



PHOTO: SIMON PAULIN/WAGEBANK SWEDEN/SE

Swedish law grants all children the same access to education. Nine years of schooling is mandatory, but most students also complete upper secondary school.

EQUAL ACCESS TO FREE EDUCATION

From the age of six, every child in Sweden has equal access to free education. The school system is regulated through the Swedish Education Act, which specifies the minimum amount of time to be spent on each subject and ensures a safe and friendly environment for students. The act also mandates nine years of school attendance for all children from the year they turn seven.

Pre-school

Förskola (pre-school) is provided by municipalities for children ages one to five. The amount of municipal subsidy for pre-school depends on the child's age and whether the parents work, study, are unemployed or on parental leave for other children.

Swedish pre-school emphasises the importance of play in a child's development, with a curriculum aiming to ensure children's individual needs and interests. Gender-aware education is increasingly common, striving to provide children with the same opportunities in life regardless of gender.

A year before the first year

All children are guaranteed a place in a one-year *förskoleklass* (pre-school year) starting in the fall term of the year they turn six until they start compulsory schooling.

This year is designed to stimulate each child's development and learning, and provide a platform for their future schooling. Although *förskoleklass* is non-compulsory, almost all children in Sweden attend it.

Compulsory schooling

Swedish compulsory schooling consists of three stages: *lågstadiet* (years 1–3), followed by *mellanstadiet* (years 4–6) and then *högstadiet* (years 7–9). Children between ages 6 and 13 are also offered out-of-school care before and after school hours.

Compulsory education also includes *sameskolor* (Sami schools) for children of the indigenous Sami people.

Upper secondary school

Gymnasium (upper secondary school or high school, years 10–12) is optional. There are 18 regular national programmes of 3 years to choose from, 6 of which are pre-

paratory for higher education such as university, and 12 of which are vocational.

While entrance requirements vary between programmes, all of them demand students to have passing grades in Swedish, English and mathematics from their final year of compulsory schooling.

In 2014, 13 per cent of Swedish 9-year students did not have the grades to qualify for a national programme; however, instead of national programmes, these students have five so-called introductory programmes to choose from. From these introductory programmes, students can then move on to a national programme.

There are also upper secondary schools for people with intellectual disabilities as well as programme variations targeting for example athletes.

In 2014, roughly 88 per cent of upper secondary students received a leaving qualification (diploma). ■

THE NATIONAL AGENCY FOR EDUCATION

The National Agency for Education (*Skolverket*) is the central administrative authority in charge of attaining the national goals set out by the Swedish Government and Parliament.

Its framework includes the Education Act and national curricula that specifies the minimum amount of time to be spent on each subject in compulsory school. This covers subjects that are deemed particularly necessary in life, such as Swedish, English, mathematics, science, social studies, religious studies, arts and crafts, physical education and health.

www.skolverket.se

THREE OTHER AGENCIES

THE NATIONAL AGENCY FOR SPECIAL NEEDS EDUCATION AND SCHOOLS

Provides children, young people and adults with disabilities with the same opportunities for development and education that everyone in society is entitled to.

www.spsm.se

THE SWEDISH NATIONAL AGENCY FOR HIGHER VOCATIONAL EDUCATION

Analyses labour market demands for workforce education, decides what programmes are to be included in higher vocational education and allocates public funding to education providers. The agency also assesses and inspects the quality and results of this education.

www.myh.se

THE SAMI SCHOOL BOARD

Is an administrative agency for public Sami schools and their affiliated activities, which are governed by the Sami School Ordinance.

www.sameskolstyrelsen.se



PHOTO: LENA GRANFELT/IMAGEBANK SWEDEN/SE

Several reforms have been implemented in Sweden over the last few years, aimed at improving student results.

BENCHMARKING INTERNATIONALLY

The quality of Swedish education has been keenly debated over the past decade, following declining results among Swedish students in international comparisons. Sweden has moved to improve performances and to raise the status of the teaching profession for long-term benefits.

International studies such as Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) and Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) have indicated a deteriorating performance among Swedish children in recent years.

Most recently, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), which is behind the PISA assessment, followed up on the trends in May 2015 with a detailed review of Sweden's educational quality.

The study, done on the request of the Swedish Government, confirms that Sweden needs to improve the quality of education and in particular raise the performance level of students in reading, math and science. This can be seen in light of Sweden investing a larger share of its GDP on education (6.8 per cent) compared with the OECD average (5.6 per cent) in 2014.

Recent reforms

The relevance of the PISA studies has been questioned by educators and policy makers both in Sweden and abroad. Critics of the standardised tests argue that the studies are too focused on math

and science, and altogether exclude areas of education that stimulate personal growth, morality and creativity.

Nevertheless, while the discussion between critics and defenders of PISA continues, the Swedish Government is looking for ways to improve the education system. It has looked particularly at neighbours Finland but also at South Korea, where teachers' salaries are higher, and at the Netherlands, where class sizes are typically smaller.

Several reforms have been implemented over the last few years, aimed at improving student results and raising the status of the teaching profession:

New education act

The new Swedish Education Act of 2011 contains basic principles and provisions for compulsory and further education, pre-school, pre-school year, out-of-school care and adult education. It promotes greater oversight, freedom of choice, and student safety and security.

New curricula

New consolidated curricula for compulsory schools for all students, Sami schools, ►

DID YOU KNOW?



PHOTO: ELISABETH EDÉN

Around 94 per cent of Sweden's students say they have access to internet at school.

