

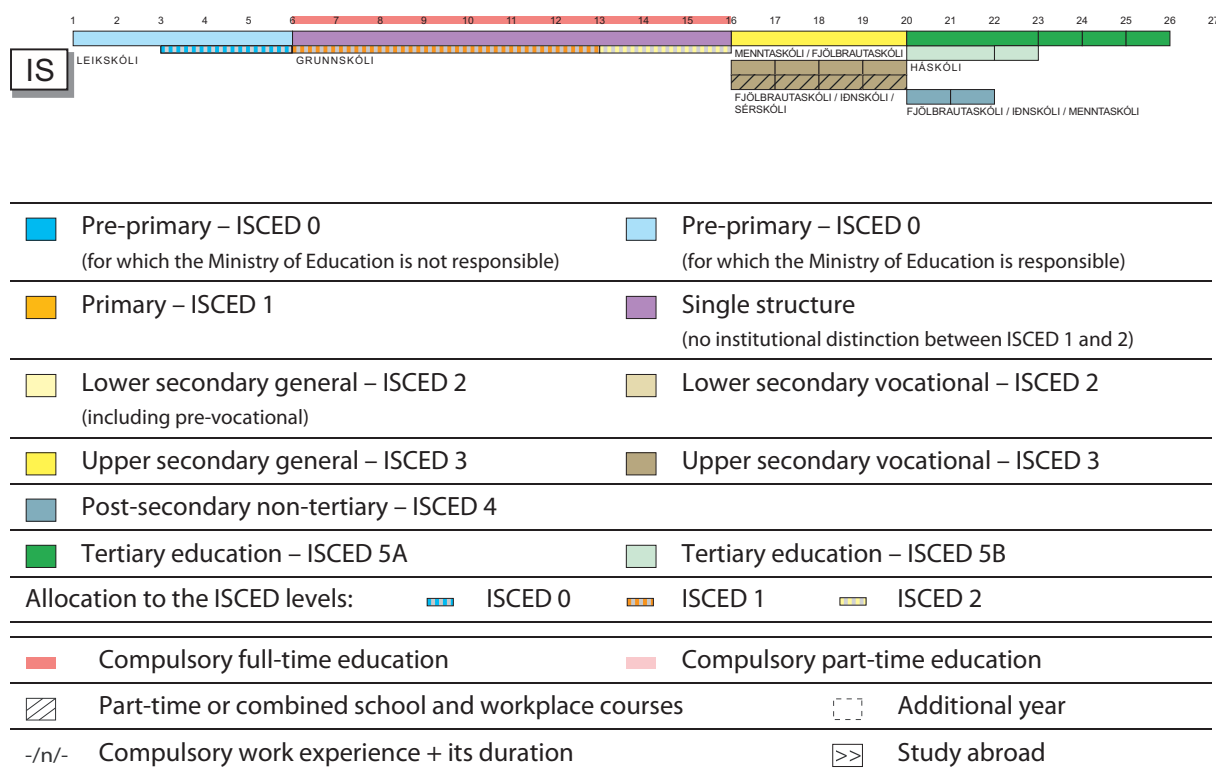
Organisation of the education system in

Iceland

2009/2010

3. Pre-Primary Education

Organisation of the education system in Iceland, 2009/10



Source: Eurydice.

Pre-primary education is the first level of the Icelandic educational system. Pre-primary schools in Iceland all operate in accordance with the Pre-primary School Act and follow an educational programme, the National Curriculum Guide, issued by the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, see [3.3](#). Pre-primary schools are for all children in the age group of 1-6 years old.

In pre-primary schools children receive education and care for their all-round development. At the pre-school level, the nucleus of the educational work is play.

Day care in private homes is an option for parents but is not considered to be part of the educational system. Supervision of day care in private homes is controlled by the municipality, see [3.6](#).

The Ministry of Education, Science and Culture

Pre-Primary School Act 2008

3.1. Historical Overview

The first all-year child-care centre was established in 1938 in Reykjavik. In 1946 there were 5 child-care centres operated 6 days a week, 4 - 8 hours a day, in the country. These centres were intended for children between the ages of 2 and 6 years old.

