Types of institutions

Currently, general (upper) secondary education – without a vocational education strand offered in parallel – is provided in general (upper) secondary schools (liceum ogólnokształcące) where students can take the maturity exam and obtain a maturity certificate. There are also (upper) secondary schools which provide only vocational education or vocational education in parallel to general education. These include, in particular, technical (upper) secondary schools and stage I sectoral vocational schools; for further details, see the next section.

General (upper) secondary schools are attended by young people aged 15 to 19 years. Pre-reform general upper secondary schools (for students who finished the pre-reform lower secondary school) provided 3-year programmes. In the new school system, based on compulsory education in the 8-year primary school, the duration of education in general secondary schools has been extended to 4 years. New, post-reform, 4-year general secondary schools began to operate on 1 September 2019.

Geographical accessibility

Nearly all general (upper) secondary schools (around 90% in the school year 2017/2018) are located in urban areas. Thus, the accessibility of schools for young people from rural areas depends on the distance between their place of residence and the nearest city or town. Costs of commuting to schools are covered mainly by parents.

In the school year 2017/2018, there were 3,717 (pre-reform) general upper secondary schools, with schools for young people representing around 60.5%. They were attended by around 617,700 students and learners (including 474,500 young people). However, due to the far-reaching changes in the school system introduced by the end of the school year 2018/2019 (lower secondary schools abolished; 4-year general secondary schools established as a new type on 1 September 2019; 3-year programmes still ongoing for the final cohort of students who finished the pre-reform lower secondary school), the above statistical data do not provide an up-to-date picture of general secondary schools.

Admission requirements and choice of school

There are no restrictions regarding the choice of a post-primary school for young people which is one of the settings where young people can participate in part-time compulsory education until they reach the age of 18. The decision to apply for admission to a given school is taken by students and their parents.
In the transition period when the new school system is being established, the legislative framework for admission to public general (upper) secondary schools is set mainly by the Act introducing the Law on School Education.

Pursuant to Article 149, section 2, sub-section 1 of the Act, for the school year 2019/2020, students who have finished the pre-reform lower secondary school are recruited to grade I of the pre-reform 3-year general upper secondary school in accordance with the criteria and procedure laid down, in particular, in Article 20f of the School Education Act (the repealed provisions which were in force for the pre-reform school system). Admission to the pre-reform 3-year general upper secondary school is based on the number of points which applicants have received in the lower secondary school leaving exam and for marks in their school leaving certificate for the Polish language, mathematics and two subjects selected by the head of a given upper secondary school (usually taking into consideration the specialisms offered / ‘profile’ of education). Other achievements indicated in a lower secondary school leaving certificate are also taken into account.

The method for converting the criteria to points and detailed arrangements for the admission process are laid down by the Regulation of the Minister of National Education of 2 November 2015 (Journal of Law of 2015, item 1942).

Winners of regional-level knowledge competitions, which cover all or extend beyond contents of the core curriculum for at least one school subject, are enrolled in the upper secondary school of their choice regardless of the criteria applied to other applicants.

In the school year 2019/2020, students who have finished the new 8-year primary school are, in parallel, enrolled in the new 4-year general secondary schools (Article 149, section 2, sub-section 2 of the Provisions introducing the Law on School Education). See below.

**Age levels and grouping of pupils/students**

A **class** (also referred to as ‘division’ in national legislation) is the basic organisational unit in a post-primary school (upper secondary school in the pre-reform system, and secondary school in the post-reform system) in Poland. It (nominally) groups students of the same age who jointly follow the same curriculum under the supervision of teachers. All classes at the same level are referred as **grades** in the national legislation. Roman numerals are used to designate classes and grades (I to III in a pre-reform general upper secondary school until 1 September 2019; grades I to IV in a post-reform general secondary school since 1 September 2019).

**Grouping into classes is based on the age** of students as the basic criterion and, where applicable, on the promotion of the student to the next grade. Each class is supervised by a **class teacher / tutor**. As a rule, a given teacher holds this function throughout the period of education in school.

The minimum and maximum numbers of students per class are not defined in the legislation. Exceptions to the general rule are provided for in regulations adopted for special and integration general upper secondary schools (for disabled or socially maladjusted students) on the basis of the School Education Act. For example, the number of students per class in integration schools and classes should range between 15 and 20, including 3 to 5 disabled students.

For some school activities / classes in general (upper) secondary schools, students are further divided into **groups**, based on arrangements similar to those in primary schools.

Secondary education is **not divided into cycles**.
Organization of the school year

Classes in the school year in general (upper) secondary schools are divided into **two semesters**:

- the first one lasting from the first day of classes (the first working day of September) till the last Saturday preceding the winter holidays;
- the second one from the Monday directly after the winter holidays till the last day of classes (the last Friday in June).

There are some exceptions. The main one concerns the highest grade as the maturity exam is conducted after the completion of the final year of education. Thus, classes in the second semester for the final grade end as early as on the last Friday in April.

The dates of the **winter break vary among the provinces** in Poland. The winter holidays are scheduled between mid-January and the end of February, and last for two weeks. The exact timing of the winter break is determined by the head of the regional education authorities (**kurator oświaty**) in agreement with the governor of the province. Schools in Poland also have Christmas and Easter breaks lasting a few days.

Detailed information on the **organisation of the school year** (start and dates of the school year, summer holidays and winter breaks with geographical variations, and public/religious holidays) are available in the annually updated Eurydice publication **“Organisation of school time in Europe. Primary and General Secondary Education, 2019/2020”** [1].

Organization of the school day and week

**Pre-reform 3-year general upper secondary schools**, which take students who have finished the pre-reform lower secondary school, still follow the regulations adopted earlier. In accordance with the Regulation of the Minister of National Education of 7 February 2012 on the outline timetables in public schools (with further amendments; last amended on 29 December 2014), the **weekly number of hours for compulsory classes** and lessons with the class tutor in a general upper secondary school is as follows:

- Grade I: 30, and 33 in bilingual classes
- Grade II: 32, and 35 in bilingual classes
- Grade III: 29, and 32 in bilingual classes

**Post-reform 4-year general secondary schools**, which take students who have finished the new 8-year primary school, follow the regulations based on the Law on School Education. Pursuant to the Regulation of the Minister of National Education of 3 April 2019 on the outline timetables for public schools, the **weekly number of hours for compulsory classes** and lessons with the class tutor in a general secondary school is as follows:

- Grade I: 30, and 33 in bilingual classes
- Grade II: 34, and 37 in bilingual classes
- Grade III: 32, and 35 in bilingual classes
- Grade IV: 25 hours, and 27 in bilingual classes

Classes usually start at 8 a.m. and finish around 2-3 p.m. if the school works in one shift (they finish later if the school works in two shifts). Each lesson (period) lasts 45 minutes. Breaks usually last between 5 and 25 minutes. The duration of the school day also depends on the size of the school building, the number of classrooms and other facilities for after-school activities. Students go to
school on **five days a week** (from Monday to Friday). The legislation provides for extending the school week to 6 days, but this requires a reasoned decision taken by the school head after consultation with the school governing bodies, and the provision is rarely applied in practice.