

Switzerland

Educational System—overview¹

The structure of the educational system starts with preschool education. It is called *kindergarten* in German-speaking Switzerland, *école enfantine* in the French-speaking area, and *scuola dell'infanzia* in the Italian-speaking canton of Ticino. Preschool was first introduced in the first half of the nineteenth century in a few large cities, in Geneva in 1826 and Zurich in 1845. Since that time it has spread to all the cantons.

Preschool is followed by compulsory education, comprising the primary and first level of secondary school. These differ widely in structure throughout Switzerland, although there are moves toward intercantonal coordination. In general the Swiss educational system reflects the continental system. The period of primary education varies by canton. In general it lasts six years, but in some cases only four years (like the *Grundschule* in Germany), or five (like the *scola elementare* in Italy). This shorter period in primary school is offset by a longer period at the next stage of secondary school. For example, in Ticino, the Italian-speaking canton, primary education lasts five years and is followed by a single *scola media* lasting four years. In French-speaking Valais, on the other hand, primary school lasts six years and secondary education, considered as an orientation cycle, is only three years.

There is a single teacher per class, not only in primary schools, but also in some first cycle secondary schools. However, in practice other teachers are involved, particularly for various types of remedial reading and optional arts and technology subjects. There is a particularly marked differentiation of methods in the case of children with learning difficulties—roughly five percent of a particular age group—who are taught in smaller classes.

During compulsory education, children are taught in their mother tongue, French, Italian, or German, depending upon the canton. In bilingual cantons, schools follow the predominant language of the municipality or commune. In German-speaking Switzerland, this presents a special problem because dialect rather than Standard German is spoken. In Switzerland, dialect usage is prevalent in all parts of German Switzerland. The widely used term *Schwyzertütsch*, or Swiss German, represents not a single language but a wide range of local and regional dialects. Although quite different in the various Swiss German regions, most of the dialects are mutually comprehensible without difficulty. Unlike the Swiss German majority, French and Italian Swiss are not dialect-speakers.

¹ <https://education.stateuniversity.com/pages/1472/Switzerland-EDUCATIONAL-SYSTEM-OVERVIEW.html>

Virtually all German Swiss children must learn High German in school, starting in the early primary grades. Most German Swiss become bilingual between dialect and standard German during the first few years of elementary schooling. School is the institution where more High German is spoken than anywhere else. It is the responsibility of the schools to teach High German to children who have only a very vague and passive knowledge of Standard German when they start school. During the first year at school, nothing but dialect is spoken. In the second year, the teacher changes gradually from High German for certain subjects, whereas the texts for reading are in High German from the very beginning. This imposes high demands upon German-speaking Swiss children, for they have to learn to read, write, and use a relatively unknown language all at once. Later on, the language spoken during the actual lessons is mainly High German.

There is a need to learn additional languages because Switzerland is a multilingual society and a small country in the heart of Europe. The requirement that a second language be taught from the fourth grade onwards (usually German in the French-speaking cantons and French in Ticino and the German-speaking cantons) makes additional demands on primary schools. In the canton of Zurich, at the end of 2000, the education director, responding to the pressure from pupils and their parents, changed the first foreign language to English with French only learned in later grades. The movement toward English as the first foreign tongue to be learned in the schools in German-speaking cantons has generated concern in French Switzerland, which encompasses less than one-fifth of the Swiss population.

Most cantons provide several types of education at the lower secondary level, with several different sections with two or three different categories of requirements. Other cantons provide more crossover points from one track to another. The first level of secondary school has resulted in a complex and varied system among the cantons, which is, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, undergoing attempts toward more standardization between cantons.

The postsecondary or upper secondary level consists of Maturitätsschulen, or general education schools, which are attended by 17-20 percent of a student group. Teacher training colleges are attended by less than three percent of the appropriate age group. Schools offering a technical diploma enroll about four percent of students. The dual system of schooling and apprenticeship enrolls almost 70 percent of the 16-19 year olds. The remainder of the group attends technical high schools or other programs.

One of the most marked features of postsecondary education in Switzerland is the contrast between two highly specific tracks. The larger of these is the system of apprenticeship known as the dual system. Students go to a vocational school for approximately two days a week, with the rest of the time spent in on-the-job training. This cycle of upper secondary education is usually started at the age of 16 or 17. Approximately 70 percent of students opt for the apprenticeship system and over 90 percent of them are awarded a certificate of proficiency.

The federal law on vocational training applies to 260 professions in industry, trades, and commerce. A separate law covers the fields of agriculture and forestry. Apprenticeships tend to last for three or four years, depending on the field. The less academically oriented students may go into elementary vocational training, which lasts only one or two years. Only one percent of the apprentices choose this option. At the end of elementary vocational education successful students are awarded an official certificate instead of the federal diploma (CFC).

The gymnasium provides an academic general education for those students who plan to attend university. It is an elite and selective publicly funded school. The number of those taking the matura or maturité exam has increased in recent years. Between 1986 and 1998 the percentage awarded this certificate almost doubled to 19 percent.

A third track is also emerging in Switzerland between the gymnasium and apprenticeship dual education system. A series of full-time vocational training programs provide education for social workers, primary school teachers, and for a large number of middle-ranking business and technical careers. Usually these schools provide an intermediate diploma rather than the maturité certificate. They comprised about 11 percent of the 1998 graduates.

The tertiary level of education is comprised of university, teacher training schools for postprimary students, and higher vocational schools and apprenticeship programs. There are 11 traditional university level institutions in Switzerland. Four cantonal universities (in Basle, Zurich, Berne, and St. Gallen), the Swiss Institute for Further Training in Upper Secondary Education in Lucerne, and the Federal Institute of Technology in Zurich are in the German-speaking part of Switzerland. German Switzerland encompasses three-quarters of the population and 20 cantons. The other cantonal universities (Lausanne, Geneva, Neuchâtel, and Fribourg, the latter offering courses in French and German) and the Federal Institute of Technology in Lausanne are located in the French-speaking part of Switzerland, which encompasses around 19 percent of the population. Ticino, the only Italian-speaking canton that comprises eight percent of the Swiss population, also has its own university. It is the newest of the Swiss universities only coming into existence in the mid-1990s. The distribution of universities illustrates the ability of the Swiss to accommodate, and over-represent the minority language groups at the university level.

In addition to universities, there are also local specialized institutions of higher learning that do not require the federal matura certificate for entrance. These applied institutions include the areas of engineering, administration and commerce, the hotel trade and tourism, health care, counseling and applied psychology, social work, media, communications and information technology, and arts and design. In order to enter these schools one must have a Berufsmatura, which is earned with a year of intensive study after the apprenticeship or appropriate upper secondary school.

The Fachhochschulen, or nonuniversity institutes of higher learning, stress a high level of applied skills. They are a relatively new part of the higher education system in Switzerland. Fachhochschulen are meant to fill the gap in the new postindustrial society for highly skilled individuals without a university education. Most of the institutions are cantonal or regional in nature. Fachhochschulen are distributed throughout Swiss society. By the beginning of the twenty-first century there were 20 in French-speaking Switzerland, and five in the Ticino. In German-speaking Switzerland, where they predominate, five were located in central Switzerland, nine in eastern Switzerland, and five in northwest Switzerland. More than 20 were located in the two most populous German-speaking cantons of Zurich and Bern. Nonuniversity higher education is a very important part of the Swiss education system. For example, the cantonal institutes of technology produce three times more engineers than the two Federal Institutes of Technology.

Additional topics

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