From the beginning the ideological foundation of the educational work that was carried out in these child-care centres and later pre-primary schools has always been child-oriented with an emphasis on learning through play in a creative environment.

The first legislation concerning pre-primary schools was passed in 1973 and amended in 1976, 1981 and 1989. The changes in the law stipulated a new division of labour between the state and the local municipalities and gave the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture the task of deciding educational policy for pre-primary schools. In 1991 and again in 1994 a new act on pre-primary schools confirmed its policy in education and established a development fund under the auspices of the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture to promote innovations, experiments and educational development projects. The most recent change was in June 2008 when a new pre-primary school act was put into practice.

[The Ministry of Education, Science and Culture](#)

[Law concerning the Icelandic College for Pre-School Teachers.](#)

[Law on pre-primary schools 1994](#)

3.1.1. Education-oriented school institutions

All pre-primary schools in Iceland operate in accordance to the Pre-primary School Act from 2008 and are education-oriented institutions.

[Pre-Primary School Act 2008](#)

3.1.2. Education-oriented non-school institutions

There are no education-oriented non-school institutions in Iceland.

3.1.3. Child-minders

Approximately 14% of children aged 0-2 years old are cared for in private homes by child-minders, *dagmæður* and 0.1% of the children in the ages 3-5 years old. These homes have permission from local municipalities to care for three to five children at a time and parents pay fees to the child minders. This is not considered to be a part of the school system and comes under the auspices of the Ministry of Social Affairs.

[Landshagir 2009](#)

[The Ministry of Social Affairs and Social Security](#)

3.2. Ongoing Debates and Future Developments

In June 2008 a new pre-primary school act was put into practice. In the new law the focus is on the child, his or her needs and welfare. The role, rights and duties of parents and children are outlined and emphasis is placed on the inclusion of all children in the school irrespective of origin or handicap. More weight is put on quality and that the schools and municipalities assert their accountability towards children, parents and

society. The implementation of new regulations, the new law and the revision of the National Curriculum Guide are now the main challenges.

Pre-Primary School Act 2008

3.3. Specific Legislative Framework

The pre-primary school level is governed by the Pre-primary School Act from 2008. The Act's first article defines pre-primary schools as the first level of the educational system and according to the Act, pre-primary schools are to provide education and care for children below the age at which compulsory education begins. Children's interests and welfare shall be the primary mission of all pre-primary school activities and learning through play shall be encouraged in a creative environment.

According to the Pre-primary School Act, the local municipalities are responsible for the operation of pre-primary schools. They are to establish and operate good pre-primary schools for children and manage the schools in accordance with the law. Furthermore their obligation is to organise specialist services for pre-primary schools. The specialist services should include support for pre-primary school children and their families, as well as support for the pre-primary school and its personnel.

Municipalities shall also recruit pre-primary school education specialist to provide counselling and support to pre-primary schools regarding innovation and development in pre-primary school activities. They shall take care of monitoring pre-primary school operations and encourage cooperation between pre-primary schools as well as between school levels.

The Ministry is to support experiments and development projects and formulate a national curriculum guide for pre-primary schools. The national curriculum guide is to specify the aims that pre-primary schools are to follow and describes the basic means and attitudes that apply in the education of young children.

The Ministry of Education, Science and Culture

Pre-Primary School Act 2008

3.4. General Objectives

The Pre-Primary School Act from 2008 defines its main aim as follows:

- To monitor and encourage children's general development in close cooperation with parents
- To provide systematic linguistic stimulation and contribute to common skills in the Icelandic language
- To provide children with mental, intellectual and physical care according to the needs of each individual, so that they may enjoy their childhood
- To encourage children's broadmindedness and strengthen their moral values
- To lay the foundation necessary for the children to become independent, autonomous, active and responsible participants in a democratic society which is undergoing rapid and continuous development

- To cultivate children's expressive and creative abilities with the aim of strengthening their self esteem, health awareness, confidence and communication skills

Pre-Primary School Act 2008

3.5. Geographical Accessibility

Many local municipalities operate pre-primary schools, but that does not mean that all children are able to attend pre-primary school when their parents so wishes. In some municipalities the demand for places is far greater than the municipalities can meet, see section 3.6. In some cases a rural municipality in the vicinity of a town makes an agreement with the town in question to the effect that children from the municipality are allowed to attend pre-primary schools in the town.