- In Sweden, 87 per cent of adults aged 25–64 have earned the equivalent of an upper secondary school degree, higher than the OECD average of 75 per cent.
- Sweden's education is mainly financed by municipal taxes, but there is also a general government grant linked to a special equalisation system to create equal conditions for all municipalities.
- Sweden was the first country in the world to prohibit corporal punishment of children, in 1979. It was also one of the first countries to sign the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, in 1990.

► special schools and upper secondary schools came into force 1 July 2011. The curricula contain new general goals, guidelines and syllabuses. The pre-school curriculum includes clearer goals for children's linguistic and communicative development and for science and technology. Mandatory national subject tests are held in years 3, 6 and 9 of compulsory school to assess student progress. There are also new qualification requirements for areas including upper secondary school studies.

New grading system

The old Swedish system with four grades from Pass with Special Distinction (MVG) down to Did Not Pass (IG) was replaced

by a new grading scale with six grades from A to F in 2011. A to E are passing grades, with F as a failing grade. Grades are assigned starting in year 6. The new grading system is very similar to the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS), the standard grading system for higher education in Europe.

Teacher certification

As of 1 December 2013, professional certification is required for school and pre-school teachers on permanent contracts. The decision, a milestone in Swedish education policy, aims to raise the status of the teaching profession, support professional development and thus increase quality in education. ■

IT – IMPORTANT TO LEARNING

Under the curriculum for compulsory education, schools are responsible for ensuring that every student attending compulsory school is able to use modern technology as a tool in searching for knowledge, communication, creativity and learning. There is a similar curriculum for upper secondary schools.

For *mellanstadiet* (years 4–6), 17 per cent of students have access to their own computer at school and 71 per cent have access to their own computer

at home. For students at *högstadiet* (years 7–9), 34 per cent have access at school and 87 per cent at home. At upper secondary level (year 10–12), 94 per cent of students have access to their own computer either at school or at home.

In addition, a large number of students are also users of smart phones and tablets. Around 94 per cent of all school-children in Sweden say they have access to internet at school. ■

CHILDREN'S RIGHTS

The Swedish Education Act, along with the Swedish Discrimination Act, strives to protect children and students from discrimination and degrading treatment.

In essence, the principals of pre-schools, schools and adult education programmes are responsible for enforcing prohibitions against discrimination and degrading behaviour, and for promoting equal treatment.

In 2006, Sweden appointed its first Child and School Student Representative, who is tasked with providing information about the discrimination act, helping schools prevent bullying,

overseeing schools' efforts and representing students who have been bullied. The representative is a part of the Swedish Schools Inspectorate, the government agency tasked with school inspections.

Since this position was the only one of its type in the world, it has attracted frequent international visits, raising hopes that similar positions will be introduced in other countries.

All students have access to a school doctor, school nurse, psychologist and school welfare officer at no cost. ■ www.skolinspektionen.se www.do.se



PHOTO: EMELIE ASPLUND/IMAGEBANK SWEDENSE

The Swedish Education Act aims to protect all children from discrimination at school.

HISTORY

- **1842** Compulsory elementary schooling is introduced in Sweden.
- **1950** Co-educational compulsory education is launched, with nine years of compulsory education.
- **1962** The school system gets its current name, *grundskola*. The first national school curriculum is established in Sweden.
- **1966** The Ministry of Education assumes responsibility for pre-schools.
- **1968** The Special Service Act is implemented, ensuring that all children are entitled to education by also including children with intellectual disabilities.
- **1992** Independent school reform so that independent schools and municipal schools follow the same rules.
- **1994** Curricula are introduced that interpret the mission of Swedish schools in a radically different way. Changes include outlining educational responsibility, teaching methods, non-traditional teacher roles and teaching materials.
- **1997** Under the Swedish Education Act, all students in compulsory education are provided with free lunches.
- **1998** Pre-schools get their own national curriculum.
- **1998** Six-year-olds are given the opportunity to attend *förskoleklass* (pre-school year) at school.
- **2006** The new Act Prohibiting Discrimination and Other Degrading Treatment of Children and School Students is introduced.
- **2011** A raft of school reforms are introduced, including earlier grading and a new system of teacher education.
- **2013** Professional certification is required for school and pre-school teachers on permanent contracts.



PHOTO: KIM WENDT/ROSAN BOSCH STUDIO

Vittra Södermalm in central Stockholm is one of many charter schools in the Swedish capital. Charter schools attract around a fourth of all Sweden's upper secondary students today.

CHARTER SCHOOLS

The number of independent schools with public funding, so-called charter schools, is growing in Sweden. Following a law change in the 1990s, parents and their children can choose among tuition-free schools, whether municipal or private.

Although private schools have been in existence for as long as there has been compulsory education in Sweden, they were not a wide-spread competitive alternative to municipal schools until the 1992 law provided them with public funding.

These publicly funded non-municipal schools are called *friskola* (charter school) to differentiate them from tuition-based private schools (of which there are only a handful left in Sweden).

Same rules apply

In Sweden, charter schools must be approved by the Schools Inspectorate and follow the national curricula and syllabuses, just like regular municipal schools.

In 2014, around 17 per cent of compulsory schools and 50 per cent of upper secondary schools were charter schools and they attracted close to 14 per cent of all compulsory school students and 26 per cent of all upper secondary school students.

Sweden has its share of scepticism about running schools for profit. Fears include that profits will take precedence over quality. Advocates of independent schools, on the other hand, note the many positive results found in statistical surveys. One is that parents with children who attend independent schools are more satisfied than those with children in municipal schools. ■

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