Types of institutions

Nursery schools

Nursery schools constitute the most popular form of pre-primary education. They function throughout the whole school year, with breaks stipulated by the managing body upon agreement with the nursery school head and council. If no council functions in the given nursery school the dates have to be indicated by both the school head and the parents council.

No winter or summer holidays are included in nursery school functioning which results in defining them as institutions with no holidays. The nursery school “school year” finishes on 31 August. Public nursery schools:

1. implement pre-primary programmes based on the core curriculum for pre-primary education;
2. provide free education and care during the time stipulated by the managing body, but no less than 5 hours a day;
3. recruit children on free access basis;
4. employ teachers with relevant qualifications, stipulated in the separate legislation.

Non-public nursery schools:

1. implement pre-primary programmes based on the core curriculum for pre-primary education;
2. employ teachers with relevant qualifications as defined for public nursery schools.

In non-public nursery schools all the organizational matters, also those including the numbers of pupils in groups are defined by managing bodies.

Public nursery schools can have one or more groups. The number of pupils in one group cannot exceed 25. Children in each group are usually of similar age, and their interest, abilities and SEN are taken into consideration.

The number of children in a group in integration nursery school and the number of children in an integration group in a mainstream school is maximum 20, including no more than 5 disabled pupils.

In order to ensure the stability and effectiveness of education and care it is recommended that the same teacher is in charge of one group up to the moment when children in this group graduate from pre-primary education.

Daily time table is based on a general time table stipulated by the nursery school head upon request by the pedagogical council, while taking into consideration health and safety regulations, necessary conditions for education and care, needs, interests and abilities of children, their disabilities as well as
parents expectations. The general daily timetable forms basis for establishing detailed time tables for groups by their teachers, while taking into consideration needs and interests of children.

**Pre-school classes in primary schools**

General organisational requirements in pre-school classes in primary schools are the same as in nursery schools.

A pre-school class in primary school is not included in the organisational structure of that school, and forms a separate unit which follows a separate programme. Education and care are organized as in pre-primary groups in nursery schools, according to the nursery school statutes.

The primary school head is directly responsible for organization and functioning of pre-school classes.

**Other forms of pre-primary education**

Other forms of pre-primary education (namely pre-school centres and units) are organised for children in their local community or in another location, as close to their home as possible. Teachers in charge of classes in other form of pre-primary education have qualifications required for teachers employed in nursery schools. Teachers working in other forms of pre-primary education managed by local authorities are employed by a head of a local nursery or primary school. The number of pupils cannot exceed 25 and be lower than 3 children. Parents of children can participate in classes offered by a unit or centre, this also applies to other family members whose presence has been approved by the parents. Minimal duration of classes offered by the unit or centre has been stipulated as 3 hours while the minimal scope of weekly hours depends on the number of children enrolled (e.g. in a group of 21 to 25 children it is set at 25 hours).

**Pre-school centres**

Classes in pre-school centres are offered throughout the school year, apart from breaks defined by the managing body.

**Pre-school units**

Classes in pre-school units are offered throughout the school year on particular week days, apart from breaks defined by the managing body.

**Geographical accessibility**

**Accessibility**

The concept of increasing participation in preschool education is part of a systemic approach in Poland. The approach is based on arrangements put in place and trialled in other European countries as part of ‘early childhood education and care policy’. The measures which are being taken by the Ministry of National Education include;

- development of a network of preschool education institutions, and availability of various preschool education settings for preschool age children;
- counselling (referred to as pedagogical support) and other forms of support in addressing problems for parents raising young children;
- counselling (referred to as pedagogical and psychological support) and specialist support to facilitate the development and education of children, address development delays and
Preschool education is provided to children from the beginning of the school year in the calendar year when the child reaches the age of 3 till the end of the school year in the calendar year when the child reaches the age of 7. Where justified, a child who has reached the age of 2.5 years may participate in preschool education[9].

Children aged 3 to 5 years have the right to participate in preschool education in a nursery school, a preschool class in a primary school or another preschool education setting.

6-year old children are required to complete one year of preparatory preschool education.

