Germans, Romanians, Serbians, Slovaks, and Slovenians have their own institutions within the education system. The official language of instruction in Hungary is Hungarian, and 99 percent of the country's population speak Hungarian as their first language.

Overview of Education System

The education system in Hungary was based on the German model from the mid-nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century. After World War II, Hungary was a Socialist country that followed the Soviet model, with strongly centralized administration. Hungary has been a republic since 1989 and a member of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) since 1996, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) since 1999, the European Union since 2004, and the Schengen Agreement since 2007. After 1989, a decentralized education system was created. In 2010, with the conservative party gaining power, a recentralization process took place. As of 2021, the Ministry of Human Resources is responsible for the education system, and the Deputy Secretary of State responsible for education is the person within the Ministry who decides most education policies.

According to Act CXC of 2011 on National Public Education,[a] the state ensures the provision of core tasks of public education with the exception of preschools. The state provides public education by establishing and operating institutions and by working with churches or private

[a] See https://net.jogtar.hu/jogszabaly?docid=a1100190.tv for more information.

institutions through public education agreements. Local governments ensure the provision of preschool education by establishing and operating institutions or by means of public education agreements.

The government is authorized to regulate the education system and issue the national core curriculum. Public education institutions are professionally independent and can make decisions about their organization and operation on matters not regulated by law or by another entity. Compulsory preschool education begins at the age of 3. Children attend Kindergarten for at least four hours a day in the year they turn 3 by August 31. Compulsory schooling lasts from ages 6 to 16. Since 2013, all children who turn 6 by August 31 become "school-mature" on September 1 of that year.[1]

Most primary education (UNESCO's International Standard Classification of Education [ISCED] Levels 1 and 2) typically takes place in eight-grade schools (general school), including primary and lower secondary education. The primary school stage (Grades 1 to 4) corresponds to ISCED Level 1. Lower secondary education (Grades 5 to 8) corresponds to ISCED Level 2 (see Exhibit 1).

Exceptions to this are the eight- and six-grade grammar schools: The former starts classes in fifth grade and the latter starts classes in seventh grade so they can educate students for a long period of time until graduation. However, the majority of students remain in general school for eight years.

Successful completion of eighth grade certifies a basic education level. After completing primary and lower secondary level education, students can continue their studies at the secondary level: grammar school, vocational secondary school, or vocational school. Some general and vocational secondary schools offer preparatory training in the first year, in which students focus on learning a foreign language, supplemented with some mother tongue and mathematics lessons, before starting the actual four-year program.

Exhibit 1: Structure of the Hungarian Public Education System by ISCED Level, Grade, and Age (2021)

<table>
<tr><th>ISCED Level</th><th>Grade</th><th colspan="5">Education Program</th><th>Ages</th></tr>
<tr><td></td><td>13</td><td colspan="3"></td><td rowspan="2">Vocational secondary schools (technikum): 5–6 grades (+LPT*)</td><td rowspan="2"></td><td>18–19</td></tr>
<tr><td rowspan="5">ISCED 3</td><td>12</td><td rowspan="4">Grammar schools: 8 grades</td><td rowspan="4">Grammar schools: 6 grades</td><td rowspan="4">Grammar schools: 4–5 grades (+LPT*)</td><td>17–18</td></tr>
<tr><td>11</td><td rowspan="3">Vocational schools</td><td>16–17</td></tr>
<tr><td>10</td><td>15–16</td></tr>
<tr><td>9</td><td>14–15</td></tr>
<tr><td rowspan="4">ISCED 2</td><td>8</td><td colspan="3" rowspan="4">Lower secondary level of general school</td><td rowspan="4">10–14</td></tr>
<tr><td>7</td></tr>
<tr><td>6</td></tr>
<tr><td>5</td></tr>
<tr><td rowspan="4">ISCED 1</td><td>4</td><td colspan="4" rowspan="4">Primary level of general school</td><td rowspan="4">6–10</td></tr>
<tr><td>3</td></tr>
<tr><td>2</td></tr>
<tr><td>1</td></tr>
<tr><td rowspan="2">ISCED 0</td><td></td><td colspan="4">Kindergarten</td><td>3–6</td></tr>
<tr><td></td><td colspan="4">Crèche</td><td></td></tr>
</table>

*Language preparatory training

Use and Impact of PIRLS

The first time Hungary participated in International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA) assessment was in 1970–1971 when the Six Subject Survey was administered in primary and secondary schools. Hungary joined PIRLS in 2001 and has participated regularly in PIRLS surveys.

