

4. THE SCHOOL ENVIRONMENT

How long do students spend in the classroom?

- In OECD countries, 7-8 year-olds receive 759 hours per year of compulsory instruction; the time devoted to compulsory instruction is 43 hours longer for 9-11 year-olds and 127 hours longer for 12-14 year-olds.
- The teaching of reading, writing and literature, mathematics and science accounts for 48% of compulsory instruction time for 9-11 year-olds in OECD countries, and 40% for 12-14 year-olds.
- The proportion of compulsory instruction time for 9-11 year-olds devoted to reading, writing and literature ranges from 16% in Iceland to at least 30% in France, Mexico and the Netherlands.

Significance

This spread examines the amount of time students spend in formal education between the ages of 7 and 15. The choices that countries make about how much time should be devoted to education and which subjects should be compulsory reflect national education priorities. Since a large part of public investment in education goes to instruction time in formal classroom settings, the length of time students spend in school is an important factor in determining the amount of funding that should be devoted to education.

Findings

In OECD countries, the total number of instruction hours that students are intended to receive (including both compulsory and non-compulsory parts) between the ages of 7 and 14 averages 6 777 hours. However, formal requirements range from fewer than 4 715 hours in Poland to over 8 000 hours in Italy and Israel.

For 9-11 year-olds in OECD countries, 48% of the compulsory curriculum is devoted to three basic subject areas: reading, writing and literature (23%), mathematics (16%) and science (9%). But there is great variation among countries in the percentage of class time devoted to these subjects. Reading, writing and literature, for example, accounts for 16% of instruction time in Iceland, compared with 30% or more in France, Mexico and the Netherlands. There are also great differences in the time spent learning modern foreign languages. In England, Japan, Mexico and the Netherlands, it accounts for 3% or less of instruction time, which rises to 10% in Germany, Greece, Italy, Spain and Estonia, Israel and Slovenia, and to 25% in Luxembourg.

For 12-14 year-olds in OECD countries, an average of 40% of the compulsory curriculum is devoted to three subjects: reading, writing and literature (16%), mathematics (13%) and science (12%). Compared with 9-11 year-olds, a relatively larger part of the curriculum for this older age group is devoted to social studies (12%) and modern foreign languages (13%).

Most OECD countries define a specific number of hours for compulsory instruction. Within that part of the curriculum, students have varying degrees of freedom to choose the subjects they want to learn. Australia offers the greatest degree of flexibility in the compulsory curriculum: 57% of that curriculum can be shaped by students themselves among 9-11 year-olds and 41% among 12-14 year-olds.

Definitions

Data on teaching time distinguish between “compulsory” and “intended” teaching time. Compulsory teaching time refers to the minimum amount of teaching that schools are expected to provide. Intended instruction time is an estimate of the number of hours during which students are taught both compulsory and non-compulsory parts of the curriculum. It does not, however, indicate the quality of the education provided nor the level or quality of the human and material resources involved. Data on instruction time are from the 2009 OECD-INES Survey on Teachers and the Curriculum and refer to the 2007-08 school year.

Information on data for Israel:
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/888932315602>.

Going further

For additional material, notes and a full explanation of sourcing and methodologies, see *Education at a Glance 2010* (Indicator D1).

Areas covered include:

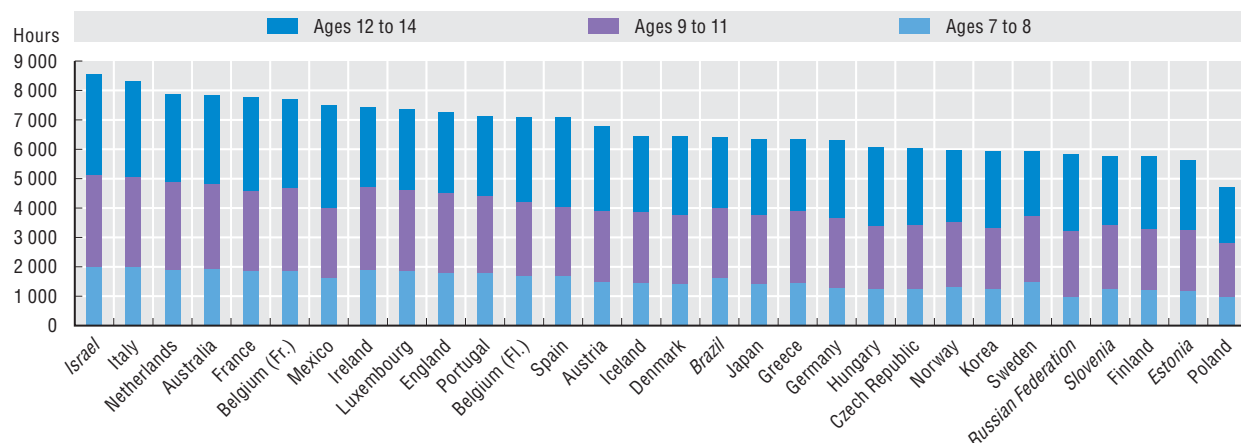
- Compulsory and intended instruction time in public institutions.
- Instruction time per subject.

