

Swedish education

Education has been keenly debated in Sweden during the past decade. This is partly due to changes in the organization of schools and in the national curriculum. But the school system is also affected by issues such as immigration and integration. The discussion is both political and educational and goes to the root of society and democracy.

Swedish schools and pre-schools have a democratic mission. This is partly a matter of developing students' knowledge of democracy and upholding basic educational values, and partly a matter of helping to raise students as democratic citizens. The mission upholds the rights of students – as well as of staff – to influence day-to-day education, from what is taught in the classroom to the school environment.

In line with this work, Parliament unveiled a national strategy in 1999 to anchor the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, otherwise known as the Child Convention, with state and municipal authorities and county councils.

Key dates

- 1842: Compulsory elementary schooling is introduced in Sweden.
- 1950: Mixed compulsory schooling goes on trial, with a nine-year school duty.
- 1962: The school system gets its current name, *grundskola* or nine-year compulsory education.
- 1962: The first national Swedish school curriculum is established.
- 1968: The Special Service Act was implemented, which ensured all children's right to education by also including children with intellectual disabilities.

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Educational bodies

The Parliament, *Riksdagen*, and the Ministry of Education and Research, *Utbildningsdepartementet*, formulates Swedish pre-school and school goals. The education act dictates the fundamental goals for all schools. The national curricula formulate basic values and an educational philosophy and aims to question and redefine terms like “knowledge”. National syllabuses dictate what is taught in schools.

The Swedish National Agency for Education, *Skolverket*, is responsible for making sure national objectives and guidelines are followed through regular nationwide inspections. This authority continuously updates and develops syllabuses and grade criteria.

The Swedish National Agency for School Improvement, *Myndigheten för skolutveckling*, is charged with ensuring the standard of schools around the country. Improving the educational conditions for children and teenagers in environments characterized by social and ethnic diversity is a priority.

State and municipalities

In 1991, the government handed over much of the responsibility for schools to the municipalities. A long tradition of regulating schools gave way to more goal- and result-based methods.

In 1994, curricula were introduced that interpreted the mission of Swedish schools in a radically different way. The changes outlined, among other things, educational responsibility, teaching methods, non-traditional teacher roles and teaching materials. A more complex idea of what constitutes knowledge was also formulated.



The 9-year compulsory school program is for all children between the ages of 7–16 years.
Photo: www.imagebank.se Felix Oppenheim/Bildhuset

Starting with the national curricula for pre-school, compulsory school and high school (upper secondary school) municipalities are responsible for shaping their own curricula. The curricula should give schools a certain amount of freedom to develop their own profile.

Compulsory schooling includes compulsory school, sami school, special school (*specialskola*), and programs for pupils with intellectual disabilities (*särskola*).

Non-compulsory schooling includes the pre-school class, high school for students with intellectual disabilities, municipal adult education, and adult education for adults with intellectual disabilities.

Pre-school

Pre-schools are open to children from one to five years of age. Municipalities have an obligation to provide pre-schooling for children whose parents work or study. Pre-schools are, with the exception of bank holidays, open all year round, five days a week. Children whose parents are unemployed or on parental leave (with younger siblings) are entitled to at least 15 hours of pre-school per week. The Swedish tradition of pre-school emphasizes the importance of play in the development and learning process. In the pre-school curriculum the interests and needs of the child are key to their education.

Parents or guardians may opt to place their children in family day-care homes, where a family child minder receives children in their own home. The open pre-school is another form of pre-school where parents/guardians or child minders of young children, together with trained pre-school staff, educate children. No advance registration is required at open pre-school.

In the autumn of 2005, 77.3 percent of all children between the ages of one and five were registered in pre-school and 6.1 percent in family day-care homes. Municipalities run most pre-schools, but 25 percent are run as independent schools, of which just under half are parent co-operatives. Children at independent

pre-schools make up 16.7 percent of pre-school children. Since July 2006, independent pre-schools do not require a permit from the Swedish National Agency for Education.

Since 2005, many municipalities have fixed the monthly fee for these schools at no more than three, two and one percent, respectively, of parents'/guardians' monthly income for the first, second and third child, respectively. If a child attends pre-school less than 15 hours per week, it is free of charge.

Compulsory education

All children between the ages of seven and sixteen are required by law to attend school, and the Swedish Education Act states that all children and youth shall have equal access to education, regardless of gender, where they live or social or economic factors. All education in the public school system is free of charge.

Today almost all children attend non-compulsory pre-school class at the age of six, which is supposed to prepare children for compulsory school. In practice this means ten years' schooling in total. A national timetable specifies the minimum amount of time to be spent on each subject. This covers Swedish (alternatively Swedish as a second language), English, mathematics, natural sciences, social studies, religious studies, arts and crafts, physical education and health. Individual schools can, within given frameworks, develop a special profile by allocating more time to certain subjects.

