

# **COUNTRY POLICY DEVELOPMENT SUPPORT**

**Synthesis Report – Iceland**

**European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education**



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## INTRODUCTION

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The Agency developed a Country Policy Development Support (CPDS) [repository](#) for Iceland in the initial CPDS phase. The repository provided evidence of current legislation and policy, and implementation into practice, across 15 key inclusive education policy areas.

This document summarises the information in Iceland’s repository. This information synthesis will help to identify specific priorities and, in particular, two or three policy areas that Iceland will commit to focus on. These priorities will be used as the basis for further monitoring and development in the stated policy areas.

The following sections present brief summaries of Iceland’s current situation in relation to the 15 policy areas. The summaries conclude with short evaluations of the overall level of implementation of each policy area, by indicating whether it:

- is to be initiated (planning is at an early stage/practice is yet to be started);
- requires development (implementation is partial or inconsistent across schools);
- embedded in policy and practice (policy and practice are established and sustainable).

The [Annex](#) shows the 15 policy areas and their indicated levels of implementation, providing a ‘snapshot’ of Iceland’s situation.



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# INFORMATION SYNTHESIS FOR ICELAND

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## 1. Legislation and policy

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There must be a clear concept of equitable high-quality inclusive education, agreed with stakeholders. This should inform a single legislative and policy framework for all learners, aligned with key international and European-level conventions and communications, as the basis for rights-based practice.

Iceland is currently in a period of major change and development in legislation and policy, with many new initiatives to be implemented over the next years (to 2030). Iceland's Education Policy 2030 (EP2030) is an education strategy document that outlines the country's aims to achieve a dynamic and flexible education system to drive economic and social change. An [OECD report](#) from 2021 indicates several recommendations and areas for development for EP2030, and Iceland also undertook a [Voluntary Review](#) of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (including education).

A revision of the Education Policy 2030 First Action Plan 2021-2024 is under way and work has recently begun on the second plan. The second plan for 2024–2027 will be launched during 2024. The third plan, 2027–2030, will be launched in 2027. The second plan will also be revised towards the end of this period.

Extensive changes in legislation and policy will be in line with current thinking in Iceland around learners considered vulnerable to exclusion. This has broadened in the last decade, from being focused on different disabilities to now focusing on all learners that, for some reason, do not thrive in the education system. The reasons can be various, and more and more often the focus is directed towards mental and behavioural problems such as anxiety, depression, etc., that can lead to school avoidance.

As all these changes in legislation and policy will be progressively rolled out over the next six years, it is not appropriate at this stage to evaluate implementation in any way. For this reason, this section is indicated as requiring development.

Level of implementation – **Requires development** (see [Annex](#)).

## 2. Funding and resource allocation

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Mechanisms exist to support the on-going development of inclusive school communities and enable them to increase their capacity to respond to diversity, support all learners and meet the full range of their diverse needs.

A report compiled with municipalities in Iceland recognises that some issues need to be addressed around funding and resource allocation in municipalities. There is significant flexibility within the funding system for schools, but there is a lack of evidence to show how and if this contributes specifically to the on-going development of individual school communities, or to show disparities.

Different methods of resource allocation are in place for different sectors of the education system. The central government uses an allocation model to provide funds to



municipalities to meet the needs of learners with disabilities at compulsory school age. This is provided through the Local Authorities Equalisation Fund. Until now, payments to the municipalities for learners with disabilities has depended on levels of disability, but there are plans to move away from the disability model. At present, the same amount is expected to be paid for each learner with the same degree of disability, irrespective of whether the special education provided varies from one municipality to another. A similar process is in place for learners whose first language is not Icelandic, but there is no evidence of a similar approach for other groups of learners who may be vulnerable.

There is little evidence to show that all stakeholders are aware of the processes of resource allocation and funding, and that such information is fully transparent and accessible. To address this, Reykjavik Capital City has begun to revise its resource allocation by using the Learning Opportunity Index. This process could be extended to other areas of the country.

