



Foto: Annika Haaes

## Going to school in Estonia

As elsewhere in Europe, Estonia and its schools are becoming increasingly multicultural. Schools are encountering with increasing frequency the need to provide education to the children of foreign citizens and stateless persons. According to the Republic of Estonia Education Act, all children living in Estonia, including children from other countries, are obliged to attend school until the age of 17. In the choice of education, it is the parents who have the decisive say. This information brochure has been prepared to assist parents, newly arrived in Estonia, to make the right choices in their selection between various education options.

In Estonia, the education levels are pre-school education, basic education, secondary education and higher education. The Estonian education system supports the integration of children with special needs and their participation in mainstream schools. There are no tuition fees in state or local government general education schools.

## PRE-SCHOOL EDUCATION (ages 3-6)

A child acquires pre-school education in either a pre-school institution or at home. The primary task of pre-school institutions is to care for and to strengthen the health of a child and to encourage his or her emotional, ethical, social, intellectual and physical development, and to create preconditions for his or her successful coping in everyday life and for progress at school. A child who does not attend a pre-school institution may participate in the activities of a preparatory group, located either at a pre-school institution or at a school. A child can also be admitted to a school without previously attending either a pre-school institution or a preparatory course. Once a child turns 7 years old, he or she is obliged to attend school.

### Pre-school institutions

- Creche (children up to the age of three) – up to 14 children in a group
- Kindergarten – younger group (3–5 year olds); middle group (5–6 year olds); older group (6–7 year olds); composite group (2–7 year olds).

A kindergarten group may have up to 20 children, and a composite group up to 18 children.

A primary school can be combined with a kindergarten (kindergarten-primary school).

- Special kindergarten or special group, which takes into account the particularities of a child's development (multiple, physical, hearing and sight disabilities), or adaptation group (children with special needs in mainstream groups). Depending on the disability, there are 4–12 children in a group.

### Form of ownership

- Municipal pre-school
- Private pre-school

In financing a municipal pre-school institution, the share covered by a parent for one child may not exceed 20% of the minimum wage<sup>1</sup> set by the Government of the Republic. The actual amount of the payment is determined by the municipal or town council, and it may vary according to the age of the child, the financial situation of the pre-school institution or other factors. The daily amount to be paid by the parent for a child's meals is set by the Board of Trustees of the pre-school institution.

### Language of instruction

- Estonian - 87%
- Russian - 13%
- English - 0,3%

If the instruction takes place in a language other than Estonian, children aged 5-6 are also taught the Estonian language (teaching may start earlier if requested by the parents).

### Conditions of admission

Parents are free to choose the pre-school for their child. Pre-school institutions are obliged to ensure a place for every child in its catchment area, if the parents so request. The parent must submit:

- an application
- the required doctor's certificate issued by the family doctor

A private pre-school institution may set additional admission conditions.

## BASIC EDUCATION (ages 7-15; grades 1-9)

Basic education is compulsory for all. This is the minimum general education that creates the pre-conditions and provides the right to continue studies for the acquisition of secondary education in an upper secondary school/ vocational education institution, or to begin employment. The condition for graduating from basic school is the completion of the curriculum and passing the basic school final examinations.

<sup>1</sup> In 2004, 2480 kroons (20% = 496 kr)

Pupils are obliged to attend school until basic education has been acquired or until they turn 17 years old, after which it is possible to acquire basic education in evening class, through distance learning or as an external student.

#### **Form of ownership**

- municipal school
- state school
- private school

A school is managed by a director. There is also a staff council comprising teachers, as well as a board of trustees, with representatives from the local government council, teachers, parents, graduates and organizations supporting the school.

#### **Language of instruction**

- Estonian
- Russian
- English (private schools)

In schools where the language of instruction is other than Estonian, Estonian is taught as a second language, as a compulsory subject, starting in grade 1. If the mother tongue of the pupil is not the same as the language of instruction at school, it is possible to study the mother tongue as an elective subject if an application is made to the director by the parents of at least 10 pupils with the same mother tongue.

#### **Conditions of admission**

The condition for admission to grade 1 is being of compulsory education age. A child who has turned 7 years old by October 1 of the current year falls under the compulsory education requirement. If a parent so wishes, a child can be admitted to grade 1 if he or she has turned six by April 30 of the current year.

