

Schools and education

1. The Swiss school system – a brief overview

The Swiss school system is decentralized and runs on a cantonal level. The Swiss Confederation has issued general guidelines which set school entry age, duration of the school year, length of compulsory schooling and high educational standards.

Each canton and even individual communities have a large degree of autonomy. Every canton has its own Minister of Education. Together, they constitute the Swiss Conference of Cantonal Ministers of Education (EDK, see below under *Useful addresses*) which plays an important role in coordinating educational policy in Switzerland. Legally binding **Konkordate** (concordats) form the foundation for the work of the EDK.

On May 21st 2006, the Swiss population voted in favor of a change in the national constitution, requiring the standardization of the national education system. The EDK's most discussed proposal is the **HarmoS Konkordat (Harmonisierung der Obligatorischen Schule Schweiz)** standardizing the mandatory school system in Switzerland. On the national level, the EDK aims at improving quality assurance and promoting mobility and flexibility in the Swiss educational system. This **Konkordat** came into force on August 1st 2009: the cantons which decided to be a part of it, amongst them Zürich, Schaffhausen and St. Gallen, have 6 years (i.e. latest until the beginning of the school year 2015/2016) to adapt their education system accordingly (see www.edk.ch for more detailed information).

In Switzerland, depending on the language region, instruction is conducted in the 4 official Swiss languages: German, French, Italian and Romansh. During their compulsory schooling, all students will learn the language of the region, one other official Swiss language, and English.

Public school is free of charge. Classroom sizes usually range between 18 and 25 students. The school year generally starts mid-August. However, the first day of school and its holidays differ from canton to canton. Public schools have an extensive lunch break which usually lasts about 2 hours and lunch facilities are rare

in the schools. Many cantons are currently implementing lunch services at school, either in cooperation with daycare centers, or supervised lunch rooms on school grounds where children eat their lunch provided from home. Currently it is common for most children to go home for lunch.

Another challenge that working parents with several school aged children face, is that even if their children attend the same school, they may have different schedules.

Approximately 95% of students in Switzerland complete preschool and compulsory schooling at the state school in the municipality where they live in. About 5% attend a private school.

The following are distinct features of the Swiss education system (see also www.edk.ch):

- **Permeability:** There are various ways to enter a training program, school or to enroll in a remedial program.
- There is open access to various types of education: anyone who meets the qualifications can generally attend courses of his/her choice, also at university level.
- Vocational education and training is subject to some restrictions due to the ceilings on student numbers. Access to medical schools is also limited.

2. Public education

As previously mentioned, the majority of Swiss children attend public schools, which are free of charge and open to all nationalities. Public school levels include:

- **Preschool level:** **Kindergarten**
- **Primary school level:** **Primarschule** or **Volksschule** (elementary school / primary school)
- **Lower secondary level:** **Sekundarschule**
- **Upper secondary level:** **Berufsbildung** (vocational education) / **Fachmittelschulen** (specialized middle schools) / **Gymnasium** (Matura school)

*Note: **Gymnasium** (High school/Grammar school) places students on the track to the **Matura** level (equivalent terms in*

Britain (except Scotland): "A-levels", Scottish: "Higher", Irish: "Leaving Certificate", German: "Abitur", French: "Baccalauréat"; US-American: "High School Diploma").

• Tertiary level:

- **Höhere Berufsbildung** (higher vocational training): Professional and higher specialist examinations as well as the **Höhere Fachschulen HF** (technical colleges)
- **Universitäten** (universities) or **Fachhochschulen FH** (universities of applied sciences, including the **Pädagogische Hochschulen PH** (universities for art and music and teacher training universities)).

Kindergarten

Note: For information on daycare possibilities before this age, please refer to the chapter Daycare for the little ones as well as the Schools and education chapter.

In Switzerland around 86% of the children go to **Kindergarten** for 2 years.

Depending on the municipality, **Kindergarten** starts at the age of 4 or 5 and lasts for 1 or 2 years. It is not yet a part of the compulsory education in all cantons. In the cantons of **Schwyz** and **Schaffhausen**, 1 year is mandatory. In the cantons of **Zürich** and **St. Gallen**, 2 years are mandatory. **Kindergarten** is financed primarily by the municipalities and is free of charge.

Note: In Kindergarten, teachers speak Swiss German and High German (Hochdeutsch). Afterwards, most academic subjects are taught in High German.

Primary school

Primary and secondary school are referred to as **Volksschule**.

Children are enrolled in the first grade of primary school by age 6 or 7. Cantons work in collaboration with municipalities in regard to the organization and financing of primary schools.

The Swiss state school system in the canton of Zürich



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In Switzerland every canton sets its own educational policy. As a result, the educational system in the canton of Zürich differs in a number of ways from its neighboring cantons.

Playgroups and Kindergarten

Playgroups tend to be private. Most have German staff, but there is a wide range of playgroups in other languages, including bilingual English and German classes.

Kindergarten starts at age 4 or 5 depending upon the date of birth of the child. State school **Kindergartens** tend to use Swiss German as a language of instruction. Children are introduced to High German bit by bit. Children who speak other languages at home receive about 90 minutes of extra High German classes. Children are not yet taught to read and write. In the second and final year children take a School Aptitude Test (**Schulreifeprüfung**). The main focus of the test is on emotional maturity. Children who are deemed ready are allowed to move on to Primary School while others might be asked to do a 3rd pre-school year (**Einschulungsklasse**) or a 3rd year at **Kindergarten**.

Primary schools

Primary schools offer a 6-year program and teach in High German. Educated Swiss parents favor state primary schools because they believe they are good both academically and socially (e.g. children are taught to feel equal regardless of class or money). Swiss German is no longer used in class, at least officially. Early English starts in the 2nd year, French in the 5th year. Teachers design their own curriculum and often prefer photocopies to books. Parents tend not to be given detailed information about the curriculum. Children who speak other languages receive about 90 minutes of extra classes in German as a Foreign Language; this is often not sufficient to achieve a good grade (5 or higher). In Year 5, teachers unofficially make up their minds about the academic potential of their pupils (e.g. who might be university material) based on the High German and the Mathematics grade. At the end of Year 6 the keener children sit the cantonal grammar school entrance test (**Gymiprüfung**) in High German and Mathematics. Primary school teachers (with some exceptions) normally do not see it as a priority for children to go to university later on in life, they think highly of apprenticeships. No allowances are made for children with dyslexia, dyscalculia or other learning problems in the **Gymiprüfung**. Dyslexics are practically excluded from higher education, regardless of their intelligence.

Tip:

- attend parents' evenings and meetings with teachers religiously
- If the German grade is lower than a 5 in Year 4, consider hiring a private High German tutor for one or two lessons per week;