Level of implementation – **Requires development** (see [Annex](#)).

### 3. Governance

An effective plan is in place that sets out clear roles and responsibilities, opportunities for collaboration and levels of autonomy throughout all system levels and sectors.

The Icelandic [Parliament](#), the Althingi, is legally and politically responsible for the school system. There are four school levels in Iceland: pre-schools, compulsory schools (single structure primary and lower-secondary education), upper-secondary schools and higher education. Parliament determines the basic objectives and administrative framework of the educational system. All education, apart from the higher educational level, falls under the jurisdiction of the [Ministry of Education and Children](#).

The Ministry is responsible for evaluating the school system, assessing schools and national assessment of learners according to the legislation. The Ministry regularly reports to Parliament on the operation of schools at pre-school, compulsory and upper-secondary level.

There is a two-tiered system governing education: central government and municipalities (local authorities). Municipalities are responsible for the operation of pre-schools and compulsory schools, whereas the operation of upper-secondary schools and higher education institutions is the responsibility of the state.

Within each municipality, matters concerning compulsory schools come under the authority of the school board, which is in charge of educational affairs in the municipality in question. There are also councils for parents and for learners.

There is a clear structure of roles and responsibilities from the Icelandic Parliament, the Ministry of Education and Children, municipalities (local authorities), school headteachers, teachers, school boards; department and project managers; school, parent and learner councils.

New developments are in the process of implementation in three new laws (as of 2024: on the Prosperity of Children, on the Directorate of Education and School Services and on Inclusive Education and School Services).



The evidence suggests that Iceland has a strong system of governance in education, embedded in policy and practice, with an effective plan in place that sets out clear roles and responsibilities, opportunities for collaboration and levels of autonomy throughout all system levels.

Level of implementation – **Embedded in policy and practice** (see [Annex](#)).

## 4. Quality assurance and accountability

There is a comprehensive quality assurance and accountability framework for monitoring, review and evaluation that supports high-quality provision for all learners, with a focus on equitable opportunities for those at risk of marginalisation or exclusion.

Extensive processes are in place for regular internal and external evaluation of aspects of education within pre-schools, compulsory and upper-secondary schools. Evidence for external evaluations is found in reports held by the Directorate of Education and School Services. These evaluations are not seen as isolated actions, but as part of a long-term perspective on improvement and development.

Schools use the results of external evaluation to improve their work. Educational authorities also use evaluation results. At pre-school and compulsory school levels, the municipality is responsible for implementing improvements. Internal evaluation results are intended for use by the school to improve various aspects of its own performance and activities and to call attention to good practices and results in the school's work. Schools' internal evaluation reports are made public, for example on school websites.

Some reports focus on groups of learners at risk of marginalisation or exclusion, such as those at risk of school drop-out in compulsory or upper-secondary education. Reports on different funding actions (such as FPIES), are available, but lack an evaluative aspect.

Evidence in this section suggests that more development needs to be done to ensure a breadth of monitoring and evaluation and quality assurance processes, with a greater focus on equitable opportunities.

Level of implementation – **To be initiated** (see [Annex](#)).

## 5. Learning opportunities for all education professionals

There is a continuum of teacher professional learning – initial teacher education, induction and continuing professional development for teachers and teacher educators – that develops areas of competence in all teachers regarding assessment and needs identification, curriculum planning (universal design), inclusive pedagogy, engagement with and in research, and use of evidence.

This area is currently undergoing change to improve the competences and skills of teachers and school leaders, both in initial teacher training and in continuous professional development. A Master's degree for all teachers was stipulated in 2008. The Competence Framework for teachers and school leaders came into force in the revised [Act](#) on education, competences and recruitment of teachers and school leaders in 2020 and further a regulation on a competence framework of teachers and school leaders in 2022.



