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Swedish law states that all children should have the same access to education.

EDUCATION:

LESSONS FOR LIFE

The quality of Swedish education has been keenly debated over the past decade. As a result, Sweden has implemented school reforms in recent years to improve results and raise the status of the teaching profession.

International studies such as PISA and TIMSS have indicated lower levels of knowledge among Swedish children in recent years. To help combat this trend, Sweden has introduced several changes to its school system.

- New education act**
 The Swedish Education Act from 2011 contains basic principles and provisions for compulsory and further education, preschool, kindergarten, out-of-school care and adult education. It promotes greater knowledge, freedom of choice, and student safety and security.
- New curricula**
 New consolidated curricula for compulsory schools for all students, Sami schools, special schools and high schools came into force 1 July 2011. The curricula contain new general goals, guidelines and syllabuses. The preschool curriculum includes clearer goals for children's linguistic and communicative development and for science and technology. Mandatory national subject tests are held in years 3, 6 and 9 of compulsory school to assess student progress. There are also new qualification requirements for areas including high-school studies.
- New grading system**
 The old Swedish system of Pass (G), Pass with Distinction (VG), Pass with Special Dis-
- tinction (MVG) and Did Not Pass (IG) has been replaced by a new grading scale with six grades from A to F. A to E are passing grades, with F as a failing grade. Beginning with the fall term of 2012, grades will be assigned starting in year 6.
- Introduction of teacher certification**
 Beginning 1 December 2013, professional certification will be required for school and preschool/kindergarten teachers on permanent contracts. The decision, a milestone in Swedish education policy, aims to raise the status of the teaching profession, supporting professional development and thus increasing quality in education. ■

LEARN MORE

- Schooling is free in Sweden, except for preschools and higher education (which are partly funded by the government).
- Education, at 42 percent, is the largest single item in municipal budgets.
- About 70 percent of education, and of municipal operations as a whole, is financed by municipal taxes. Other funding includes fees, rents and state grants.
- Sweden invests a total of 6.3 percent of GDP on education while the OECD average is 5.7 percent. Only six other OECD countries invest a greater percentage than Sweden.
- Compared with students in other countries, Swedish students have good reading skills. In several international studies, Sweden was ranked among the very best for both younger and older children.
- In the international TIMSS study conducted in years 4 and 8, Sweden has the highest percentage of students who feel safe at school. Ninety five percent of high-school students and older students in compulsory school say they always or usually feel safe at school.
- Sweden was the first country in the world to prohibit corporal punishment of children, in 1979, and, in 1990, was one of the first to sign the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.
- A national timetable specifies the minimum amount of time to be spent on each subject in compulsory school. This covers Swedish (or Swedish as a second language), English, mathematics, science, social studies, religious studies, arts and crafts, physical education and health.



PHOTO: HANS BJURLING/JOHNER

An average of 96 percent of all schoolchildren say they have access to a computer and the internet at school.

TEN YEARS OF SCHOOLING

The Swedish Education Act states that all children and young people are to have equal access to education, regardless of gender, where they live or social or economic factors.

Attendance at school is compulsory for all children through year 9. Today almost all children also attend non-compulsory kindergarten at the age of six. In practice, this means ten years of education in all.

Schools for different needs

Compulsory education also includes Sami schools, special schools (*specialskolor*) and programs for students with intellectual disabilities (*särskolor*). Special schools are intended for children with hearing difficulties, who have serious language problems or who have impaired vision combined with other disabilities.

Preschool

Preschool (*förskola*) is open to children from one to five years of age. Municipalities have an obligation to provide such facilities for children whose parents work or study. There have never been as many children in preschool as now. More than eight out of ten children from one to five

years of age spend part of their weekdays there. The Swedish tradition of preschool emphasizes the importance of play in a child's development and learning. The interests and needs of children are key components of their education in the preschool curriculum. Gender-aware education is increasingly common in Swedish preschools. The aim is for children to have the same opportunities in life, regardless of gender.

Kindergarten

All children are offered a place in kindergarten (*förskoleklass*) starting in the fall term of the year they turn six until they start compulsory schooling. Kindergarten is designed to stimulate each child's development and learning, and provide a platform for their future schooling.

Compulsory schooling

Elementary school (*lägstadiet*) for years 1–3 is followed by middle school (*melanstadiet*) for years 4–6 and then junior

FIVE GOVERNMENT AUTHORITIES

THE SWEDISH SCHOOLS INSPECTORATE

Oversees and examines the quality of schools across the country through regular inspections. The inspectorate monitors compliance with the Education Act. www.skolinspektionen.se

THE NATIONAL AGENCY FOR EDUCATION

Provides information about education, promotes understanding, and administers public funding and grants. www.skolverket.se

THE NATIONAL AGENCY FOR SPECIAL NEEDS EDUCATION AND SCHOOLS

Provides children, young people and adults with disabilities with the same opportunities for development and education that everyone in society is entitled to. www.spsm.se

THE SWEDISH NATIONAL AGENCY FOR HIGHER VOCATIONAL EDUCATION

Analyzes labor market demands for workforce education, decides what programs are to be included in higher vocational education and allocates public funding to education providers. The agency also assesses and inspects the quality and results of this education. www.yhmyndigheten.se

THE SAMI SCHOOL BOARD

An administrative agency for public Sami schools and their affiliated activities, which are governed by the Sami School Ordinance. www.sameskolstyrelsen.se

- high school (*högstadiet*) for years 7–9. Children between six and thirteen are also offered out-of-school care before and after school hours. This can be at an after-school center, a family daycare home or an open after-school program.