3.6. Admission Requirements and Choice of Institution/Centre

Pre-primary schools are for all children who have not reached the age at which compulsory school begins, i.e. usually the year in which the child turns 6. However, few pre-primary schools accept children less than a year old, and usually the youngest children are at the age of 2. In municipalities where there are waiting lists for places at pre-schools children of single parents and students are often given a priority.

At the pre-primary level, parents can often choose between pre-primary schools within their own municipality, i.e. if there is more than one pre-primary school to choose from.

All handicapped children have the same right as other children to attend pre-primary schools, and in many cases are given a priority status in regard to admission. The programme for the handicapped children is the same as for other children, but adapted to their ability.

Pre-Primary School Act 2008

3.7. Financial Support for Pupils' Families

Local municipalities pay for the construction and the operation of pre-primary schools. Parents contribute a substantial amount towards operating costs of the pre-primary school level. The share that the parents contribute varies from municipality to municipality and in some cases depends on the circumstances of the parents. In some municipalities' single parents and students pay substantially lower fees than others. Many municipalities offer reduction to parents who have two or more children attending schools at the pre-primary level and in some places parents of five year old children pay less than others. On the whole, parents contribute about a third of the operating costs of pre-primary schools.

3.8. Age Levels and Grouping of Children

The structure of many Icelandic pre-primary schools is similar. Each school has 1-5 divisions with 18-24 children in each. Divisions where handicapped and other children are integrated have 14-18 children. The age range of the children is from 1 to 6 but almost all children move over to primary school in the autumn the year that they turn 6. .

Children are often divided into different divisions according to their age. 1, 2 and 3 year old are often together in a division and so are 3 to 5 year old. It is not uncommon, however, especially in smaller communities that children in different age brackets share a division. A child is not moved from one department to another at a particular time of the year. Such a change is made when the time is considered to be right for the child in question and the number of children in other divisions permits it. Pre-primary schools are intended equally for boys and girls, and each division usually has both sexes. A few pre-schools in Iceland divide children into divisions according to sex, see [3.15](#).

Pre-primary schools are most often in buildings that are specifically designed and constructed for their operation. They are situated in places where there is enough room to have a spacious playground.

The Ministry of Education, Science and Culture

Regulation concerning the operation of pre-schools.

3.9. Organisation of Time

At the pre-primary level, each municipality decides the length of the school day and the school year.

3.9.1. Organisation of the Year

Pre-primary schools normally operate for eleven months a year as they usually close for one month because of the summer holidays. There are, however, a few pre-primary schools, that operate longer.

Pre-primary schools do not have Christmas or Easter holidays exceeding the holidays that the general public is given. Pre-primary schools have special preparation days, two to four a year, which the staff uses for preparation and development of their work. On these days the pre-primary schools are closed for the children.

3.9.2. Weekly and Daily Timetable

Pre-primary schools commonly provide a period from six to nine hours a day for the child to stay at the school, and it is up to the parents to decide how long their child stays. However, it also varies from one municipality to another whether the wishes of parents, regarding the length of stay can be fulfilled.

The pre-primary schools open between 7.00 a.m. and 8.00 a.m. and close between 17.30 p.m. and 18.30 p.m. The head teacher and the staff determine the daily routine of a pre-primary school. Meal times, i.e. breakfast, mid-morning refreshments, lunch and afternoon refreshments are a permanent part of the pre-primary school routine. After lunch the younger children usually have a rest. In almost all pre-primary schools children are expected to play outside for a certain time every day.

3.10. Curriculum, Types of Activity, Number of Hours

The Pre-primary School Act stipulates that the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture shall issue a National Curriculum Guidelines, which pre-primary schools are to follow. The most recent publication of the National Curriculum Guide was issued in 1999. The National Curriculum Guide from 1999 is now under

revision but will be in practice until a new one will be issued. The guidelines provide a policy outline for the work in pre-primary schools and stipulate what demands are to be made in education and care.