There is free choice of school for compulsory education. Basic schools and upper secondary schools with basic school classes are obliged to ensure places for all children living in their catchment areas. Schools with city-wide or state-wide intakes may set conditions for admission due to their special circumstances: before admission, the candidate must pass a number of tests, where the conditions and times for the tests are determined by the school. Admission is decided by the school's admissions commission.

In basic school, the maximum class size is 36 pupils.

#### **School levels and curricula**

The school levels of basic school are:

- Level I (grades 1–3)
- Level II (grades 4–6)
- Level III (grades 7–9)

Generally, basic school study lasts for nine years, but this time may shorten or lengthen if pupils follow individual curricula.

Acquiring basic education takes place based on the state curricula for basic school and upper secondary school, which determine the instruction objectives for the basic level, as well as the principles for the organization of instruction, the compulsory and elective subjects, the subjects' volume and curricula, and the requirements for progression from each school level and for graduation from basic school. Each school uses the state curricula as a basis for preparing its own curricula, taking into account the wishes of the pupils and its own possibilities.

For pupils from abroad, the staff council of the school decides on the grade to which the new pupil will be admitted, based on the knowledge and skills of the pupil, and also decides the need for implementing an individual curriculum.

Parents have the right to refer to officials in the following institutions.



### School year

In a school year there are 175 school days (35 weeks). The school year begins on September 1. School vacations are at the start of November (autumn vacation), end of December/start of January (Christmas vacation), end of March (spring vacation) and from June to the end of August (summer vacation). The precise dates for vacations are set each year through a regulation issued by the Minister of Education and Research.

### Number of lessons

One school week is comprised of five school days. The weekly schedule of lessons is set through the school's curriculum. The health regulations relevant to the school's timetables and organization of lessons are set through a regulation issued by the Minister of Social Affairs. The maximum number of hours per week permitted in grade 1 is 20 hours, in grade 2: 23 hours, in grades 3 and 4: 25 hours, in grade 5: 28 hours, in grades 6 and 7: 30 hours, in grade 8: 32 hours, in grade 9: 34 hours.

The duration of a lesson is 45 minutes. Recess must last at least 10 minutes. Generally there is at least one 15 minute or longer meal recess. The number of lessons and their sequence during the day is set in the timetable, which is approved by the school's director (manager). The school day is usually from 8am to 3pm, but in some schools in larger towns, lessons may take place in an afternoon shift. Many schools provide after-school activities for their Level I, and also partly for their Level II pupils, which are free of charge.

### School meals

Pupils from grade 1-4 in all basic schools can receive a free hot meal. The cost of the meal for senior pupils is covered by the parents. Many schools sell snacks and drinks.

### Assessing pupils

Assessment may be verbal (analysis/assessment) or grading (grade). Competencies are assessed only verbally. The knowledge, skills and proficiencies of pupils are graded using a five-mark system, where a mark of 5 is "very good", 4 is "good", 3 is "satisfactory", 2 is "deficient" and 1 is "weak". In grades 1 and 2, the assessments are mostly verbal. The behavior of, and care taken by a pupil is assessed using the grades of "exemplary", "good", "satisfactory" and "unsatisfactory".

Aggregate assessments are used at the end of a study period, a part of a study period (school term, half-year) or at the end of the course. Aggregate assessments of study results are the bases for issuing certificates regarding the completion of the curriculum requirements and school graduation (graduation certificate).

Each year, grades 3 and 6 undertake level tests in the school's language of instruction, in mathematics and in one elective subject. In order to graduate from basic school, grade 9 pupils sit compulsory final examinations with common questions and tasks in

1. compulsory mother tongue examination
2. compulsory mathematics examination
3. one examination in a subject chosen by the pupil (a foreign language, biology, chemistry, physics or geography).

In non-Estonian medium schools, a basic school graduate must successfully sit an Estonian language examination as the third examination. On graduation from grade 9, a pupil is issued a basic school graduation certificate.

### Cooperation between home and school

Parents participate in decisions related to their children's education through parents' meetings and other bodies (board of trustees, council). Should there be problems, parents have the right to refer to officials in the following institutions.

## SECONDARY EDUCATION (ages 16-18, grades 10-12)

Secondary education is based on basic education and is divided into **general secondary education** and **vocational secondary education**. General secondary education is acquired in upper secondary school within three school years. Upper secondary grades are treated as an entity, as are the various levels of basic school. General secondary education provides the right to continue studies for the acquisition of higher education.

Teaching at an upper-secondary school takes place as day, evening and distance study. Graduation is also possible as an external pupil. The maximum of hours per week permitted for pupils at the upper secondary level is 35 hours.