IEA studies provided the first experiences of participating in international comparative assessments in Hungary. These learning opportunities and methodological experiences paved the way for the development and institutionalization of national assessments. Through PIRLS, researchers became aware of the positive reading performance of Hungarian students in fourth grade.[2] The experiences of the IEA assessments helped inform the development of the national assessment system (e.g., monitoring student achievement, National Assessment of Basic Competencies).

The Language/Reading Curriculum in Primary Grades

Reading instruction is regulated by the National Core Curriculum (NCC), which includes goals and tasks, and the Curriculum Framework, which contains the actual components of the curriculum. Content regulation is implemented on three levels: a macro level (National Core Curriculum), an intermediate level (framework curricula), and the institutional level (pedagogical programs and local curricula).

For the 2020–2021 academic year, a new National Core Curriculum was introduced[b] in Hungary in Grades 1, 5, and 9 starting from September 1, 2020.

National Core Curriculum

The new National Core Curriculum[c] (referred to as NCC or NAT) 2020 describes the general conceptual and content bases and frameworks of the curriculum, and defines the compulsory content for primary and secondary educational institutions. The NCC 2020 contributes to the content unity of school education. Besides describing the general content, the NAT strengthens the connection to the history of the nation, to intergenerational relations, common cultural roots, the use of mother tongue, and national identity.

The NAT also formulates the methodological principles around supporting effective learning, the importance of the learning environment, individualized learning opportunities, and the development of skills. The NAT emphasizes active learning within the learning environment, including the participation of students in learning activities, the organization of activity-based learning, and social learning. The NCC emphasizes the need to adapt the learning environment to the individual characteristics of learners, to compensate for disadvantages, to use digital tools and methods, and to have teachers work together (e.g., joint teaching, joint planning, joint evaluation). In support of capacity building, the NCC emphasizes the importance of evaluating student performance, i.e., data- and fact-based pedagogy. Within student assessment, the NCC emphasizes the importance of diagnostic and formative assessment in addition to summative assessment.

Based on the recommendations by the European Union and taking the Hungarian context into account, the NCC 2020 defines the key competencies for education related to school learning and teaching processes as follows:

1. Learning competencies
2. Communication competencies (mother tongue and foreign language)
3. Digital competency
4. Mathematical and thinking competencies
5. Personal and social competencies
6. Creativity, competencies of self-expression and cultural awareness
7. Employee, innovation, and entrepreneurial competencies

The NCC 2020 defines the number of basic hours in a two-year breakdown by study area and also defines the maximum number of hours that can be used in teaching. In primary level education (Grades 1 to 4), the maximum number of lessons per week is 24 (14 for Grades 1 and 2 and 10 for Grades 3 and 4). The subject of Hungarian language and literature comprises 7 lessons

[b] Government Decree 5/2020. (I. 31.) on the issue of the National Core Curriculum

[c] The Hungarian translation is *Nemzeti Alaptanterv* (NAT).

per week for first grade, 7 lessons per week for second grade, 5 lessons per week for third grade, and 5 lessons per week for fourth grade.

Principles of the NCC in the Subject of Hungarian Language and Literature

The NCC defines the principles and goals for each learning area and also sets the expectations in detail on a number of issues (e.g., the main topics, the authors, the scope of compulsory reading). The subject of Hungarian language and literature comprises 24 lessons per week in Grades 1 to 4, on average 25 percent of the weekly instruction time.[d] One NCC principle is that the mother tongue is the most important foundation of Hungarian culture and national identity.