The national curriculum guidelines for pre-primary schools:

- is a professional policy outline concerning upbringing and education in pre-primary schools
- is based on a child-oriented ideology which focuses on the needs and development of the child
- is a basis for evaluating pre-primary school education and the training of pre-primary school teachers
- is intended to ensure the quality of pre-primary education and to ensure equal opportunities in the upbringing of children
- emphasises the importance of a good relationship between the pre-primary school and the parents and cooperation between the pre-primary school and the compulsory school in the education of the child.

The national curriculum guidelines stress the importance of the play in education and upbringing of children, comprehensive development in their education, discovery learning and creative work.

Individual pre-primary schools are required to formulate their own school curriculum on the basis of the national curriculum guidelines that the Ministry has issued. The school curriculum sets out the policy of the schools and describes how they intend to meet the aims of education and care that are stipulated by the national curriculum guidelines.

The national curriculum guidelines are divided into eight chapters as described in the following text:

- Aims of pre-primary education. In this chapter the general vision in education at pre-primary school level is explained, its aims and the means of achieving those aims.
- Play and pre-primary school activities. In pre-schools children's play should be the route to their learning and maturing. This chapter deals with life skills and daily life; children's development and learning, their games, and the value of belonging to a group. Furthermore, it emphasises physical and mental care that are intertwined and interactive factors. Finally, it deals with the special needs of children, chronically ill children and children of foreign extraction.
- Learning Areas. Pre-primary school learning areas are aspects of emphasis in pre-primary school education. These include motor development, language development, artistic creation, music, nature and environment, culture and society. The learning areas overlap and are an integral part of basic pre- primary school activities: play, daily care and general life-skills.
- Pre-primary schools and homes. A close co-operation between parents and schools is to be developed. According to the Pre-primary schools Act and the Regulation on Pre-primary school Activities, the head teacher is obligated to encourage co-operation between homes the school.
- Pre-primary schools and compulsory schools. This chapter focuses on the co-operation between pre-primary schools and compulsory schools and the co-operation of these school levels with parents' organisations. The staff at pre-primary schools and compulsory schools is to be well acquainted with ideas

and practices at both school levels. Parents of children at the two levels are also encouraged to consult and co-operate.

- The school curriculum. Pre-primary schools are required to compose their own curriculum. They are to stipulate short term and long-term aims in education based on the curriculum guidelines issued by the Ministry of Education and the administrative policies of the pre-primary schools. The school curriculum is to make the work that goes on at the pre-primary school more visible and focused. It is also intended to show comprehensively the education that is provided as well as the conditions that govern the operation of the school. The school curriculum informs the staff of the school of what is expected of them and it is to strengthen the co-operation with parents and other organisations. Parents are to be made familiar with the school curriculum.
- Evaluating the quality of work at the pre-primary school. This chapter deals with the importance of evaluation and what is to be evaluated. The evaluation is divided into internal and external evaluation.. Individual school shall develop means for internal evaluation to evaluate educational work, administration and personal relations. The internal evaluation is to be carried out by the school staff. An unrelated body, in some cases under the auspices of the Ministry of Education, carries out the external assessment.
- Innovations at the pre-primary school level. The law concerning pre-primary education requires the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture to provide annual grants for innovations at the pre-primary school level. This chapter deals with the aims and processes of the innovations.

[The Ministry of Education, Science and Culture](#)

[National Curriculum Guide for Pre-primary Schools](#)

[Law on pre-primary schools 1994](#)

3.11. Teaching Methods and Materials

The Pre-primary School Act and the national curriculum guidelines do not prescribe working methods. Each pre-primary school is expected to choose and develop methods that support the school's aim. Models based on the ideology of Reggio Emilia, Montessori and Waldorf are examples of ideology that have been adapted to suit the conditions and aims of Icelandic pre-primary schools. Most models stress the area of work; i.e. that specific types of games are played in different locations. This applies to activities such as artwork, sorting and ordering games, role-play, motion games, music, water games etc.