The main dividing line between the areas of good and poor preschool education accessibility has run so far between big cities and rural areas. Nursery schools and schools could not be established in some sparsely populated areas due to low numbers of children. Thus, demographic and geographical factors have had a significant impact on access to preschool education.

At the same time, communes have very rarely chosen to establish and operate preschool education units or centres, as one of the options available, as close to the child’s home as possible. At present, there are considerable needs in the area of preschool education, stemming from amendments to the school education legislation whereby every child aged 3 to 6 years should be provided with a place in a preschool education setting.

Pursuant to the Law on School Education[1], in the case of 5- and 6-year olds, if the distance between the child's home and the school or nursery school exceeds 3 km, the commune (gmina) (the lowest-level local government unit) is required to provide free transport to a public nursery school, another public preschool education setting or public school with preschool classes, and free care during transport.

**Participation**

In the school year 2017/2018, the overall rate of participation in preschool education was:

- 73.6%, with 84.0% in urban areas and 59.1% in rural areas, for 3-year-olds;
- 86.7%, with 93.4% in urban areas and 77.5% in rural areas, for 4-year-olds;
- 93.4%, with 97.1% in urban areas and 88.4% in rural areas, for 5-year-olds.

In the school year 2017/2018, 96.7% of 6-year olds were enrolled in total in preschool education institutions or first grades of the primary school, with 99.2% in urban areas and 93.31% in rural areas[10]. Some 6-year-olds entered the first grade of the primary school, as part of compulsory full-time education, since parents could choose the education path for their 6-years old children (preschool education or school education). (Data from the School Education Information System (SIO)). In the school year 2018/2019, the overall rate of participation in preschool education was:

- 77.9%, with 86.4% in urban areas and 65.5% in rural areas, for 3-year-olds;
- 89.4%, with 95.5% in urban areas and 80.9% in rural areas, for 4-year-olds;
- 95.0%, with 97.9% in urban areas and 90.9% in rural areas, for 5-year-olds.

In the school year 2018/2019, 99.4% of 6-year-old children in total were enrolled in preschool
education institutions (or first grades of the primary school), with 101.7% in urban areas and 96.3% in rural areas (the rate exceeds 100% as given the requirement to complete one-year preparatory preschool education, the data includes children participating in education abroad)\[11\]. Remaining 6-year-olds entered the first grade of the primary school, as part of compulsory full-time education, since parents could choose the education path for their 6-years old children (preschool education or school education) (Data from the School Education Information System (SIO)).

As compared to 2017/2018, the rate of participation in preschool education in 2018/2019 rose by 4.3% for 3-year-olds, by 2.7% for 4-year-olds and 1.6% for 5-year-olds.

In 2018, the number of children participating in preschool education again grew significantly to 1,392,900 (by 31,700 as compared to 2017).

At the same time, as compared to 2013, the number of children in preschool education decreased by around 60,000 in 2014, while the participation rate in preschool education for 3- to 5-year-olds increased by more than 5%.

The difference between 2015 and 2014 was even more significant: the number of children in preschool education decreased by nearly 96,000 again. At the same time, the participation rate in preschool education for 3- to 5-year-olds increased by nearly 5%. This reflected demographic trends, i.e. declining populations in successive cohorts, and the creation of new places for preschool education.

New arrangements put in place by the legislation have contributed to higher participation rates. In 2016, 1,299,100 children were enrolled in preschool education institutions (an increase by 158,000 as compared to 2015) and 1,361,200 in 2017 (an increase by 62,000 as compared to 2016).

In the school year 2017/2018, the preschool education participation rate for 3- to 5-year-olds was 84.7%. Preschool education institutions were attended by a much larger proportion of children in urban areas (91.5%) than in rural areas (75.2%).

In the school year 2018/2019, the preschool education participation rate for 3- to 5-year-olds was 87.4%. Preschool education institutions were still attended by a much larger proportion of children in urban areas (93.3%) than in rural areas (79.2%). The higher participation rates in the school year 2017/2018 resulted from changes in the school system: 7-year old children were required to enter the primary school and 6-year-olds to follow one-year preparatory preschool education; children aged 3 to 5 years were granted the statutory right to participate in preschool education as from 1 September 2017. Thus, each commune was obliged to provide preschool education places to all 3- to 5-year-olds whose parents wished their children to be enrolled.

