



EUROPEAN AGENCY
for Special Needs and Inclusive Education



RAISING THE ACHIEVEMENT
OF ALL LEARNERS IN INCLUSIVE EDUCATION

RAISING THE ACHIEVEMENT OF ALL LEARNERS IN INCLUSIVE EDUCATION

Country Report: Iceland



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ICELAND COUNTRY REPORT

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1. What reference is made to raising achievement in national policies? How is raising achievement defined?

The national 2011 [Curriculum Guide for Pre-schools, Compulsory Schools and Upper-secondary Schools](#) contains the framework and conditions for learning and teaching. It is based on the principles of existing laws, regulations and international conventions.

Six fundamental pillars have been developed within this framework:

1. Literacy
2. Sustainability
3. Health and welfare
4. Democracy and human rights
5. Equality
6. Creativity.

These form the essence of educational policy and include the working methods, content and learning environment at every educational level. They enable important continuity across the Icelandic education system.

Each of the fundamental pillars derives from laws on pre-primary, compulsory and upper-secondary education. They also reference other laws which include legal provisions for education and teaching in the school system, such as act no. 10/2008 on the Equal Status and Equal Rights of Women and Men. In addition, various government policy issues are taken into account, for example, important policy issues on sustainability are published in [Welfare for the Future](#).

The fundamental pillars are based on the view, which is appearing in school legislation, that both social objectives and individual educational objectives should be achieved. They are socially-orientated as they promote increased equality and democracy. They ensure well-educated and healthy citizens, who both participate in and change and improve society.

One of the primary objectives of compulsory education from first to last grade is the overall development and general education of the individual. Each learner is preparing for lifelong education. From the beginning of compulsory education, the competence that is aimed for at graduation is defined. This lays the foundation for integral general education.



Competence involves the learner and is a learner-orientated implementation of the fundamental pillars. It emphasises:

- knowledge and the accumulation of facts, principles, theories and methods;
- skills and competence;
- logical thinking;
- the ability to use methods and practices;
- the ability to use knowledge and skills.

Central to the reform agenda in Iceland is the emphasis on strengthening the teaching profession. Since 2008, a five-year master's degree has been required to become a teacher in Iceland. The main objective is to improve teacher professionalism in Iceland. Ultimately, however, it is the leadership, professional capabilities and co-operation of teachers, administrators and everyone involved in education that will bring forth and sustain positive changes.

2. What national policies specifically target raising achievement?

The Icelandic Ministry of Education, Science and Culture published a [White Paper on education reform](#) in June 2014. It identifies where to focus efforts to strengthen the education system and which strategies are most likely to provide learners with the education mandated by law and by the National Curriculum Guides. Work on the White Paper was based on international studies of education reform. Attempts have been made to draw from the experience of the nations that perform strongest in international comparisons.

In the policy, the Ministry follows the example of other countries that have set a reform agenda and have successfully improved the performance of their learners. Behind the educational policies of these countries is a growing body of international research and comparative studies.

The two principal goals for education reform in Iceland up to 2018 are to improve reading performance and the progress of upper-secondary school learners:

- 90% of compulsory school learners to meet minimum reading standards – up from 79% currently. One measure proposed to reach this goal is an increase in the time allocated to Icelandic in the National Curriculum Guide for compulsory schools. Standards should be developed for the reading proficiency levels to be attained by learners at each level of compulsory education. Reading literacy should be measured regularly from pre-primary to the end of compulsory education.
- 60% of upper-secondary learners to graduate on time – up from 44% currently. Programme length will be altered, with studies leading to final examinations being shortened. Drop-out will be tackled and vocational education restructured. A standard duration of three years is proposed for programmes leading to the matriculation examination. Ways of shortening vocational programmes are to be



investigated. Risk factors influencing early school leaving will be screened among all upper-secondary learners.

- Formal consultation on occupational education between the Ministry and the labour market.
- Vocational education is to be reviewed, with the aim of simplifying basic programmes and developing a tertiary vocational education level.