Most pre-primary schools are eclectic in their approach to different ideologies and choose to adapt them to their circumstances. Free and organised play is emphasised, and so is linguistic and artistic, musical creativity as well as exercise.

Each pre-primary school provides the children with play materials, such as books and toys. There is no coordination across pre-primary schools concerning choice of material. Many pre-primary schools offer computer sessions on individual basis for the oldest children in order to enhance their computer skills.

In the pre-primary school, the child is first and foremost to learn through play by dealing with various tasks under normal and concrete circumstances. First hand experience is considered important. The role of a qualified pre-primary schoolteacher is therefore primarily to create proper and stimulating learning

conditions. A great emphasis is placed on the interaction between the pre-primary school teacher and the children and a democratic form of co-operation, which is based on mutual respect.

Pre-Primary School Act 2008

3.12. Evaluation of Children

Pre-primary schools are not required to assess the performance or the progress of each individual child. However, the pre-primary school staff or specialists make such an assessment, if any suspicion of deviation from normal development arises.

Each pre-primary school shall systematically evaluate the achievements and quality of its activities with active participation, as relevant, from pre-primary School personnel, children and parents. The pre-primary school issues publicly information on its internal evaluation, its connections with school curriculum guide and plans for improvement.

Municipalities shall administer assessment and quality control of pre-primary school activities and provide the Ministry with information about implementation of pre-primary school operations, internal and external evaluation, process of pre-primary school policy and plans for improvement.

The Ministry of Education, Science and Culture

Pre-Primary School Act 2008

3.13. Support Facilities

Municipalities shall organise specialist services for pre-primary schools. Specialist services include support for pre-primary school children and their families, as well as support for pre-primary school activities and its personnel. The municipalities shall determine the organisation of specialist services and endeavour to provide the services within the pre-primary school itself.

Children who need special assistance and training according to evaluation by recognised diagnostic specialists are entitled to such services within the pre-primary school. The service shall be carried out under specialist supervision according to decision by the pre-primary school head teacher and the specialist services, with the parents' collaboration. The pre-primary school head teacher shall coordinate the work of those that take care of matters concerning individual children.

Pre-Primary School Act 2008

3.14. Private Sector Provision

Local municipalities have the power to allow parents or private parties to operate a pre-primary school. All the private pre-primary schools get financial support from their local municipality, and therefore the private sector of the pre-primary level could be described as grant-aided private sector. In 2008 approximately 13% of all children in pre-primary schools attended privately run schools. It varies in which form private pre-primary schools are operated. There are, for example, parent-operated pre-primary schools where a special

association is formed to carry out the operation of the school, and there are organizations that manage and directing pre-primary schools that work in accordance with a particular ideology.

There are no differences in the provision of private education or in the legislative framework compared to the public sector.

The Ministry of Education, Science and Culture

Pre-Primary School Act 2008

3.15. Organisational Variations and Alternative Structures

The Hjalli School Model uses segregated avenues in carrying out the work of boys and girls in the pre-primary school. Children are divided into separate divisions on the basis of their gender most of the time but brought together in mixed groups at certain times during the day so that segregation and integration on the basis of the child's sex is used in a revolving fashion to obtain the best possible results for each individual. According to the Hjalli School Model boys and girls need different types of exercise and different reactions. The Hjalli School Model stresses clear rules of behaviour, care for other human beings and the environment. These schools are without traditional toys and the aim is to stimulate the children's own creative and imaginative powers.

3.16. Statistics

Please refer to the subdivisions for more details.

3.16.1. Pre-primary schools and attendance

Pre-primary school attendance, December 2007

0 – 2 years of age	44% of the age group in question
3 – 5 years of age	97% of the age group in question
0 – 5 years of age	70% of the age group in question

	Dec. 2008	%
Pre-primary schools - total	275	
Pre-primary schools run by municipalities	238	
Private pre-primary schools	37	13% of pre-primary schools
Children in pre-primary schools - total	18.278	
Children in pre-primary schools run by municipalities	15.912	87% of children in pre-primary schools
Children in private pre-primary schools	2.366	13% of children in pre-primary schools

Landshagir 2009

Statistics Iceland