**Network of nursery schools**

The 2015 amendments to the School Education Act [2] (Ustawa o systemie oświaty) re-established the responsibility of heads of the regional education authorities (REA) (kurator oświaty) for overseeing activities of local government units with regard to the network of schools and nursery schools.

The council of a commune may design the network of public nursery schools, preschool classes in primary schools and other types of preschool education settings upon receiving a positive opinion from the head of the REA. The head of the REA assesses whether the network designed provides places for all children concerned who live in a given commune to participate in one-year preparatory preschool education, and for 5-, 4-year-old and, as from 1 September 2017, also 3-year-old children to participate in preschool education.
Establishment and financing of nursery schools

The establishment and management of nursery schools are statutory and mandatory tasks of communes (gmina). Part of funding for this purpose comes from income taxes paid by natural and legal persons. Additionally, communes receive targeted State-budget grants for preschool education tasks.

The expenditure on preschool education amounted to 1,574 mln PLN in 2015 and 1,563 mln PLN in 2016 (the amount was lower as a result of the school starting age lowered to 6 years). In 2017, the spending amounted to 1,289 mln PLN. The amount was lower as, since 1 January 2017, the school education subsidy has included an average amount of 4,300 PLN (three times more than before) for 6-year-olds and older children. Thus, in total, an amount of 1,428 mln PLN was allocated for this purpose. In 2018, the funds disbursed included: around 1,354 mln PLN as the targeted subsidy for communes for the development of preschool education, and 1,612 mln PLN as the subsidy for 6-year-olds (in total, nearly 3 billion PLN).

For 2019, an amount of 1,413 mln PLN was earmarked as a targeted subsidy for communes, and 1,717 mln PLN as a subsidy for 6-year-old children (in total, 3.1 billion PLN).

With subsidies introduced for 6-year-old children participating in preschool education, fees were abolished for preschool education which extended beyond the number of hours of fee-free teaching, education and care set by communes (at least 5 hours). Parents of children in preschool education who are covered by a State-budget subsidy no longer pay fees, except for meals. Thus, children who are required to complete one year of preschool preparatory education are provided with fee-free education[12].

Furthermore, preschool education is supported by the European Social and Investments Funds (the current programming period 2014-2020). Funds are allocated primarily for the creation of new preschool education places and quality improvement in preschool education. The amount allocated from the European Social Fund for the years 2014-2020 is around MEUR 335.6, which represents 84.28% of the total amount for this purpose, and 15.72% comes from the State budget (the amount will depend on the EUR-PLN exchange rate).

Geographic variations in the preschool education network are still an issue. Some communes are still struggling to provide high-quality preschool education.

As the managing bodies, communes take responsibility for activities of public nursery schools. The tasks of a managing body include in particular:

1. providing conditions for the activity of nursery schools, including safe and healthy conditions for learning, education and care;
2. providing conditions for special organisation of the learning process and use of special working methods for children participating in special education;
3. renovating nursery school facilities and making related investments;
4. providing administrative, including legal, financial and organisational, services to nursery schools;
5. providing nursery schools with educational resources and equipment necessary for full implementation of preschool education curricula, and performing other statutory tasks;
6. performing labour-law tasks vis-à-vis heads of nursery schools[13].
Admission requirements and choice of ECEC institution

As from the school year 2017/2018, admission rules for public nursery schools (przedszkola) are laid down in the Law on School Education. Decisions are taken by parents who, in most cases, choose institutions within the area of their commune (gmina) (lowest-level local government unit). The age of a child is the main criterion: children should reach 3 years of age. In special cases, younger children of 2.5 years of age may be enrolled upon the consent of the head of a nursery school (change introduced by an amendment to the School Education Act in 2003).

The Law on School Education states that the procedure of admission to public nursery schools is initiated at the parents’ application submitted to the head of a chosen institution (an application can be submitted to a maximum of 3 nursery schools). In nursery schools which are particularly attractive for parents, where the demand exceeds the number of places available, an admission procedure includes up to 3 stages, depending on the needs.

