

Turkey: Progress in pre-primary school enrolment

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Turkey aims to reach a 100% enrolment rate in pre-primary education for 4- and 5-year-olds by 2023. To that end, the capacity will be doubled by the end of 2022.

Interested NGOs have raised concerns as to whether the infrastructure for this impressive target can be built in such a short time and whether satisfactory quality can be reached in these services. Some also expressed criticism of the government's wishes to incorporate religious education into pre-primary education, which is against the secular constitution of the country.

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Description

Pre-primary education in Turkey is optional between the age of 36 and 68 months, when compulsory primary education begins. Turkey until recently had a low enrolment rate in pre-primary education, and there have been continuous attempts to address this. Earlier policies to extend pre-primary education to a larger population were piloted in certain provinces (Ağırdağ et al. 2015), but these were shelved in 2012 following a legislative amendment that extended the duration of compulsory education from 8 to 12 years and reduced the primary school enrolment age by one year (to 60-66 rather than 72 months). With the new legislation, children started primary school earlier but the pre-primary education pilot projects were stopped, since the education budget was directed to capacity building in secondary school education, which lacked the necessary infrastructure.

In 2016 the target of increasing enrolment in pre-primary education appeared in the Medium-Term Programme 2017-2019 (Ministry of Development, 2016), and the pilot implementation started in 2017-2018 in 22 provinces. That target was also mentioned in the Presidency's Annual Programme for 2020 and 2021. The policy was also hampered by the COVID-19 outbreak, which forced schools to cease face-to-face education for more than a year (between April 2020 and June 2021), and the enrolment rate among 5-year-olds dropped to 56.9% in 2020 from 71.2% in 2019 according to Turkstat.

With the gradual recovery, the Ministry of National Education (MoNE) increased its efforts to improve pre-primary school enrolment. The enrolment rates for 3-, 4-, and 5-year-olds were 14, 35, and 78% in

2021, respectively. The Ministry aims to increase these to 50, 70, and 90%, respectively, by the end of 2022 and to 100% for 4- and 5-year-olds by 2023. To that end, 3,000 kindergartens will be constructed by the end of 2022, and classroom capacity will increase by 40,000, including the expansion of schools already in operation, doubling the total capacity (Anadolu Ajansı, 2022). The MoNE did not provide details as to when these projects will be operational.



Outlook and commentary

Pre-primary education remains rather limited in Turkey. In a report published in 2017, two NGOs, Eğitim Reformu Girişimi (ERG) and Anne Çocuk Eğitim Vakfı (AÇEV) find that pre-school education is more common among wealthier and more educated households. 26% of pre-primary education funding is from private sources according to OECD statistics (compared to the OECD average of 17% for 2021). In this context, the attempts to extend the reach of pre-primary education with the ultimate aim of making it compulsory are important.

There are however ambiguities in the announcements. Abbas Güçlü (2021), a columnist specialised in education, questioned the details of the implementation, especially inquiring about the readiness of the infrastructure and teaching personnel. Neither is it clear whether education will be half- or full-day. In fact, in 2016 the MoNE reported that compulsory enrolment required about 20 thousand additional classrooms at an estimated cost of 7 billion TRY (€2.1 billion

at the 3.34 TRY/€ average exchange rate in 2016 [Anadolu Ajansı 2016]). As such, it is questionable whether the necessary infrastructure and personnel will be ready to provide quality education.

NGOs, such as ERG and AÇEV, as well as Eğitim-Sen, a union of public education employees, are also concerned about the content of the education, especially in the wake of a National Education Council meeting where a recommendation was adopted for a

curriculum including religious education for pre-primary children. ERG and AÇEV (2022) published a statement in response, pointing to potentially adverse effects of the proposed education on the children's developmental and psychological state.

Finally, some municipalities are also attempting to extend access to pre-primary care by building new facilities, especially in low-income neighbourhoods. It is yet to be seen whether these two initiatives will be able to work in parallel.

Further reading

Anadolu Ajansı (2016). [Eğitimde tam gün planlaması Başbakanlık'ta \[Full-day education planning at the Prime Minister's Office\]](#). Ankara.

Anadolu Ajansı (2022). [Okul öncesi eğitim seferberliğinde 2 bin 109 anaokulunun planlaması tamamlandı \[Plans for 2,109 pre-primary school is completed in the campaign for the pre-primary education\]](#). Ankara.

ERG and AÇEV (2017). [Türkiye'de Erken Çocukluk Bakımı ve Okul Öncesi Eğitime Katılım \[Early Childhood Care and Enrolment in Pre-school Education in Turkey\]](#). İstanbul.

ERG and AÇEV (2022). [20. Millî Eğitim Şûrası Genel Kurulunda Okul Öncesinde Din Eğitimine Dair Alınan Tavsiye Kararı Hakkında Değerlendirme \[An evaluation of the recommendation for education of religion in pre-primary schools adopted at the 20. National Education Council\]](#). İstanbul.

Güçlü, Abbas (2021). [Eğitimde yeni arayışlar \[New attempts in education\]](#). Milliyet Gazetesi, 29.10.2021.

OECD (2021). [Education at a Glance 2021: OECD Indicators](#). OECD Publishing, Paris.

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