Senior high school

Senior high school (*gymnasium*) is optional and free of charge. Senior high school programs run for three years. Al-

most all students who finish compulsory school start senior high school. To be accepted into a national program, students must have passing grades in Swedish or Swedish as a second language, English and mathematics. For senior high school, students require passing grades in nine additional subjects, for a total of twelve. For a vocational program, students must have passing grades in five additional subjects, for a total of eight. ■



PHOTO: MARTIN SVALLANDER / IMAGEBANK SWEDEN.SE

The Child and School Student Representative helps protect children's rights.

CHILDREN'S RIGHT TO HEALTH

All students have access to a school doctor, school nurse, psychologist and school welfare officer at no cost. The government has invested SEK 650 million (USD 90,6 million, EUR 71,7 million) for 2012–2015 to improve student health.

Two laws, the Swedish Education Act and the Swedish Discrimination Act, help protect children and students from discrimination and degrading treatment. In essence, the principals of preschools, schools and adult education programs are responsible for enforcing prohibitions against discrimi-

nation and degrading behavior, and for promoting equal treatment. In 2006, Sweden appointed its first Child and School Student Representative, who is tasked with providing information about the discrimination act, helping schools prevent bullying, overseeing schools' efforts and representing students who have been bullied. This position was long the only one of its type in the world, but it is hoped that similar positions will be introduced in other countries as a result of international visits to the representative's office to learn about its work. ■

IT – AN IMPORTANT PART OF LEARNING

Under the curriculum for compulsory education, schools are responsible for ensuring that every student attending compulsory school is able to use modern technology as a tool in searching for knowledge, communication, creativity and learning. There is also a similar curriculum for high schools.

There is an average of six students

per computer in municipal elementary schools and 4.5 students per computer in independent elementary schools. The figure is 2.5 students per computer for municipal high schools and 1.6 for independent high schools.

An average of 96 percent percent of all schoolchildren say they have access to a computer and the internet at school. ■

HISTORY

- **1842** Compulsory elementary schooling is introduced in Sweden.
- **1950** Coeducational compulsory education is launched, with nine years of compulsory education.
- **1962** The school system gets its current name, grundskola. The first national school curriculum is established in Sweden.
- **1966** The Ministry of Education assumes responsibility for pre-schools.
- **1968** The Special Service Act is implemented, ensuring that all children are entitled to education by also including children with intellectual disabilities.
- **1994** Curricula are introduced that interpret the mission of Swedish schools in a radically different way. Changes include outlining educational responsibility, teaching methods, non-traditional teacher roles and teaching materials.
- **1997** Under the Swedish Education Act, all students in compulsory education are provided with free lunches.
- **1998** Preschools get their own national curriculum.
- **1998** Six-year-olds are given the opportunity to attend kindergarten at school.
- **2006** The new Act Prohibiting Discrimination and Other Degrading Treatment of Children and School Students is introduced.
- **2011** A raft of school reforms are introduced, including earlier grading and a new system of teacher education.
- **2013** Professional certification is required for school and pre-school/kindergarten teachers on permanent contracts.



PHOTO: MIRIAM PREIS/IMAGEBANK, SWEDENSE

Sweden is one of the few countries in the world that serve free school lunches.

INDEPENDENT SCHOOLS

The number of independent schools in Sweden is growing, and today school choice is seen as a right.

The Swedish government supports the establishment of independent schools, which must be approved by the Schools Inspectorate and follow the national curricula and syllabuses. In 2010 roughly 10 percent of school operations were carried out by private players. Twelve percent of compulsory school students and 24 percent of senior high school students attend independent schools. There are also a few international schools whose curricula follow those of other countries. These schools are partly funded by the Swedish government and are mainly aimed at the children of foreign nationals who are in Sweden for a limited time.

The independent school system in Sweden – in which education is free and students have general access to schools with the freedom to choose among a variety of providers – has attracted interest from around the world. In Sweden, some people think it is wrong to run schools for profit, and highlight examples of poor conditions and inconsistencies as a consequence of the system. Advocates of independent schools note the many positive results found in statistical surveys. One is that parents with children who attend independent schools are more satisfied than those with children in municipal schools. ■

USEFUL LINKS

www.do.se Equality Ombudsman (*Diskrimineringsombudsmannen*)

www.scb.se Statistics Sweden

www.skf.se Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions (*SALAR*)

www.skolinspektionen.se Swedish Schools Inspectorate (*Statens skolinspektion*)

www.skolmatensvanner.se Friends of Swedish School Meals

www.skolverket.se National Agency for Education (*Skolverket*)

www.spsm.se National Agency for Special Needs Education and Schools (*Specialpedagogiska myndigheten*)

www.sweden.gov.se Ministry of Education and Research (*Utbildningsdepartementet*)

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