



How is the school year organised in OECD countries?

EDUCATION INDICATORS IN FOCUS

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#86



- On average, primary school students in OECD countries receive 805 hours of instruction per year, and lower secondary students 916 hours, spread over 38 school weeks. However, these averages mask wide variations across countries.
- The total length of school vacations averages around 14 weeks per year, ranging from less than 11 weeks in Costa Rica and Denmark to 17 weeks in Greece, Latvia and Lithuania.
- The organisation of the school year, in particular the length of the summer holidays, is frequently debated but is rarely the subject of educational reforms because of its sensitive nature.
- Contrary to common assumptions, the length of instruction time is not closely related to students' academic performance. The quality of instruction and other factors such as students' participation to private tutoring and extracurricular educational activities, play critical roles in determining learning outcomes, too.

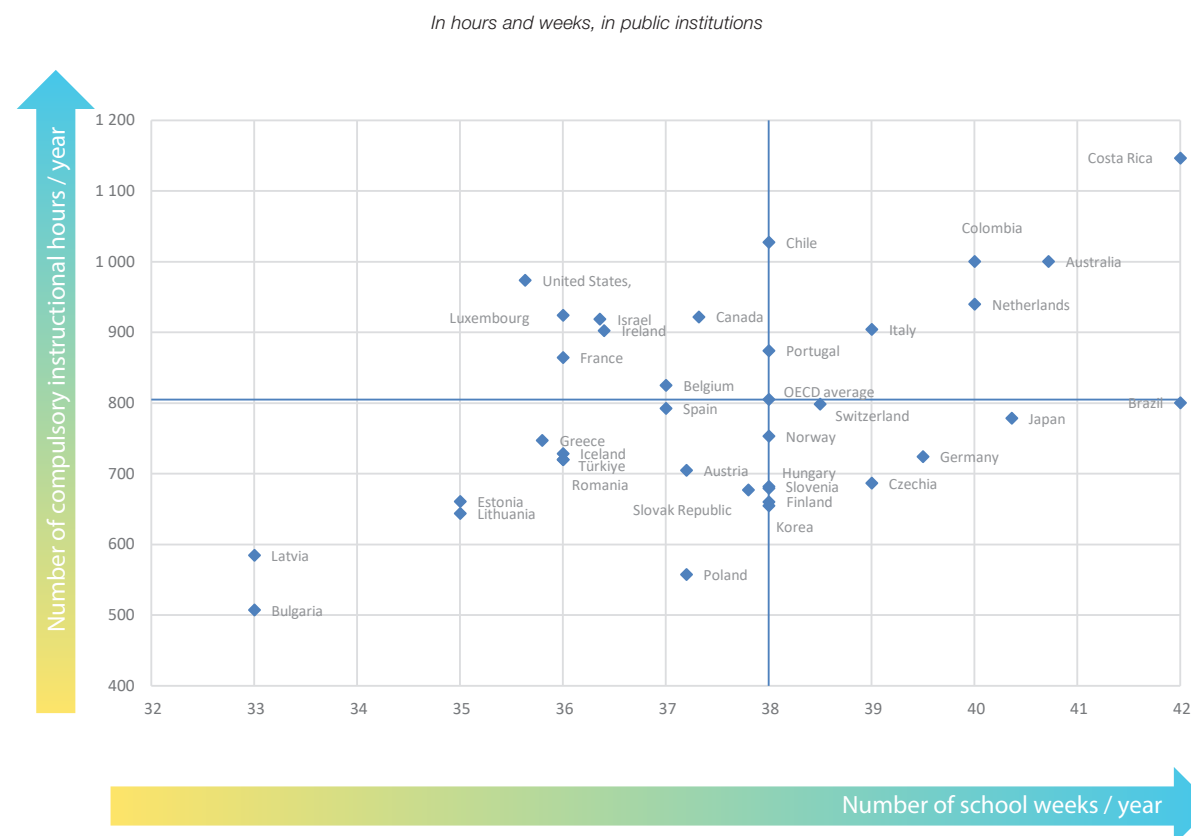
Organisation of the school year: Number of weeks and instructional hours

In many OECD countries, particularly in Europe, the school year typically starts in early September, although in some countries it may begin in late August or early October. However, this pattern is not universal. For instance, in Australia and New Zealand the school year starts in late January or early February to align with the end of the Southern Hemisphere summer. Similarly, most South American countries commence their school year in February or March. Finally, Japan's school year begins in April, coinciding with the start of the fiscal year and the cherry blossom season, symbolising new beginnings (OECD (2023[1]), Annex 1). These variations highlight the diversity in academic calendars worldwide, reflecting each country's unique context and cultural practices.