3-stage admission procedure

At the first stage, the nursery school admits children living within the jurisdiction of a given commune who are required to participate in preschool education (6-year-olds), and children aged 3 to 5 years. Children in this age group have the statutory right to participate in preschool education.

Where the number of children from the commune exceeds the number of places available, at the second admission stage the nursery school applies criteria laid down by national legislation (for the first group) which concern a difficult family situation or health problems of a child (statutory criteria of the same weight).

Where the number of children from families which require special care from the State and are in a similar situation is still higher than the number of places available, at the third (final) admission stage the nursery school applies criteria defined by the commune (for the second group) which refer to the needs of the family and local community or, where necessary, a financial criterion. (These are local criteria, defined by the commune, and their number cannot exceed six. A fixed number of points is assigned to each of them.)

Catchment areas

A commune should provide preschool education places to children living within its jurisdiction. Public nursery schools which still have places available upon admitting all children from a given commune can admit children from other communes, at their parents’ request. Where necessary, for applicants from outside the commune, they may apply admission criteria relating, first of all, to a difficult family situation or health problems of a child, and then to the needs of the family and local community and, where appropriate, the financial criterion.

The issue of unavailability of preschool education is fading into history. In many cases, it is difficult to enrol a child in a particular nursery school, whereas places in nursery schools are still available in many communes, despite earlier concerns. This results mainly from the extension of the preschool education infrastructure.

The issue which should be addressed in the coming years is the uneven distribution of places in the network of preschool education institutions. In some communes, parents complain about an insufficient number of places. At the same time, statistics show that currently (the school year 2018/2019) nearly 114,000 are still untaken in preschool education institutions.
Support for non-public providers

Where the commune does not provide places to all children who are required or have the right to participate in preschool education, it should organise an open competition for non-public nursery schools (and, subsequently, other non-public preschool education providers). A non-public nursery school selected through a competition receives a grant from the commune budget which is equal to 100% of current expenditure per pupil in public nursery schools managed by the commune; thus, it charges fees and provides fee-free education and care of the same duration as nursery schools managed by the commune, etc. In practice, these arrangements have been in place since 2015.

Other non-public nursery schools receive from the commune budget grants equal to at least 75% of current expenditure per pupil incurred by public nursery schools administered by a commune.

Other non-public nursery schools apply their own criteria for the admission of children.

Age levels and grouping of children

Age levels

The age criterion is most often used to group children. Most nursery schools are divided into four grades (classes for 3-, 4-, 5 and 6-year-olds). A combination of different age-groups is also possible when other criteria are taken into consideration: children's needs, interests and abilities in mainstream nursery schools, and the extent and type of disability in special nursery schools.

It is also possible to group children of different ages (a so-called ‘family group’) for educational reasons to promote individual development. In rural areas, mixed age groups are also created for demographic reasons (a small number of children); nursery schools in rural areas have, on average, two classes (6-year olds and other children) or one class only.

Grouping

Mainstream education

The number of children in one class/group cannot exceed 25, except in integration and special nursery schools and special preschool classes where the limits are lower. Activities in preschool education units and centres are organised for groups of 3 to 25 children.

As a rule, two teachers working in shifts supervise one class (one until 12 a.m., and the other from 12 a.m.). They should either work with one age group or accompany children during the entire four-year period in a nursery school.

Integration and special education

As from 1 September 2017, the maximum number of children is 20 in integration nursery schools and preschool classes (earlier, it ranged from 15 to 20), including up to 5 disabled children (earlier, 3-5 disabled children), and between 4 and 12 (earlier, between 6 and 16), depending on the degree and type of disability, in special nursery schools and preschool classes.

Integration nursery schools and mainstream nursery schools with integration classes also employ additional teachers trained in special education, as well as specialists in rehabilitation.
Individualised learning programme and home education

For 6-year old children who, due to their health problems, are entitled to follow an individualised learning programme at home on the basis of a certificate from a counselling and guidance centre, home-based classes are provided for 4 to 6 hours or more per week. Such classes are taught on the basis of the Regulation of the Minister of National Education of 9 August 2017 on the procedures for providing individualised one-year compulsory preschool preparatory classes and individual tuition for children and youth [3].

