4. THE SCHOOL ENVIRONMENT

How long do students spend in the classroom?

- In OECD countries, 7-8 year-olds receive 770 hours per year of compulsory instruction; 9-11 year-olds receive an additional 40 hours, and 12-14 year-olds an additional 126 hours.
- The teaching of reading, writing and literature, mathematics and science accounts for nearly 50% of compulsory instruction time for 9-11 year-old students in OECD countries, and 40% for 12-14 year-olds.
- There are big differences among OECD countries in the proportion of compulsory education for 9-11 year-olds that is devoted to reading and writing.

Significance

This indicator 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 6 907 hours. However, formal requirements range from fewer than 6 000 hours in Finland, Korea, Norway and Sweden to over 8 000 hours in Italy and the Netherlands.

In OECD countries, 9-11 year-olds spend an average of nearly half the compulsory curriculum on 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 and writing, for example, accounts for 13% or less of instruction time in Australia, for example, 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 Australia, England, Japan, Mexico and the Netherlands, 1% or less of instruction time for 9-11 year-old students is spent on

learning other languages, while the same age group in the Czech Republic, Luxembourg, Portugal, Spain and Sweden spend 10% or more of their time in school learning other languages.

On average among OECD countries, 40% of the compulsory curriculum is devoted to reading, writing and literature for 12-14 year-olds. However, a relatively larger part of the curriculum is devoted to social studies and modern foreign languages.

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 for 9-11 year-olds: up to 59% of that curriculum can be shaped by the students themselves.

Definitions

Data on teaching time distinguish between “compulsory” and “intended” teaching time. Compulsory teaching time refers to the minimum amount of teaching 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 2007 OECD-INES Survey on Teachers and the Curriculum and refer to the 2005-06 school year.

Going further

For additional material, notes and a full explanation of sourcing and methodologies, see *Education at a Glance 2008* (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).

4. THE SCHOOL ENVIRONMENT

How long do students spend in the classroom?

Figure 4.1. **Total number of instruction hours in public institutions, 2006**

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

Source: OECD (2008), *Education at a Glance 2008*, Table D1.1, available at <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/402183135853>.

Figure 4.2. **Instruction time by subject, 2006**

This figure shows the percentage of compulsory instruction time devoted to each subject.

Source: OECD (2008), *Education at a Glance 2008*, Tables D1.2a and D1.2b, available at <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/402183135853>.

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