The Competence Framework includes new requirements for teachers and school leaders in pre-schools, compulsory schools and upper-secondary schools.

The Ministry of Education and Children has contracted the teacher education institutions to organise and provide all teachers with continuous professional development (CPD), including professionals in early childhood education and care (ECEC). There is a range of training and course providers for CPD, including at university and municipal levels but, prior to the new act 95/2019, no evident evaluation of the course content or outcomes. The extent of CPD opportunities in inclusive education for those working with teachers is unknown. Research/applied research opportunities for teachers have increased since the Government introduced a Research Fund in 2021 to support knowledge exchange and build competence in practice through research-based evidence.

As there are a number of long-term changes currently underway, some aspects of this area may require development.

Level of implementation – **Requires development** (see [Annex](#)).

## 6. Curriculum framework

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There is a single curriculum framework that is sufficiently flexible to provide relevant opportunities for all learners, and an assessment framework that recognises and validates attainment and wider achievement.

This area is currently under development in Iceland, following the launch of major new legislation on Inclusive Education and School Services, supposedly in spring 2025. This law will address and call for an update of many elements of the existing curriculum framework, which has been in place since 2011.

Recent curriculum revisions emphasise inclusive education by promoting individual learning plans, addressing diverse needs and fostering equality. They put focus on supporting learners with disabilities, cultural and linguistic diversity, and social inclusion. Teachers are encouraged to adopt differentiated instruction and ensure equitable participation for all learners, aligning with human rights principles.

Level of implementation – **Requires development** (see [Annex](#)).

## 7. Collaboration and communication

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Structures and processes are in place to enable collaboration and effective communication at all levels – between ministries, regional- and local-level decision-makers and between services, sectors (public and private) and disciplines, including non-governmental organisations and schools.

The [Act on Integration of Services in the Interest of Children's Prosperity nr. 86/2021](#) is in the process of implementation across education, health and social systems. This Act states that no child should be left behind and focuses on cross-sectoral co-operation, stating that the education, social affairs and health systems should collaborate with municipalities and schools on the matter of every child and their families.





A revised Action Plan to the EP2030 will be launched in 2024. The new law on Inclusive Education and School Services will address inclusive education at all school levels. The process of revision has involved rich co-operation with all stakeholders involved.

There is a high level of collaboration and communication across all sectors of the education system. The processes are embedded into the system, from national to individual school levels. Examples are the laws on pre-school, [compulsory](#) and [upper-secondary](#) education, which stipulate that the Ministry of Education and Children is to conduct comprehensive external evaluation at these school levels with the Directorate of Education and School Services. Each school or institution is required to systematically evaluate internal activities with the active participation of staff, learners and parents, as relevant. They must publish information on the internal evaluation, compliance with the school curriculum guide and plans for improvement.

This suggests that there is a high level of co-operation and collaboration across the system but given some challenges elsewhere (such as in access to support in ECEC), there may be some room for further development and evidence of improvements through implementation.

Level of implementation – **Requires development** (see [Annex](#)).

## 8. Early childhood education and family support

There is a strategy to increase participation in quality inclusive early childhood education and support families experiencing disadvantage.

Early childhood education and care (ECEC) is divided into centre-based provision and home-based provision. From age 1–6, when primary education starts, children can attend pre-schools (*Leikskóli*), which fall under the overall responsibility of the municipalities. A system of regulated and publicly subsidised home-based provision (*Dagforeldri*), aimed at the youngest children (from birth up to age 2), falls under the responsibility of the Ministry of Welfare.

Pre-school education is defined by law as the first level of the educational system, providing education and care for children who have not reached six years of age, at which point compulsory education begins ([Pre-School Act No. 90/2008](#)). While pre-school is not a part of compulsory education, around 96% of children from the ages of 2–5 attend these schools. There is, however, recognition of the challenge to provide children placement in pre-schools directly after the conclusion of parental leave, or from the age of one.