One of the measures proposed to achieve the first objective is to enhance and increase the teaching of Icelandic in compulsory education (ages 6 to 16). Criteria will be developed for reading skills to be acquired by learners at each stage of compulsory education. Reading and literacy will be measured regularly from pre-primary school to the end of compulsory education (primary and lower-secondary education). Immigrant learners will receive additional support to enable them to reach the same proficiency in reading comprehension as other learners. Teachers are to receive sufficient in-service training and support. All pre-primary and compulsory schools should adopt a literacy policy in line with the 2013 National Curriculum Guide and the school policy adopted by each municipality. Learners will be encouraged to read for pleasure outside of school, and parents will be empowered to arouse interest in reading and to support their children.

To tackle the high drop-out rate and its consequences, the Icelandic government has taken measures with recent reforms throughout the education system. These include reforms in teacher education, compulsory and upper-secondary education (2008) and the development of a new national curriculum and a national qualifications framework. Iceland has worked on the implementation of these reforms and is continuously strengthening upper-secondary education while focusing on improving and investing in pre-primary and compulsory education. Preventing drop-out and encouraging successful upper-secondary completion is important for economic growth and social development.

In recent years, the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, in partnership with upper-secondary schools, has promoted efforts to reduce drop-out. In 2011, a report compiled by Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) experts identified the strengths and weaknesses of the Icelandic education system when it comes to combatting drop-out rates. Subsequently, the Ministry set up a working group to oversee continuing work on these issues. The OECD analysis is used as a framework for this project, complementing existing research and the experience of European Union (EU) countries.

At the same time, the Ministry participates in the 'Education is a working process' project. This is a collaboration between Education and Labour partners which has significantly reduced the drop-out of upper-secondary learners. The project requests information about the reasons for the drop-out from all upper-secondary schools, and screens for risk factors in the schools with the highest drop-out rates. The screening included 59% of learners who graduated from compulsory school in 2013 and began their upper-secondary education the same year. A project manager was recently appointed to handle policy-making tasks in education and career counselling in upper and lower-secondary schools, with a view to reducing drop-out.

Iceland participated in the EU working group on Early School Leaving (ESL). The working group, which was active for two years, completed its work and submitted a report in



November 2013. The lessons learned from this group have been taken into account in the Ministry's work to prevent drop-out.

3. What information/data are collected at national level on attainment and achievement?

- **National tests in 4th, 7th and 9th grades.** Nationally co-ordinated examinations in Icelandic and mathematics are held in the 4th and 7th grades. There are also nationally co-ordinated examinations in the 10th grade in Icelandic, English and mathematics, although since 2017 these tests take place in the 9th grade. These examinations primarily indicate learners' position. They are prepared, graded and organised by the [Directorate of Education](#). The results of the national co-ordinated examinations are distributed: learners receive their own marks and the mean figures are distributed to the public for each examination at every compulsory school in the country, as well as for each region and region-wide.
- **Data collated by [Statistics Iceland](#),** including data regarding hours in special education and the number of school days or time used for individual subject areas.
- **PISA tests for 15-year-old learners every three years.** Since 2000, Iceland has taken part in the OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) study. In 2009, the country took part in the Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS). Iceland also regularly participates in OECD work on developing learner achievement indicators. The Icelandic education system has been regularly reviewed by OECD experts.
- **Screenings in literacy at national level,** collected by the Directorate of Education. This is an on-going initiative based on the White Paper from 2014.

4. What information/data on attainment and achievement (including the wider areas outlined above) are collected at school level?

Skólapúlsinn ('school pulse') is a small, focused, web-based project to help school administrators better monitor what is happening in their school. The project is designed to make tedious testing and surveying easier and more streamlined. Schools can choose to be part of this collection and receive their results compared to other participating schools.