Students, teachers and parents/guardians meet for regular in-depth talks to evaluate the progress made by children in their learning and development. Official grades are not given until the autumn term of year eight, when a three-grade system is used: C/pass (*G/ godkänd*), B/merit (*VG/väl godkänd*) and A/distinction (*MVG/mycket väl godkänd*). The Swedish National Agency for Education now recommends formal school reports from year five.

To get into high school a pass is needed in Swedish, mathematics and English; 89.2 percent of students meet this requirement.

The school year is divided into two terms. The autumn term begins around mid-August and runs until the end of December, with a one-week break. The spring term starts in the second week of January and runs until the second week of June, with one week off in February and one around Easter, in March-April. A regular school week is five days long, Monday to Friday.

Pre- and after-school care

Children between six and twelve years of age, in pre-school class or compulsory school, are offered day care before and after school hours. Day care can be an

High school national programs

The Arts Program

- Art and Design
- Dance
- Music
- Theater

The Business and Administration Program

- Commerce and service
- Tourism and travel

The Child and Recreation Program

- Recreation
- Pedagogic and social activities

The Construction Program

- Construction
- Building
- Painting
- Sheet metal working

The Electricity Program

- Automation
- Electronics
- Electrical engineering
- Computer technology

The Energy Program

- Operations and maintenance
- Marine technology
- Heating, ventilation, sanitation and refrigeration

The Food Program

The Handicraft Program

The Health Care Program

The Hotel and Restaurant Program

- Hotels
- Restaurant and meal services

The Industry Program

The Media Program

- Media production
- Printing

The Natural Resource Use Program

The Natural Science Program

- Natural sciences
- Mathematics and computer science
- Environmental studies

The Social Science Program

- Economics
- Culture
- Social Sciences
- Languages

The Technology Program

The Vehicle Program

- Aircraft
- Coach work
- Machine and lorry technology
- Cars
- Transport

Specially designed programs

Individual programs

All programs comprise eight core subjects: Swedish (alternatively Swedish as a second language), English, mathematics, natural science, social studies, religious studies, arts and crafts, physical education and health.

Pre-school – key dates

- 1996: The Ministry of Education takes responsibility for pre-schools.
- 1998: Pre-schools get their own national curriculum.
- 1998: Six-year-olds are given the opportunity to attend pre-school classes in school.

after-school center, a family day-care home or an open after-school program.

Day-care fees for school children must not exceed two percent of parents'/guardians' gross income.

High school

High school is non-compulsory and free of charge. Students who have finished secondary school with at least a pass in Swedish, mathematics and English are entitled to a place at high school. Around 98 percent of students who finish compulsory school start high school.

High school programs run for three years. Students can choose from 17 different programs with general qualifications to study at colleges and universities.

For students who fail to qualify for a high school education, individual programs can be tailored to their needs. The aim is that the student should be able to transfer to one of the national programs in due course.

On July 1, 2007 the reform Knowledge and Quality – Eleven Steps for the Development of High School comes into effect, creating a clearer connection between career preparation programs and work. The direction of each program should also be reflected in subjects such as Swedish, English and mathematics. In line with the changes, history is to become a core subject in high school education.

Independent schools and funding

During the 1990s, the terms “school choice” and “independent schools” (in the context of pre-school, compulsory school and high school) were established and schools now operate on an open market. Independent schools are growing in number and a choice of schools is today seen as a right.

Each child is financially allocated an education, from pre-school up to and

including high school. In this way the Swedish government supports the establishment of independent schools to a unique extent. Independent schools must be approved by the Swedish National Agency for Education and follow the national curricula and syllabuses.

In the autumn of 2005, 7.4 percent of compulsory school students and 13.1 percent of high school students attended independent schools.

There are also a small number of international schools whose curricula follow those of other countries. These schools are part-funded by the Swedish government, and are mainly aimed at the children of foreign nationals who are in Sweden for a limited time.

Special support

Students who need special support generally attend ordinary classes in nine-year compulsory school and high school. Students with intellectual disabilities are offered a special program. They can either be included in an ordinary group or form a special group that is often placed in the ordinary school.



Students can choose from 17 national 3-year high school programs. Photo: Mascot

Links

Ministry of Education and Research,
Utbildningsdepartementet,
www.sweden.gov.se

Swedish National Agency for Education,
Skolverket,
www.skolverket.se/sb/d/190

Swedish National Agency for School Improvement,
Myndigheten för skolutveckling,
www.skolverket.se/in_english

The Swedish Institute for Special Needs Education,
Specialpedagogiska institutet,
www.sit.se/net/Specialpedagogik/In+English

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