

ICELAND

Overview

Iceland is the most sparsely populated country in Europe. Almost four-fifths of the country are uninhabited. The country has a written constitution and is a parliamentary democracy.

Icelandic is the national language. English and Danish are widely spoken and understood in Iceland. Literacy has been universal in Iceland since the end of the eighteenth century. In 1907 school attendance was made obligatory for all children aged 10-14. Before the age of ten they were generally taught at home. In 1946 compulsory school attendance was extended, and at present it covers the ages between 7 and 16. Those who wish to continue their education either go to various specialised schools or to secondary schools.

The Structure of Schooling

Under legislation that became effective in 1996, municipalities are responsible for the operation of elementary and lower-secondary schools, while the central government manages upper-secondary and tertiary education. Compulsory schooling extends to age 16, and elementary and lower-secondary education is ordinarily provided in the same school. There are many small schools; almost half have fewer than 100 pupils, and often have a single teacher responsible for all grades.

All pupils who complete compulsory schooling have a right to attend upper-secondary school. At this level, the program is differentiated on the basis of interests and career objectives.

The government issues National Curriculum Guidelines which provide detailed objectives as well as directions on how they should be carried out. The National Centre for Educational Materials develops and publishes educational materials for compulsory schools and distributes them to pupils free of charge. The Institute for Educational Research is responsible for organising, setting and grading the nationally co-ordinated examinations.

The Legal Framework

Schooling is subject to the *Compulsory School Act* of 1995 and the *Upper Secondary School Act* of 1996. The former provides that:

Local authorities are responsible for providing schooling for all children and youths 6 to 16 years of age as specifically provided for in this Act. Such schooling is called compulsory school (Icelandic *grunnskóli*). All children and youths of the age prescribed above must attend school, subject to the exemptions provided for in Articles 5, 7 and 8 (article 1).

Freedom to establish non-state schools

According to the *Compulsory School Act*,

The Minister of Education, Science and Culture may authorise compulsory schools or sections of compulsory schools . . . which are financed by individuals or institutions if they operate in accordance with a Regulation or organisational plan approved by the Ministry. Such schools shall abide by the same rules and be subject to the same supervision as other compulsory schools. Children attending such private schools are exempt [from public school attendance] as provided for

in Article 7, and the school director shall, before the commencement of each school year, send the [municipal] School Board concerned a list of pupils and notify this same party of any and all changes to the register of pupils without delay.

The *Upper Secondary School Act* of 1996 provides that “Private parties or organisations may establish and operate schools at upper secondary level. The Minister of Education, Science and Culture may authorise such schools by virtue of Acts or Regulations concerning upper secondary schools and their operations if they fulfil the conditions set in a Regulation” (article 41).

In 1998 approximately 6% of all publicly funded schools are private institutions provided and controlled by non-government bodies but receiving some financing from the public sector (www.eurydice.org).

Home schooling

There is a provision in the *Compulsory School Act* for parents, with approval, to educate their children at home, though the implication of the language seems to suggest that this is intended to respond to special circumstances rather than to constitute a general right to an alternative form of education.

School choice not limited by family income

The website of the Ministry of Education states that private schools receive public funding, but that there are few of them. The statutory language makes clear, however, that public funding is not an entitlement (*Compulsory School Act*, article 56).

The *Upper Secondary School Act* is somewhat more positive toward support of independent schools:

Private schools shall not be entitled to receive grants from public funds. *Alpingi* [the Parliament] shall determine the contribution to such schools from the National Treasury. Should private schools receive contributions from public funds the parties responsible for their operations shall conclude an agreement with the Minister concerning these allocations and school operations, administration and property, as appropriate (article 41).

School distinctiveness protected by law and policy

The staff of each school is required to develop an educational plan showing how it will apply the national curriculum guidelines to its local circumstances; this provides a certain scope for individualization. The plan must show how the schedule will be arranged to accommodate the required number of hours for each subject, how pupils will be assessed, and how the life of the school will be organized.

Distinctive character

The *Compulsory School Act* provides that

The Minister of Education, Science and Culture may, with the approval of a local authority, take the initiative in developmental and experimental work in compulsory schools. The Minister may also grant permission to local authorities and private schools to operate experimental schools or to experiment with specific aspects of school activities by exempting them from provisions of Acts and Regulations. Such exemptions could, for instance, concern studies, the school year, the organisation of instruction, number of instruction periods, etc. provided such does not conflict with Article 2 of this Act or limit the role of compulsory schooling as provided for therein.

Reasonable time limits shall always be stipulated for such experiments and provision made for their evaluation upon the conclusion of the experiment. The Minister of Education, Science and Culture may support experimental schools and special innovations to the extent permitted by the budget at any time (article 53).

Decisions about admitting pupils

Although students usually attend their local school, parents may choose a school outside their district. Children are admitted at the age of 6. All compulsory education is free.

Decisions about staff

Teachers in compulsory schools are employed by the municipalities.

Accountability for school quality

There is no national inspectorate. Supervision of education takes place at the local level, with the ultimate responsibility resting with the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture.

The legislation on compulsory education (1995) and on upper secondary education (1996) all compulsory and upper secondary schools requires each school to adopt a method of self-evaluation of instructional and administrative practices, communication and external relations. The national Ministry of Education reviews these self-evaluations every five years, and ensures that the requirements of the laws on compulsory education and the National Curriculum Guidelines are being met.

“Evaluation in compulsory school shall generally be carried out by the schools' teachers; pupils and their parents or guardians shall be provided with clear and comprehensible information on study progress. Teachers shall provide written reports at least at the close of each school year” (Compulsory School Act, article 45). Schools may give numerical or letter grades, or written assessments.

Assessment is carried out by teachers and is not standardized between schools. The National Curriculum Guide contains recommendations for assessment, progression and examinations. Students progress automatically through compulsory education. The only national examination takes place at the end of compulsory education and include Icelandic, mathematics, English and Danish.

The Compulsory School Act, article 56, provides that evaluation of pupils in independent schools shall be carried out by the same methods prescribed for public schools.

Teaching of values

The organization and work of the school is to be “guided by tolerance, Christian values, and democratic co-operation.” The *Compulsory School Act* includes, among the curriculum requirements, “Christian instruction, ethics and religion” (article 30).

References

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