Iceland has produced two reports aimed at addressing some of the challenges around early childhood education. These include funding issues, which are a barrier for some families, and the lack of guidelines or regulations for children with additional or special needs in this age group. Parents have indicated difficulties that arise when there are delays in obtaining cross-sectoral support for their children in the local community or environment. However, the Children's Prosperity Handout indicates some evidence that this aspect is recognised and is being dealt by municipalities.



Regulations are in place for the internal and external evaluation of pre-schools across a range of variables, but not of settings for younger children. The new law on Inclusive Education and School Services (2024) will address this area.

At present, there is no clear evidence of a strategy to increase participation in early childhood education that actively promotes the benefits for children and families in overall child development, improving social inclusion and academic development, and increasing life chances. This suggests that early childhood and family support may need some further development.

Level of implementation – **Requires development** (see [Annex](#)).

## 9. Support for transitions

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There is a strategy to support all learners at times of transition between phases of education – and particularly as they move into adult life – through vocational education and training, further and higher education, independent living and employment.

It is a legal requirement that all learners at the compulsory and upper-secondary levels have the right to receive educational and career guidance and counselling from appropriate specialists within the compulsory school.

A single school from age 6–16 is in place in Iceland, which reduces transitions between schools. Transitions from compulsory school to upper-secondary school for vulnerable learners is governed by an Individual Relocation Plan. At the upper-secondary school level, many special units include preparation for adult life. This includes further education at a special unit at university level or training for a job, either in the labour market, in sheltered workshops, or in other appropriate facilities. The aim is to find a permanent job for each learner to suit their abilities and interests.

Mainstream and special schools introduce employment opportunities and the rules of work to their final year learners with special needs, with the aim of having a successful transition from school to work. In addition, a number of initiatives support successful transitions, such as a pilot project by [Throskahiálp](#), which is supported by two Ministries, and advocacy work with education, business and other organisations, particularly for vulnerable people.

Local authorities are required to establish co-operation between pre-school and compulsory school, and between compulsory school and upper-secondary school.

Schools provide support at all levels in an effort to combat drop-out of learners with a foreign language background from secondary schools. These efforts include increased emphasis on native language teaching and the promotion of active bilingualism or plurilingualism.

Evidence suggests that many initiatives are in place in this area, but that there could be more evidence to show the changes and improvements made. This might be linked to data collection, for example.

Level of implementation – **Requires development** (see [Annex](#)).



## 10. Co-operation between school-level stakeholders

Structures and processes are in place to facilitate co-operation between stakeholders in schools, families and local communities. Strategies are in place to ensure that all stakeholders support inclusive school development and enhance learner progress.

The [Act on Integration of Services in the Interest of Children's Prosperity nr. 86/2021](#) states that no child should be left behind. It focuses on cross-sectoral co-operation, stating that the education, social affairs and health systems should collaborate with municipalities and schools on the matter of every child and their families. Co-operation with families and local communities is stated in the new law, but it is too early to provide evidence of implementation. However, while many stakeholders have a strategy on co-operation, it is not the case for all stakeholders. The legal arrangements for foster children involve significant co-operation between schools, municipalities and a range of stakeholders.

The [Compulsory](#) and [Pre-School](#) Acts 2008 require all compulsory schools to have a parents' association and the Upper-Secondary School Act 2008 requires all upper-secondary schools to have a parents' council. The head teacher is responsible for founding the parent's association/council and for ensuring that it is provided with all necessary assistance. The role of the parents' council is to support school activities, ensure learners' welfare and promote relations between school and home. Each compulsory school's parents' council sets its own rules, e.g. regarding elections for its board and election of two parent representatives to the School Council.

As schools have considerable autonomy in this area and use a variety of approaches, there is no specific country-wide evidence of implementation. However, there are some regulations and guidelines in the National Curriculum Guide for all school levels to support the contribution of active family involvement in education, especially at the compulsory school level. Internal and external evaluation processes are in place for different aspects of these initiatives. The Ministry of Education and Children supports financially (contract) the National Home and School Association that organises various activities to inform parents of their role and responsibilities, for example with guidelines, informational material, courses for parents, events, etc.