The main goals of teaching Hungarian language and literature are to prepare students to use their mother tongue consciously; to have a clear understanding and comprehension competency; and to communicate accurately using the language consciously and reflectively.

It is important that students' language skills and competencies allow them to think critically, which enables them to thrive in the world of work, learn throughout their life, and be capable of working effectively independently and as part of a team. Students should know, understand, and respect the cultural traditions of Hungary.

Other goals include ongoing development of students' comprehension and composition skills, writing and language skills, the use of verbal and nonverbal communication methods, and understanding of themselves and others.

According to the NCC, the main goals of teaching language subjects in Grades 1 to 4 are to develop students' ability to speak and express oneself in one's mother tongue, and to establish a stable foundation for reading and writing. In Grades 1 and 2, the emphasis is on establishing the skills and competencies of the mother tongue. At this stage, learning should be followed by continual diagnostic, formative assessment. The most important learning outcomes of this learning area are the acquisition of reading and writing skills, as well as the development of basic skills and competencies necessary for comprehension and interpretation of texts. Educating the reader is aided by the processing of children's literary works. During the next phase (Grades 3 and 4), awareness and the development of conscious use of language are priorities. It also should be noted that students' language skills are different, so there is a constant need for differentiated development that considers individuals' skills.

Framework Curricula and Local Curricula

According to the law, educational institutions prepare a local, school level curriculum and their own pedagogical program in addition to the framework curricula issued by the Ministry. To do this, the number of hours per learning area specified in the NAT must be followed.

[d] See https://net.jogtar.hu/jogszabaly?docid=A1200110.KOR for more information.

The framework curriculum for Grades 1 to 4 of primary school formulates the targets related to the teaching of the subject and distinguishes between core and supplementary material. At each grade level, the content goals are discussed for each subject, and detailed content proposals are formulated for the core material. In Grades 1 to 4, the basic aims of the framework curriculum are the same as the general principles and aims of the curriculum for Hungarian language and literature in the NCC. The subject of Hungarian language and literature plays a key role in education: It provides students with knowledge and helps them develop skills, abilities, thinking, and intellectual and moral heritage. Literary works are also important means of social and emotional education, shaping community and personality.

Goals and tasks of teaching language and literature in the first stage of primary education (Grades 1 to 4) include the following: Students should acquire a secure reading comprehension foundation appropriate to their age and keep their curiosity, openness, and interest. They should be taught to be readers who have different reading and interpretation strategies by the end of the first stage of primary education.

The framework curriculum of the Hungarian language and literature course contains suggested topics, the number of hours related to each topic, learning outcomes, development tasks and knowledge, concepts, and suggested activities. The number of hours for each topic contains minimum (80 percent) and maximum (100 percent) values. The minimum number of hours must be devoted to the core material.

The curriculum for Grades 1 to 4 builds on itself in accordance with the specifics of skills development. There is a separate curriculum for Grades 1 and 2 and for Grades 3 and 4, but both include the area of reading and comprehension, with recommended topics for grammar and spelling, the number of instruction hours, and expected learning outcomes detailed in each curriculum.

The recommended topics and number of instruction hours for reading and comprehension for Grades 3 and 4 are as follows:

- Speech and communication (22 hours)
- Tales, stories (22 hours)
- Legends and novels (30 hours)
- Poems, works of folk art (25 hours)
- Festivities, traditions, crafts (25 hours)
- Plants, animals, people, inventions (35 hours)
- Read Together! common reading (10 hours)

The recommended topics and number of instruction hours for grammar and spelling for Grades 3 and 4 are as follows:

- The building blocks of language: sounds/letters, syllables, words, separations, alphabetical order (13 hours)

- The steps of writing a text (18 hours)
- Word, word connection, sentence, text (23 hours)
- Vocabulary and suffix, word analysis (14 hours)
- Relationship between sounds and meaning, fixed word relations (12 hours)
- Names of living beings, physical and mental objects, lowercase and uppercase letters (18 hours)
- Words expressing properties (13 hours)
- Words expressing quantities (13 hours)
- Expression of actions, events in the past, present, future (22 hours)