Individualised one-year preschool preparation is organised in the form of activities conducted by one or two teachers in direct contact with the pupil. The activities are carried out in the child’s place of residence, in particular at home or in an education-and-care institution, or in the nursery school if the child’s health allows him/her to do so.

Moreover, at the parents’ request, the head of a public or non-public nursery school where the child is enrolled may allow the child to follow the one-year preschool preparation outside of a nursery school, preschool class or another preschool education setting. This is commonly referred to as ‘home education’.

Such a permission may be granted if the request is accompanied by:

1. a certificate from a public counselling and guidance centre;
2. a statement from the parents that conditions are provided for the child to follow the core curriculum for preschool education.

Organisation of time

In accordance with the core curriculum for preschool education, play, learning and leisure in a nursery school are organised so as to follow the rhythm of the day, i.e. regularly repeated phases which enable children to understand gradually the concept of time and organisation and give them a sense of security and tranquillity, ensuring their healthy development.

The organisation of work in nursery schools is regulated by an overall timetable. It is established by the nursery school head, taking into consideration the principles of healthcare and hygiene, learning, education and care, children’s needs, interests and abilities, and type of disability, and parents’ expectations. Based on the overall timetable, the teacher in charge of a class prepares a detailed timetable for his/her group, taking into consideration the needs and interests of children.

Nursery schools are open throughout the school year, except for breaks established by the managing body at the joint request of the head and the nursery school council, or at the joint request of the head and the parents’ council if a given institution does not have a nursery school council. Preschool classes in primary schools work, likewise, throughout the school year, except for breaks established by the school managing body. Classes in preschool education units take place on some of the weekdays throughout the school year, and classes in preschool centres are offered on all weekdays throughout the school year, except for breaks established by the managing body.

Organization of the day and week

The minimum working time for nursery schools and preschool classes in primary schools is 5 hours a day. Most nursery schools, pre-school classes in primary schools and pre-school centres work around 9 hours a day and are open 5 days a week. During the day children participate in activities organised or proposed by the teacher and engage in play activities in the classroom or in
the garden. The duration of classes / activities in a nursery school should be adjusted to children’s developmental capacities.

As mentioned above, classes in preschool education units take place on some days of the week, and classes in preschool education centres are offered every day. The minimum working time for these two types of alternative preschool education settings is 3 hours per day and 12 hours per week. This depends on the number of children participating in preschool education (the larger is the number of children, with the maximum being 25, the higher is the weekly number of hours.) According to the above-mentioned Regulation, the body managing a given unit or centre adopts organisational arrangements, in particular ensuring healthy and safe conditions for educational and learning activities.

**Staff**

Preschool education teachers are qualified to work with every child and should choose working methods and approaches which are suitable for the level of development and needs of every child. Teachers should apply the principle of individualisation in their work with children.

The head of a nursery school assigns one or two teachers to be responsible for classes, depending on the working hours of a class and its tasks and taking into consideration proposals from children’s parents. Since a class can have a maximum of 25 children, one teacher may work with up to 25 children.

To ensure continuity and effectiveness of teaching, educational and care-related activities, it is recommended that one teacher should be responsible for a given class until its pupils complete preschool education.

Qualifications held by staff employed in preschool education institutions are among the highest in the European Union. As early as in 2013, 84% of preschool teachers had a Master’s degree, and 11.8% had a Bachelor’s degree.

In 2018[14], 86.1% of staff employed in the preschool education sector held a Master’s degree (or even a PhD) and a pedagogical qualification, and 10.2% had a Bachelor’s degree (with pedagogical training completed). Only 2.5% of preschool teachers had qualifications below the Bachelors-degree level.

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[10] The number includes children who entered school education at the age of 6, based on their parents’ decision.

[11] The number includes children who entered school education at the age of 6, based on their parents’ decision.

[12] This is based on Art. 52, section 1, of the Act on Financing School Education Tasks.

[13] This is based on Art. 10 of the Law on School Education.

[14] Data from the School Education Information System (System Informacji Oświatowej, SIO), 31

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