One important initiative in Iceland is its participation in UNICEF's 'Child Friendly Cities' scheme, aimed at municipalities. The Icelandic government has funded this since 2019. The aim is that, in 2024, 80% of children in Iceland will be living in municipalities working on the initiative.

The evidence suggests that Iceland's provision in this area is well established and continues to be developed.

Level of implementation – **Embedded in policy and practice** (see [Annex](#)).



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## 11. Data and information collection

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A system is in place for data and information collection that provides feedback to inform on-going improvement across the whole system and supports decision-makers at all levels to identify 'signals' that indicate the need for urgent action regarding schools needing additional support.

Mandatory internal and external evaluation processes are in place, as legal requirements.

Internal evaluation includes the school's policy and objectives, a definition of how these are to be achieved, an analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of the school's operations, and a plan for improvements. Findings from internal evaluation processes are shared within schools, with parents and other groups outside the school.

Some indication of improvement can be found in the citations of reports from the Directorate of Education and School Services.

Local authorities use different ways to assess need and allocate additional funds to secure inclusive education for vulnerable groups and support learners with general and specific learning needs.

The OECD Iceland Report 2021 recommendations identified a number of different topics within this area. Iceland is responding to these within the EP2030 (a ten-year plan), which has Five Pillars, each with corresponding focus points. Some of these respond to internal and external data (e.g. PISA, TALIS), highlighting areas of challenge (e.g. early drop-out from secondary education; lower than average or declining attainment in maths, reading and science; lower numbers in vocational education; low perception by teachers of the value of the teaching profession; improving teacher competencies; age and numbers of teachers; supporting learner well-being; variation in attainment for learners from non-Iceland backgrounds or from low socio-economic groups, etc.).

The first EP2030 action plan is in revision and the next plan will be launched in 2024. Some aspects of EP2030 are currently in a phase of implementation, although the move from policy statements to actionable implementation is a feature of the OECD Report, alongside developing the means to measure the 'impact' of policy changes.

The evidence suggests that this area is under review and requires further development.

Level of implementation – **Requires development** (see [Annex](#)).

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## 12. Transforming specialist provision

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There is a strategy to transform specialist provision to support all learners and increase the capacity of mainstream schools, detailing cross-sectoral working and professional development for all staff.

Integrating all learners into mainstream education, as far as possible, is the policy in Iceland. The general aims of the legislation at each school level apply to all learners, including those with disabilities and special needs, and there are very few special schools in the country. EASIE data indicates a very low percentage of learners in specialist



provision, and from previous years' data, the trend is towards greater inclusion in mainstream education.

A regulation on the services for learners with special needs in compulsory schools (2010) indicates that the flexible and varied learning environment is designed to meet all learners' needs. Learners with additional or special needs and their families are further supported by cross-sectoral collaboration. Major new legislation and an Action Plan ([The Act on Integration of Services in the Interest of Children's Prosperity 86/2021](#), Education Policy 2030, Action Plan 2024) will bring changes to this area once implemented. This area will also be affected when further indications of measures and provisions are available, following the implementation of the Act.

The compulsory school act indicates that the four segregated special schools should provide consultation services for the whole country/regions, providing education and advice on the issues of the school's target group. However, in practice, the schools are unable to fulfil this requirement due to time constraints. Information on resources and expertise from other aspects of specialist provision to support the wider education system will be included in the forthcoming law on Inclusive Education and School Services. The Ministry of Education and Children has prepared this law in broad co-operation and consultation with the school community and main stakeholders. It will build on the current system of sharing specialists and services between schools and municipalities.

The evidence at this stage suggests that a number of initiatives are under development, but as yet there is no evidence of their implementation into practice.