Professional Development Requirements and Programs

The continual professional development of active teachers is important to maintain and renew their professional knowledge. The related expectations are regulated by a government decree[e] that states that in-service training is used to renew, expand, and develop the knowledge and skills needed to maintain direct contact with children and students in education work; to organize the activities of public educational institutions; and to provide pedagogical services, the operation of the examination system, the performance of measurement and evaluation tasks, and the management and leadership tasks of a public educational institution. The regulation also stipulates that teachers must participate in in-service training on the first working day in September every seventh year of their career until the year they turn 55. If the teacher has the same education and professional qualifications for more than seven years, he/she must participate in in-service training that renews and supplements the teacher's acquired knowledge and skills.

Further training every seven years—within the framework of one or more methods of continuing education—is carried out by participating in professional development trainings for at least 120 lessons and fulfilling the prescribed study requirements (each lesson lasts 45 minutes). Further training every seven years can be provided in other forms, too (for example, by teachers obtaining additional qualifications or qualifications that fall within the scope of vocational education), such as the following:

- A teacher professional examination
- A document certifying the completion of training that develops the teacher's professional readiness, abilities, and skills, resulting in at least 30 credit points
- A document certifying the participation in complex development projects implemented in cooperation with the education board, measurable in students' effectiveness

[e] Government Decree 277/1997 on in-service teacher training, the teacher examination, and the benefits and allowances for in-service training (XII. 22.)

- European Computer Driving License (ECDL): certificate of completion of ECDL, ECDL START, or ECDL Select
- A foreign language proficiency certificate attesting to at least level B1 language proficiency
- International trainings organized by the EU
- Distribution of innovative practice between educational institutions if at least 70 percent of the teachers are present

Up to 25 percent of teachers' professional development may be completed in other ways, e.g., through self-education, which can be achieved by observing the experiences of others (observing classes), or by trying out work forms, procedures, techniques, and methods in one's own practice (demonstration lesson).

Monitoring Student Progress in Reading

Since the 2001–2002 academic year, Hungary has administered the National Assessment of Basic Competencies (NABC) to examine student performance in mathematics and reading. Since 2004, all students in Grades 6, 8, and 10 have taken part. The assessment does not focus on textbook knowledge; instead, it measures whether students can use their skills and knowledge to solve everyday situations. The NABC benchmarks student performance along seven levels of competency. School level results are published on a website nine months after the assessment and are available to everyone, while schools and the organizations responsible for them receive additional data analysis software that enables them to study students' performance in more detail. Since the 2008 implementation of the assessment, it has been possible to track individual student development from Grades 6 to 10.

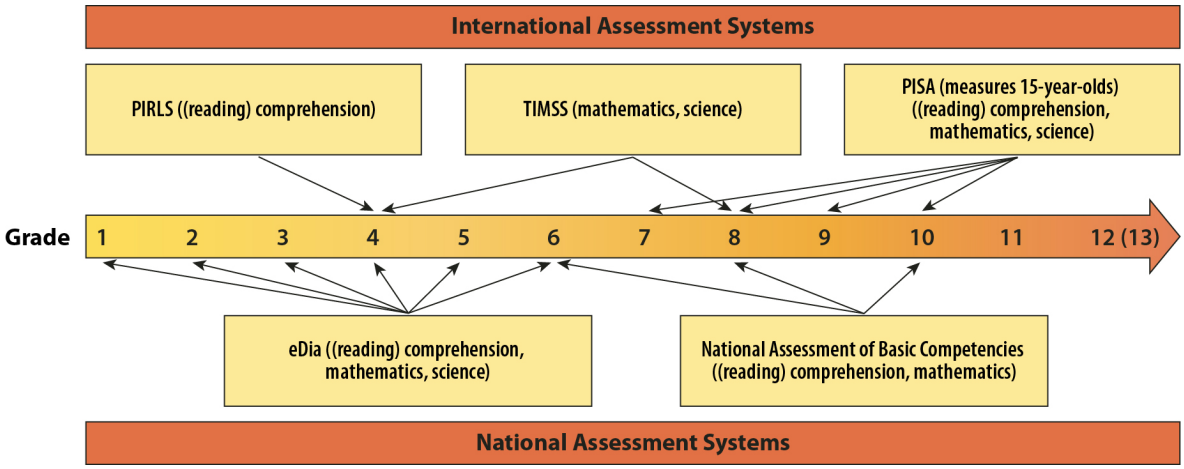
Other assessments take place in the first four grades. Two international assessments (PIRLS and TIMSS [the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study]) are administered in fourth grade in addition to diagnostic measurements. Some of these are still in the development stage, but there are also measurements that have been available for longer, such as the DIFER program package (the Diagnostic Development Test and Criteria-Oriented Development System) for 4- to 8-year-olds. DIFER helps students develop seven skills that are critical to school learning at the elementary stage. These include writing skills; the development of relational vocabulary; the reception of linguistic information; the development of basic numeracy skills; the acquisition of knowledge; and learning and thinking, among other things.