5. What information/data are used for school evaluation and quality assurance at national/local level?

- **Internal evaluation in every school,** which is collated by the municipality. All pre-primary, compulsory and upper-secondary schools are required to implement internal evaluation methods to evaluate their work. Schools can choose which system to use, but it should include significant elements of internal monitoring. An internal evaluation includes:



- the school's policy and objectives;
 - how the objectives are to be achieved;
 - an analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of the school's operations;
 - a plan for improvements.
- **External school evaluation**, organised by the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture. This may include the evaluation of schools/institutions as a whole, evaluation of internal evaluation methods or other defined parts of school activities. At pre-primary and compulsory school levels, municipalities may conduct their own evaluation of schools and school activities. The Directorate of Education evaluates individual schools and the Ministry follows up on the evaluations. There is an on-going discussion around evaluating larger number of schools every year and improving the follow up.

6. Are there any specific initiatives in place to support/enable teachers and/or school leaders to raise the attainment and achievement of all learners?

The Academic Council for the Professional Development of Teachers was established in the autumn of 2012. The Council aims to work on projects in the field of lifelong learning and professional development of teachers in pre-primary, primary and secondary schools.

The universities in the country offer varied professional development courses for teachers.

In Iceland, there are various funds that support schools based on applications to strengthen school development and support in-service training for teachers. The Teachers' Union has also funds to support teachers in their professional development.

7. What other policies may influence levels of attainment and achievement for all learners?

The National Curriculum Guide, which is common to pre-primary, compulsory and upper-secondary education, defines the fundamental pillars of education in Iceland. According to the 2011 Curriculum Guide, these fundamental pillars are divided into six categories, which are interrelated and interdependent in education and school activities. They provide a clear overview of educational work. They are based on the idea that active democracy cannot be achieved without literacy in society's diverse symbolism and communication systems. They are also based on the idea that active democracy can only flourish if every form of equality between individuals and groups in society is simultaneously supported. Human rights can only be ensured by supporting individual health and welfare and by fighting discrimination and all forms of violence, including bullying.

The pillars are:

- literacy in the widest sense;



- education towards sustainability;
- equality;
- creativity;
- health and welfare;
- democracy and human rights.

The National Curriculum Guide defines Key Competences in five categories. Competence criteria are defined at the completion of the 4th, 7th and 10th grades. They are divided into five categories, in accordance with the criteria for assessment of key competences:

- expression and communication;
- creative and critical thinking;
- independence and co-operation;
- using media and information;
- responsibility for and evaluation of one's own education.

There are various school development projects supported by the national funding system. Many schools also participate in Nordic projects through Nordplus and European Projects through Erasmus+. Please refer to the [Rannís website](#) (the Icelandic Centre for Research).

8. Please provide a short commentary/critical reflection on the main policy challenges

- The PISA 2012 and 2015 results demonstrate a negative trend in the performance of Icelandic learners. The education system now battles against declining literacy rates among learners leaving compulsory education. Some disparities exist according to place of residence. In recent years, reading literacy has deteriorated more rapidly in most regions outside the capital area than within it.
- The PISA 2012 and 2015 results also demonstrate slow learner progress in upper-secondary education. Only 44% of learners enrolled in Icelandic upper-secondary schools graduate on time. Furthermore, relatively few learners enrol in vocational programmes. Those who do are less likely to graduate on time, together with learners enrolled in preparatory programmes. This is an on-going challenge.
- In recent years, the number of learners with a foreign background has risen considerably in Icelandic compulsory schools. A particular cause for concern is the fact that many of these children do not do well in school. Their reading literacy skills are much poorer than those of children whose native language is Icelandic. A comprehensive resolution, based on the Act on Immigration Issues, has been put forth by Althing (Parliament) regarding immigrants in Iceland. The resolution dictates a policy on immigrants in 2016–2019. This aims to help immigrants to fully participate in Icelandic society, putting particular attention on special needs and protection. It promotes equal opportunities for immigrants, especially for children



of migrants and to minimise school drop-out, with added emphasis on education for bi- or multilingual individuals.