Countries also differ in the number of instructional hours received by students and the length of the school year. On average, primary school students in OECD countries receive 805 hours of instruction per year, and lower secondary students receive 916 hours, spread over 38 school weeks. In some countries, such as Australia, Colombia, Croatia and the Netherlands, the school year is longer (at least 40 weeks) with above-average instructional hours to cover comprehensive curricula. In contrast, Bulgaria, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania have shorter school years (less than 36 weeks) with fewer instructional hours, making it necessary to focus on specific learning objectives (Figure 1).

In general, the countries where students receive above-average instructional time are also those with the longest school years. However, some countries organise their school year differently. For example students in Canada, France and the United States receive an above-average number of instructional hours concentrated into a relatively small number of weeks each year (Figure 1). This can pose challenges for students who are struggling academically, as the condensed timetable leaves less room for opportunities during the school week when they might be able to catch up. In contrast, countries such as Czechia and Japan offer fewer hours of instruction spread over a longer school year, allowing students more time to delve into the curriculum or to revisit concepts that they have not yet mastered.

Figure 1. Compulsory instruction time and number of school weeks per year in primary education (2023)



Source: OECD (2023[1]), Education at a Glance 2023, <https://doi.org/10.1787/e13bef63-en>, Chapter D1.

While the structure of the school year, including the number of weeks and total teaching hours, is often a topic of debate, it is rarely changed. For instance, the only OECD country to make a significant change to instructional hours between 2015 and 2023 was Poland, which reduced them in primary education by over 10%, from 635 hours per year in 2015 to 558 hours in 2023 (OECD (2023[1]), Chapter C7).

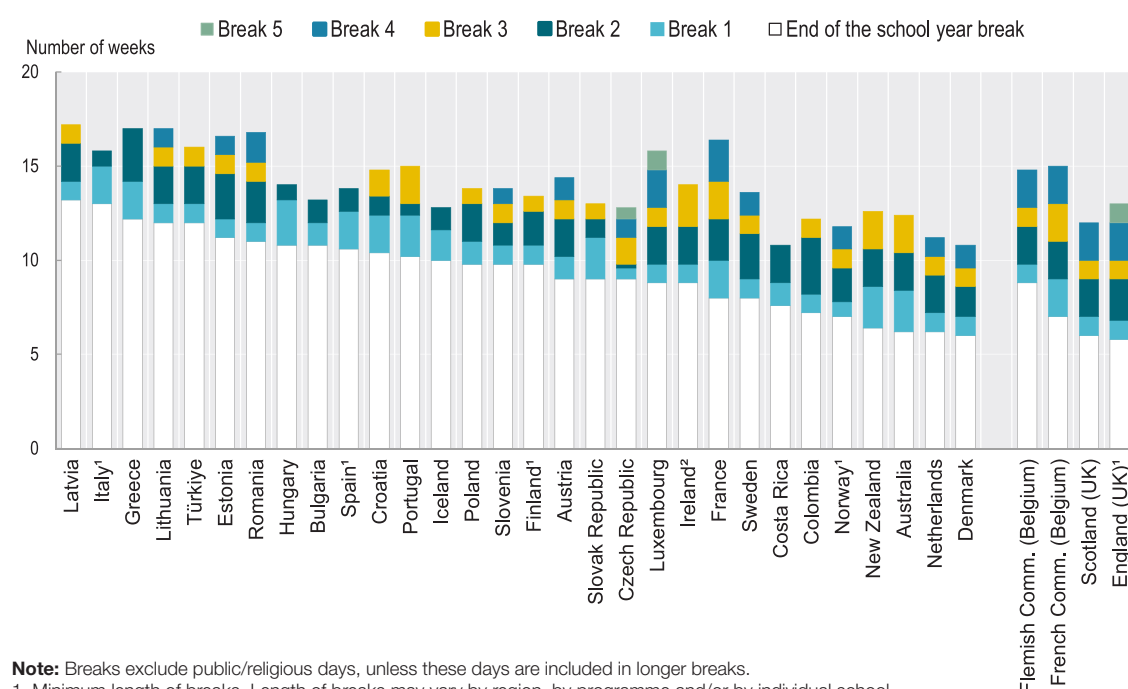
This reluctance to change the school calendar or daily schedule arises primarily because doing so calls into question the entire organisational structure of the education system. Changes to school timings have far-reaching implications, affecting not only academic schedules but also transport, family routines, extracurricular activities, the tourism economy and community services. The logistical challenges of implementing such changes can be substantial, leading policy makers to seek less disruptive alternatives.