The University of Szeged recently developed the eDia system, which makes it possible to examine skill areas (see DIFER) and monitor student progress in a new, innovative, and more motivating environment for students. Within the framework of the eDia system, computer-based tests will be developed not only for the three main areas (mathematics, reading comprehension, natural science), but also for 16 additional areas (e.g., school readiness, musical skills, inductive

thinking, problem solving, creativity, Information and Communications Technology [ICT] literacy, motivation, health education, visual abilities[3]).

Once the system is finalized, personalized testing with objective benchmark feedback becomes feasible. The eDia system is an integral part of the Hungarian assessment system and can fill gaps in domestic and international research projects that mainly focus on the measurement of achievement and skills in older students (see Exhibit 2). Diagnostic measurements are complemented by other related developments, including projects that train teachers and schools and those that seek to facilitate the transition between school stages for students.

Exhibit 2: Pedagogical Evaluation in Hungary[4]



Special Reading Initiatives

Outstanding and underperforming students can get help in unified special education methodological institutions.[f] These are pedagogical professional service institutions in Hungary that have a duty to provide care for students living in their area of operation. Typical activities provided by these institutions include special education counseling, early development support, speech therapy care, and expert opinions (e.g., in relation to school maturity). The expert examination may be initiated ex officio, at the request of a parent, or on the initiative of an educational institution.

In addition to diagnostic measurements within the education system, some civil organizations operate outside official policy and the education system to promote reading and reading education. The best-known example is the Hungarian Reading Society, which operates as a nongovernmental organization with the aim of bringing together interdisciplinary activities. The Society organizes conferences for reading theorists and practitioners; provides expert support to small communities,

[f] 15/2013 (II. 26.) EMMI decree - the pedagogical professional service institutions. See https://net.jogtar.hu/jogszabaly?docid=a1300015.emm for more information.

schools, and libraries to form local reading companies; and organizes trainings and collaborations around reading pedagogy methods. At the initiative of the Society, Folk Tale Day has been organized annually since 2003 and has grown into a national movement. In 2010, the Reader-Companion program was launched to organize folktale readings for adults who do not have books or who are otherwise disadvantaged. Storytelling trainings, courses, and events are also popular.

Response to COVID-19 Pandemic

Teaching and Learning During the COVID-19 Pandemic

In the first academic year of the COVID-19 period (2019–2020), schools were closed in mid-March, after which both primary school students (including fourth grade students) and high school students remained at home until the end of the school year.

In high schools, the outgoing grade was based on only the written part of the graduation examinations. There was no central program, only a few nonbinding recommendations, so schools typically made decisions about how to offer remote instruction using digital tools. When the Digital Agenda was commissioned in the spring of 2020, most institutions and educators successfully switched to digitally supported education for core tasks, although in many cases it was challenging to select the right platforms and software, produce digital content, and connect with students.

In the 2020–2021 academic year, schools also closed for a few weeks. Teachers were offered vaccinations in order for schools to operate in person. Once schools were open for in-person attendance, parents were allowed to keep their child home but the child had to follow the curriculum. In May, secondary school students went back to school. In the last week of the school year, it was possible for schools to organize a catch-up week.