- Sigurðardóttir, Gudjónsdóttir and Karlsdóttir discuss these issues and various study results in *The Development of a School for All in Iceland: Equality, Threats and Political Conditions* (2014). For example:
 - At compulsory level, only 1% of all learners attend special schools. However, the placement of learners with disabilities in mainstream schools does not mean that they are included or acknowledged as participants in school life. Participation has not been generally measured in Iceland.
 - The discussion about inclusive education is stronger at policy level among school authorities than it is among teachers or within teacher training. Despite promising efforts to meet the needs of diverse learners, there is a strong emphasis on standardising academic goals rather than multiform learning opportunities.
 - Teachers in compulsory education believe that they respond to learners' needs in their teaching. However, if learners with special educational needs (SEN) are going to be included in mainstream classrooms, teachers call for more specialised resources and knowledge.
 - After 30 years of progress towards inclusion, teachers claimed to have little knowledge on inclusive schools. They had acquired the knowledge they had outside school, rather than from professional discussion or practice within their schools or teacher training programmes.
 - Teachers' education levels are relatively low. TALIS results indicate that Icelandic teachers do not take part in professional development activities to the same extent as teachers in other participating countries. The results indicate more teaching collaborations than in other participating countries.
- In her 2014 PhD study, *The Teacher in an Inclusive School. Exploring teachers' construction of their meaning and knowledge relating to their concepts and understandings of inclusive education*, Gunnþórsdóttir argues that:
 - Both the structure of a school system and teachers' attitudes create a scope for exclusionary thinking and practices which affect and hinder learner's education opportunities.
 - Teachers do not see inclusion as inherent in the job of teaching. It is an additional task, with teaching learners who do not have special needs as the main task.
 - Learners need an official diagnosis to be offered relevant support and teaching. In that regard, SEN are in a pecking order.
 - Difference is managed within education systems through the identification and labelling of individuals and groups and the interrelated processes of inclusion and exclusion.



- Teachers have adopted certain positions. They justify their attitudes by claiming they do not get enough support from the system and it is therefore unrealistic for their teaching to correspond to established policy.
- Teachers talk about the right of every child to an education which builds on their abilities. They say it is their job to make this happen, but the teaching styles and attitudes are influenced by traditional views on education, standardised norms and ideas about the 'normal' learner.
- According to official numbers from Statistics Iceland (Hagstofa Íslands, 2016) there is an increase in special education in the Icelandic school system. In the school year 2014–2015, 28.4% of learners received special education or support in compulsory education.
- Several reviews have been conducted by international and domestic bodies which have found some challenges in relation to inclusive education policy in Iceland. While there was general agreement that the policy itself was justified, school administrators and staff felt that the implementation was not sufficiently managed or funded. The European Agency signed a contract with the Icelandic Minister of Education, Science and Culture in November 2015 for an external audit of the system for inclusive education in Iceland. The final report was expected to be published at the beginning of March 2017. There were huge expectations in Iceland that the Audit would be important in further development and implementation of inclusive education policy in Iceland.

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There is a very active IT team of teachers in the school who lead the learners' IT work. They have focused on coding and using Google Suite for Education for Learning. Good facilities for IT education have been built up, and there are now about 100 devices (computers, Chromebooks and tablets) for the 190 learners.

4. Data/information available

Skólapúlsinn and *skólavogin*: web-based assessment tools to help school administrators better monitor what is happening within their school. Schools can choose to be part of this collection and get results compared to other participating schools.

- According to the data, the staff in Oddeyrarskóli are quite satisfied in the workplace.
- According to the data, the school's main challenges are to raise all learners' achievements, raise the learners' self-esteem and belief in their own ability to learn, as well as the learners' well-being.