Level of implementation – **Requires development** (see [Annex](#)).

### 13. Inclusive school leadership

There are strategies in place to develop and support school leaders who work with others to create an inclusive and equitable school ethos with strong relationships, high expectations, proactive and preventative approaches, flexible organisation and a continuum of support to intervene when learners are at risk of failure and exclusion.

The EP2030 notes leadership as a focus area, and it is also a recommendation in the [OECD Iceland Report, 2021](#). A revised [Act](#) on education, competences and recruitment of teachers and school leaders came into force in 2020 and a regulation on a competence framework of teachers and school leaders was stipulated in 2022.

The law on a new Directorate of Education and School Services and a new law on Inclusive Education and School Services will provide information on how school leaders are supported to foster the skills and personal characteristics to become effective.

The current evidence suggests that this is an area at an early stage of development.

Level of implementation – **To be initiated** (see [Annex](#)).



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## 14. Learner voices

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A guidance framework is in place to develop learning and teaching environments where learners' voices are heard and included in decision-making processes and learners' rights are fulfilled through personalised approaches to learning and support.

One of the projects coming forth in the second action plan for the EP2030 will be developing the importance of the voices of young people as part of 'active democracy' at all school levels. The EP2030 emphasises learners' voices, ensuring their active participation in shaping learning environments and policies. It promotes democratic engagement, critical thinking and decision-making, valuing learners' perspectives in education reform. This approach fosters empowerment, inclusivity and collaboration, aligning with global trends in rights-based and learner-centred education.

However, educational legislation has recognised the voices of learners for many years. Under the [Compulsory School Act 2008](#), learners are entitled to express their opinions about their education, and should have further opportunities to do so through their representatives on the pupils' association board in the school council. This is also written into the [National Curriculum Guide](#).

Evidence for increased involvement of learner voices can be found in the expansion of the Child Friendly Cities scheme and Rights-based schools, working with the Ministry and UNICEF in Iceland. Many people, including parents and learners, were involved in the process of building the new law on Inclusive Education and School Services, which will be launched in 2024. Learners are also involved in evaluation processes at schools, and Pupil Councils give learners opportunities to be heard across a wide range of topics.

Level of implementation – **Embedded in policy and practice** (see [Annex](#)).

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## 15. Resilience within the education system

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Policy and practice have developed in response to unforeseen events to build resilience within the education system.

No information at present.

Level of implementation – **To be initiated** (see [Annex](#)).



## ANNEX

Table 1 shows the level of implementation of policy areas in Iceland. There are three levels of implementation:

- **To be initiated** – Planning is at an early stage/yet to be started
- **Requires development** – Implementation is partial or inconsistent across schools
- **Embedded in policy and practice** – Established and sustainable.

However, some countries' policy areas are between levels of implementation. In these cases, the table indicates more than one level of implementation for the policy area.

**Table 1. Policy areas and their levels of implementation in Iceland**

Policy area	To be initiated	Requires development	Embedded in policy and practice
1. Legislation and policy	–	Requires development	–
2. Funding and resource allocation	To be initiated	–	–
3. Governance	–	–	Embedded in policy and practice
4. Quality assurance and accountability	To be initiated	–	–
5. Learning opportunities for all education professionals	–	Requires development	–
6. Curriculum framework	–	Requires development	–
7. Collaboration and communication	–	Requires development	–
8. Early childhood education and family support	–	Requires development	–
9. Support for transitions	–	Requires development	–
10. Co-operation between school-level stakeholders	–	–	Embedded in policy and practice



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<b>Policy area</b>	<b>To be initiated</b>	<b>Requires development</b>	<b>Embedded in policy and practice</b>
11. Data and information collection	–	Requires development	–
12. Transforming specialist provision	–	Requires development	–
13. Inclusive school leadership	To be initiated	–	–
14. Learner voices	–	–	Embedded in policy and practice
15. Resilience within the education system	To be initiated	–	–