Summer holidays and other breaks over the school year

School vacation periods also vary significantly across countries. The total length of school breaks ranges from under 11 weeks in Costa Rica and Denmark, to as long as 17 weeks in Greece, Latvia and Lithuania, averaging around 14 weeks globally. In all countries, the longest break occurs between successive school years, commonly during the summer holidays. This break ranges from 6 weeks in Denmark to 13 weeks or more in some regions of Italy and in Latvia. In almost every country, it accounts for at least half of the total school holiday time (Figure 2).

Figure 2. School breaks in compulsory primary education (2023)

In weeks, in public institutions



Note: Breaks exclude public/religious days, unless these days are included in longer breaks.

1. Minimum length of breaks. Length of breaks may vary by region, by programme and/or by individual school.

2. End-of-year break includes examination periods.

Countries and other participants are ranked in descending order of duration of the end-of-school-year break.

Source: OECD (2023[1]), Education at a Glance 2023, <https://doi.org/10.1787/e13bef63-en>, Chapter D1.

There are many explanations for the long summer holidays in some countries. Southern European countries, for instance, primarily attribute their longer holidays to their climate and to coincide with peak tourist seasons. High temperatures during summer make it challenging for schools lacking adequate cooling systems to function effectively. Historically, this period also aligns with agricultural cycles, allowing families to participate in harvest activities. In contrast, some Nordic countries like Iceland and Finland, which also have above-average summer breaks, use them to promote a balance between rest and academic work. The long summer holidays are seen as a necessary respite from the intense and focused academic year, providing students with ample time to relax and engage in outdoor activities during the pleasant summer months.

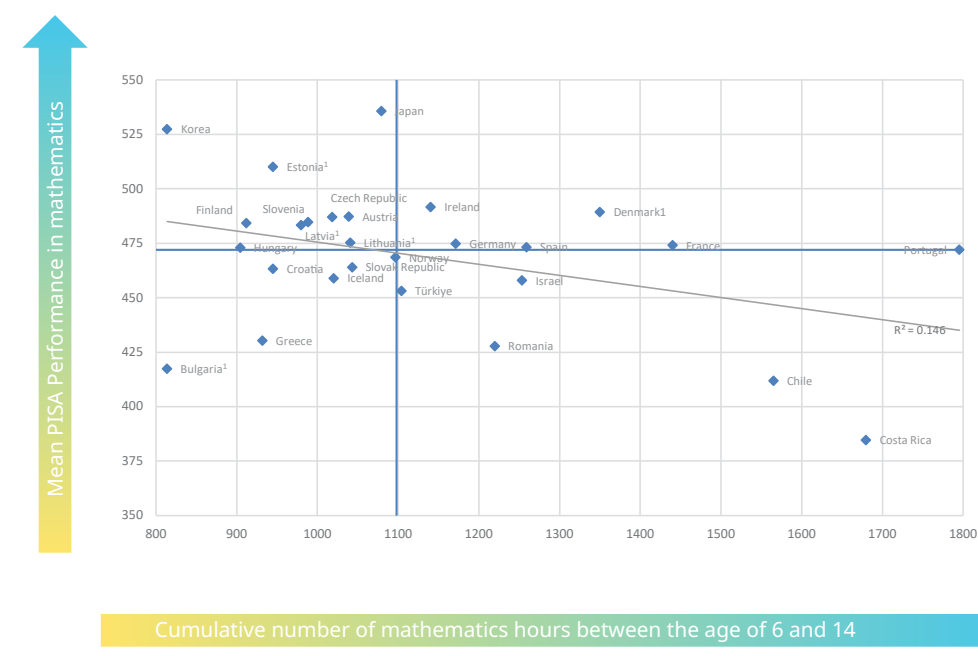
In addition to the extended summer break, students typically have two to four shorter holiday periods throughout the school year. However, in Czechia, England (United Kingdom) and Luxembourg, a fifth break is also provided. Overall, the total duration of these additional breaks averages around 5 weeks, varying from less than 3 weeks in Bulgaria, Costa Rica, Iceland and Italy, to 7 weeks or more in England (United Kingdom), France, the French Community of Belgium and Luxembourg (Figure 2).