5. Focus of example/work to raise achievement

- **Building up a Professional Learning Community:**
 - Teachers team work and team teaching are used to build a professional learning community.
 - Meetings are used to learn from each other and learn together.
 - Social media (Facebook site) is used to share ideas and good practice.
 - Learners' and parents' evaluations are used to learn from and to do better.
 - All the school leaders in Akureyri and the neighbourhood are working on building a professional learning community between schools. All school leaders meet every month to learn together.
- **Beginning Literacy (BL)** has been the main ideology used for reading and writing in younger classes in Oddeyrarskóli since 2006. BL is an approach to literacy education, built on an interactive model. It emphasises the need to address both decoding skills and comprehension. BL draws on definitions of inclusive education and classroom communities. It assumes that every learner should learn within their class community through scaffolding and other means of adapting learning to learners' needs. BL is implemented in schools through a two-year contract between each school and the Centre of School Development at the University of Akureyri (UNAK). See the [introductory video](#) about the approach.
- Reading and writing in the middle stage is developed through an ideology called *Læsi til náms* (Literacy for Learning). The teachers in the middle stage of the school have been working with a teaching advisor from the Centre of School Development at UNAK. This is a development programme for teachers who wish to enhance their skills and strengthen learners' learning in all aspects of literacy. Studies show that real changes in education take some time and it is necessary to support the



changes effectively. By participating in the Literacy for Learning development programme, the teachers are a part of a learning process; they reflect on their own work and gain new knowledge and skills in teaching literacy, in collaboration with colleagues and consultants from UNAK. The teachers' goals are to:

- strengthen their knowledge of a variety of reading methods;
 - strengthen learners' reading comprehension;
 - practice ways to work with vocabulary and comprehension, writing, collaborative dialogue and learning.
- **'Talk together – learn together'**. One year ago, the teachers increased talking (discussions) in the classroom in order to build up more understanding of concepts and critical thinking. The school received a small grant to get some counselling and it has now been a year-long project. The teachers in the 3rd and 4th grades have been developing a teaching method in maths, based on conversations and concept understanding, with a teaching advisor from UNAK.
 - **Focus on ICT in all learning**. ICT is integrated into all learning. The teachers have increased the use of Google Suite for Education in recent years, which facilitates the setting of goals and formative assessment.

6. Summary information about developments/current work in this area

National tests give information about learner performance in Icelandic and maths in the 4th and 7th grades, and in Icelandic, maths and English in the 10th grade. The learners' performance can be compared with their past performances and with the performance of other learners in Iceland.

In the last five years, the learners' performances in these tests have been unstable, but they tend to be lower than average.

The table below shows a five-year average in the national tests in Oddeyrarskóli, for the years 2010–2014. The average performance of learners in Iceland is 30. The table shows that the five-year average performance of the learners in Oddeyrarskóli is lower than the average of learners in Iceland. However, it also shows an improvement over the last two years in the subjects that are assessed.

Grade	Subjects	5-year average (2010–2014)	Autumn 2015	Autumn 2016
4 th grade	Icelandic (reading, writing)	27.2	32.93	26.9
4 th grade	Maths	25.5	35.2	32.36
7 th grade	Icelandic	25.5	28.09	27.23



Grade	Subjects	5-year average (2010–2014)	Autumn 2015	Autumn 2016
7 th grade	Maths	24.6	29.21	30.15
10 th grade	Icelandic	25.9	28.41	not finished
10 th grade	Maths	27.1	30.96	not finished
10 th grade	English	28.0	26.25	not finished

7. Key learning points from this example

- The main emphasis in Oddeyrarskóli is on all learners feeling welcome and providing a good and joyful atmosphere in the school. Parents of learners with special needs or social or language problems apply for admission to the school, even though they may live in other parts of the town.
- The teachers work together in teams in order to meet every learner's needs in the classroom, where learners work in collaboration with their classmates.
- The teachers focus on the goals of learning rather than 'books to finish.'
- The teachers in the school are willing to improve their teaching methods in order to raise all learners' achievement. For example, they may be active in the school development programmes listed above.
- Regular team meetings are held in order to focus on learning and learners' well-being, if needed. The teams consist of teachers, parents, school leaders and consultants from family services. The meetings are held every four to ten weeks.

8. Supporting materials (web links, papers, presentations, etc.)

- The [school's official website](#)
- The [school's Facebook page](#)
- The [Centre of School Development](#) at the University of Akureyri