### Conditions for admission

The state and local governments must ensure the availability of secondary education to everyone. Admission to upper secondary school generally takes place according to the results of graduation from basic school. Schools with city-wide or nationwide intakes may carry out tests so that the limited number of student places available could be filled with those learners who would be able to fulfill the study requirements needed for graduation from upper-secondary school.

### School specialization

The state curriculum sets the compulsory subjects and their minimum volumes, and the number of elective subjects and courses. This depends on the school's level, and the school's specialization, taking into account the wishes of the pupils and the possibilities available for the school. A school forms its specialization through the choice of electives or courses and/or the extended study of some subjects. A school may have more than one specialization.

### Graduating from school

In order to graduate from upper secondary school, grade 12 pupils sit five upper secondary final examinations, of which at least three must be state exams. Two final exams can be sat as school exams, but a pupil has the right to sit all five final exams as state exams. It is compulsory for all graduates of upper secondary schools to sit the Estonian language state exam (it is also possible to sit the Russian language state exam), and for non-Estonian medium schools it is compulsory to sit the Estonian as a second language exam (with a result of more than 60 points, the graduate is issued with the mid-level language skill certificate). The other exam subjects can be chosen from amongst mathematics, foreign languages (English, German, Russian, French), physics, chemistry, biology and history. The German state exam can also be sat as the German language diploma exam (i.e. the Level II language diploma issued by the German Culture Ministers' Conference).

State exams are generally written exams. The marking commissions for the state examinations use a 100-point system to grade the results, and for the final essay, a 10-point system is used. Upper secondary school final exams are also higher education institution admission exams. Graduates from upper secondary school are issued an upper secondary school graduation certificate and a state exam certificate.

### Cooperation between home and school

Parents participate in the decisions regarding their children's education in the same way as in basic education. In addition, pupils' representatives also participate in electing the members of the school's board of trustees.

## VOCATIONAL SECONDARY EDUCATION

Vocational secondary education is education as determined by state curricula in various vocational areas. Vocational secondary education is acquired in a vocational education institution, on the basis of either basic school or general education. The nominal study duration for vocational education acquired on the basis of basic education is at least 3 years, and on the basis of secondary education, at least one year. Most vocational education institutions belong to the state.

### Conditions of admission

All Estonian citizens and those who have valid residency permits for Estonia can begin studies in vocational education institutions. The state, and local governments, are obliged to ensure all who wish

it the opportunity to acquire vocational secondary education on the basis of basic education. Admission documents are documents proving previously acquired education, physical and mental health, language skills and the result of admission tests. Study according to the vocational secondary education curriculum, following basic school, requires a basic school graduation certificate, and study following upper secondary school requires an upper secondary graduation certificate and a state examination certificate. Schools may have additional admission requirements: undertaking certain tests, with the conditions and test timetable being set by the school according to the specialty. Admission is decided by the school's admissions commission.

#### Graduation from school

Graduation from a vocational education institution is proven by a graduation certificate. A graduate from a vocational education institution will have the right in the future to sit for a qualification exam, and be awarded a professional qualification. A professional qualification is proven by a professional certificate, and the holder has the right to use the professional title of the profession, or its shortened form. The issuer registers the professional certificates, and these are entered into the professions register, according to the procedures determined in the professions register's statutes.

Graduates from vocational education institutions who wish to continue studies at the higher education level must generally sit for state exams. All persons with secondary education have an equal right to compete for admission to educational institutions offering higher education.

#### Estonian language instruction

In Estonian-medium schools, Estonian is studied as the mother tongue from grade 1 to 12, according to the state curriculum. At the end of basic school, pupils sit for the compulsory Estonian language exam, and at the end of upper secondary school, for the compulsory Estonian language state exam.

Children who do not speak Estonian at home can begin Estonian language studies at pre-school.

In Russian-medium schools, pupils study Estonian as a second language from grade 1 to 12, according to the state curriculum. At the end of basic school, pupils sit for the compulsory exam, which is equivalent to language skills at beginner level (A). Graduates of non-Estonian medium upper secondary schools sit for the compulsory Estonian as a second language state exam, which is equivalent to language skills at medium level (B). At least 60 points are needed to pass the exam.

## Contacts

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Citizenship and Migration Board  
Endla 13, Tallinn 15179  
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Gonsiori 29, Tallinn 15027  
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Local Governments  
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