In the 2021–2022 academic year, no central measure regarding school closure was taken, and it was possible to vaccinate students. Nonetheless, in Grades 2 to 4, class level quarantine occurred at the beginning of the school year depending on the infection rate. Institution level rules exist in a significant portion of schools (e.g., indoor mask wearing for adults).

Special groups did not have specific COVID-19 measures in the first year but followed general measures (e.g., eating lunch in specific locations, wearing masks in the classroom). There were and are additional precautions in several schools (e.g., reorganizing lunch, wearing masks in the classroom).

In Hungary, the experience of digital out-of-classroom work has shown that, with the support of digital tools, the relationship between teachers and students can be maintained temporarily—as emergency education—during the period when the government closes schools to control the pandemic. At the same time, due to limited contact and lack of personal presence, the effectiveness of learning and learning support decreased in some cases, and home confinement and the deterioration of relationships placed a significant mental burden on both teachers and students.

This period was also stressful for parents. The blurring of parental and pedagogical roles has been a challenge, especially for parents of younger children.

Differences in the effectiveness of digitally supported education have developed among institutions, mainly due to differences in teachers' digital competencies and digital teaching experiences, as well as differences in students' family backgrounds and parental learning support.[5]

Impact of the Pandemic on Student Learning

In the 2019–2020 academic year, the impact of the pandemic varied greatly from school to school. Schools that could respond quickly were able to develop a sustainable daily teaching routine. In some schools, only the lesson was taught online; in others, physical education class also was held online. However, a number of schools could not pivot easily to remote instruction. This resulted in partial solutions (e.g., in several schools, education was reduced to three teaching days per week). Schools were able to prepare parents to help their children learn (e.g., with homework, dissertation, lecture), which was very much needed.

Zoom, Teams, Google Classroom, and Meets, among others, have been among the tools used in the Digital Agenda. Currently, there is little information on schools operating in more difficult circumstances.

After the pandemic, an analysis based on comparing results of the National Assessment of Basic Competencies (NABC) between 2019 and 2021 showed that the lack of attendance in education has caused a decrease in the performance of students in lower grades and lower performing students, especially with regard to mathematics. Closer analyses show that in all of the three grades that took the NABC (Grades 6, 8, and 10), there was a decrease in the performance of students in lower grades and lower performing students in both reading comprehension and especially mathematics. The findings also show that the rate of development from Grades 6 to 8 was much greater than from Grades 8 to 10. Eighth graders had significantly better comprehension and mathematical skills than sixth graders, but the difference in performance between eighth and tenth graders was much smaller.[6]

Policy and Practice Changes

To protect against the coronavirus, separate specifications for educational institutions regulated the tasks around each health-related step, as well as the order of the digital work schedule outside the classroom. It was possible to apply different methodological solutions at different times during the pandemic.

Protection against coronavirus can be divided into three distinct phases in terms of digitally supported education: traditional in-person education, blended education, and education outside the classroom. In the framework of traditional attendance education (in-person education), digital devices (e.g., projector, interactive panel, student response systems) are used to support classroom activities. In the case of blended education, also referred to as hybrid learning, institutions

alternately use in-person and digital work schedules. In the case of education outside the classroom (digital work schedule), the institution cannot be visited by students, and their study obligations must be fulfilled via digital means.[7]

Impact of the Pandemic on PIRLS 2021

As a result of the closures due to the pandemic, PIRLS data collection took place in fall 2021 instead of spring 2021, as schools were closed in the spring and only digital education was provided. However, during the fall curriculum, although COVID-19 was again present, in-person education was already mandatory for all schools (with the exception of classes taught from home due to quarantine). After consultation with the International Study Center, PIRLS 2021 data collection was carried out with fifth grade students. There were no major absences, and there were no classes lost from the sample due to quarantine.

Suggested Readings

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[7] Oktatási Hivatal. (2021). *Digitális pedagógiai módszertani ajánlások kézikönyve* [Handbook of digital pedagogical methodological recommendations].