Research studies (Kromydas et al., 2022[2]) have shown that extended holidays exacerbate educational inequalities, as students from disadvantaged backgrounds may lack access to enriching activities and academic support during this period. Therefore, some countries have started to reconsider their school vacation policies, particularly focusing on the length of the end-of-year break. However, reducing the duration of the summer break poses significant challenges due to the lack of popularity for such a change among students, parents and teachers. Nevertheless, in countries like England (United Kingdom) and France, experts and policy makers are actively exploring the possibility of shortening summer breaks. In England (United Kingdom), the proposal includes shortening summer holidays but increasing other breaks throughout the year (Adams, 2024[3]), while in France, the proposal under discussion is to shorten summer holidays while keeping the other breaks the same length (Robles, 2023[4]). These proposals remain in the discussion phase for now, as it is a sensitive issue requiring careful consideration and consensus before any changes are made.

Relationship between cumulative instruction time and learning outcomes

How much emphasis the curriculum places on core subjects like mathematics and reading varies significantly from one country to another. For instance, the amount of instructional time dedicated to mathematics that a student will have received between the age of 6 and 14 ranges widely from under 900 hours in Bulgaria and Korea to over 1 600 hours in Costa Rica and Portugal. Contrary to what might be assumed, the countries where students spend the most hours doing mathematics do not always achieve the best academic performance in that subject. As Figure 3 shows, the countries with the greatest accumulation of teaching hours often do not rank highest in PISA 2022. For example, 15-year-old students in countries like Estonia, Finland, Korea and Slovenia have consistently performed above the OECD average in PISA mathematics assessments despite having received a below-average number of hours of dedicated maths teaching since the age of six.

Figure 3. Cumulative number of hours in mathematics per student between the age of 6 and 14 (2023) and mean mathematics performance in PISA at age 15 (2022)



Note: 1. Data refer to students between the age of 7 and 15 instead of 6 and 14.

Source: OECD (2023[1]), Education at a Glance 2023, <https://doi.org/10.1787/e13bef63-en>, Chapter D1; and OECD (2023[5]), PISA 2022 Results (Volume I), <https://doi.org/10.1787/53f23881-en>.

There are several possible explanations for this phenomenon. First, the relationship between instruction time and academic performance is not fully captured because instruction time in school only accounts for a portion of the total learning time. For example, in Korea, a significant amount of private tutoring complements formal education. To fully understand the relationship with learning outcomes, it is important to also consider these additional factors such as students' participation to private tutoring and extracurricular educational activities. Second, the quantity of education is not a guarantee of the quality of education. In other words, spending more hours studying mathematics does not necessarily mean better understanding or better results if the teaching methods are not effective or if educational resources are insufficient. Third, other factors play a crucial role in students' performance in mathematics. The quality of teachers, the engagement and support of parents, and the overall school environment can all influence academic results.

Educational systems that prioritise a balanced approach, combining adequate instructional hours with student-centred teaching strategies, tend to achieve better outcomes. Finally, students' attitudes towards mathematics, their motivation and their self-confidence can also have a significant impact on their performance, regardless of the time spent in class (OECD, 2023[5]).

The bottom line

Although school timetables are often scrutinised, they are rarely the subject of educational reforms. There is no universal model for structuring school time, as countries vary considerably in terms of annual compulsory instruction time, the length of the school holidays and the allocation of time to different subjects. Simply increasing the amount of class time devoted to core subjects such as mathematics does not automatically guarantee improved learning outcomes, particularly if teaching methods are not effective or if educational resources are insufficient. Moreover, additional factors such as students' participation in private tutoring and extracurricular educational activities also play important roles.

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