Further reading from OECD

21st Century Learning Environments (2006).

Figure 4.1. Total number of instruction hours in public institutions, 2008

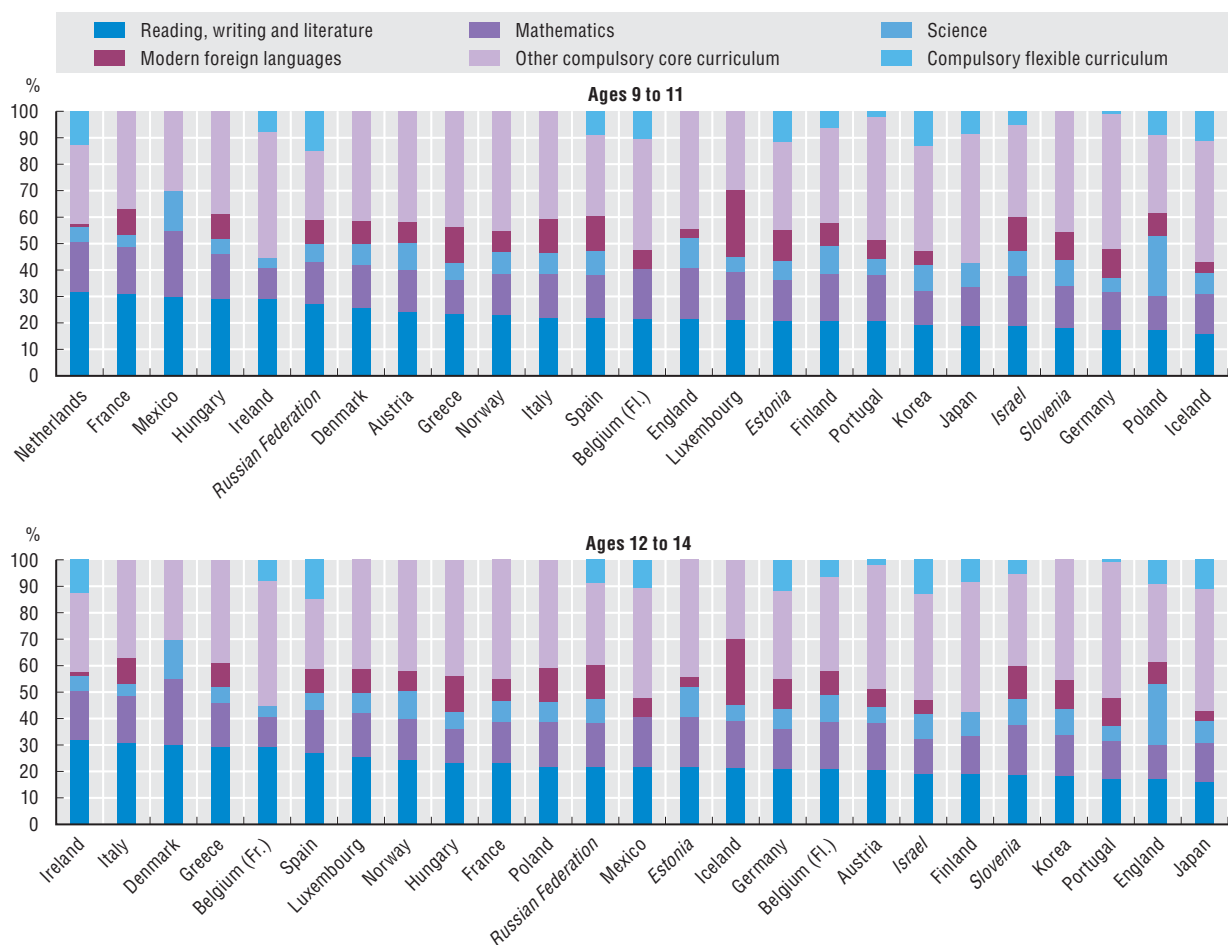
This figure shows the hours of intended instruction that students receive between ages 7 and 14 (this represents the compulsory instruction time public schools are required to deliver as well as the time devoted to non-compulsory instruction).



Source: OECD (2010), *Education at a Glance 2010*, Table D1.1, available at <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/888932310472>.

Figure 4.2. Instruction time by subject, 2008

These figures show the percentage of compulsory instruction time devoted to each subject.



Source: OECD (2010), *Education at a Glance 2010*, Tables D1.2a and D1.2b, available at <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/888932310472>.



From:
Highlights from Education at a Glance 2010

Access the complete publication at:
https://doi.org/10.1787/eag_highlights-2010-en

Please cite this chapter as:

OECD (2010), "How long do students spend in the classroom?", in *Highlights from Education at a Glance 2010*, OECD Publishing, Paris.

DOI: https://doi.org/10.1787/eag_highlights-2010-29-en

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