

The School System in Switzerland

It is difficult to make any general statement about school in Switzerland, as it is under cantonal authority and the systems and names may vary considerably from canton to canton - not at least due to the three language regions. The general pattern, however, will be described in the following paragraphs.

A) Structure of the educational system

Primary school

Primary school is the first level of compulsory school education and is usually attended by children between 6/7 and 12/13 years, i.e. for a period of six years.

Secondary level I

This level covers the final years of compulsory school attendance and aims at providing the pupils with a good general basic education.

For around 70% of the pupils secondary level I represents the end of their full-time education, and they subsequently embark on specific vocational training. A smaller proportion prepares for advanced studies at other educational institutions.

Vocational training (apprenticeship)

Vocational training is a dual system consisting of practical training in a private or public company and parallel attendance at a vocational training school which provides tuition in basic theoretical knowledge on 1-1 1/2 days of the week. Vocational training usually takes 2-4 years and the successful trainees receive a certificate of proficiency.

Maturitätsschulen (high schools)

The Maturitätsschulen provide a broad general education. They are **academically highly competitive**, i.e. demanding entrance exams and „eliminating“ unsuccessful students, and virtually monopolise preparation for university studies.

All over Switzerland, only 17% of the young people attend a Maturitätsschule. There are various names for this type of school, i.e. Kantonsschule, Gymnasium, lycée, collège, etc. Pupils finish this school with a federal matriculation examination which facilitates access to all universities in Switzerland.

A Maturitätsschule usually offers **several sections** and consequently different types of federal matriculation (Matura). In some cantons all 5 sections form one school, in others each section forms a separate school.

- **Classical and modern language section:** Stress on liberal arts but scientific subjects are also taught extensively. It either leads to the Matura A (with Greek, Latin and one modern language), or Matura B (with Latin and two modern languages), or Matura D (with 3 modern languages).
Compulsory subjects in all sections: Native language and literature (i.e. German, French or Italian), History, Geography, Biology, Maths, Chemistry, Physics, Music or Drawing, Physical Education.

- **Scientific section/Matura C:** Stress on scientific subjects, but also providing a general education in liberal arts.

Compulsory subjects: Native language and literature, Maths, Geometric Design, Physics, Chemistry, Biology, History, Geography, two modern languages, Music or Drawing, Physical Education.

- **Commercial section/Matura E:** Offering quite a broad program in liberal arts and sciences besides the commercial subjects (Economics, Accounting and Law).

Other forms of higher education

- Teachers' college: tends to go less far in the main subjects than a Maturitätsschule, but puts more emphasis on music, art, physical education and handicraft. It leads to a certificate for primary teaching after the 14th grade.

- Diploma Schools: Less demanding academically than a Maturitätsschule, and stressing general education. Offering subjects such as History of Art, Philosophy, etc. Considered as good preparation for social and medical professions, such as kindergarten teacher or nurse.



Almost all exchange students in Switzerland attend a Maturitätsschule. Based on the academic abilities of a student it is decided which division and which grade he/she will attend. If a place is available, there might be the possibility of enrolling a host student in a Diploma School.

B) The Academic Year

The school year runs from mid August (in some cantons it starts as late as mid September) to end of June/mid July. In addition to long summer vacations (in most cantons 5-6 weeks in July/August), pupils have vacations in fall, at Christmas/New Year, in winter and in spring.

The school week lasts from Monday through Saturday morning. Usually students have an additional afternoon off during the week. Classes usually start at 8 a.m. and may last till 6 p.m. On the whole, pupils have to attend approx. 35 lessons per week, each lesson lasts 45 - 50 minutes.

The pupils are regularly given work to be done at home and frequently have tests to prepare for.



Basically, host students must attend all subjects of the section they are enrolled in. An exception are foreign languages of which the students do not have any previous knowledge. Consequently, the schedule of host students consists of approx. 25 - 30 lessons per week. There might be opportunities for students to take subjects at a different level better suited to their ability, e.g. they might take German resp. French or Italian at a lower level.



Exchange students are expected to do the assigned homework and to participate actively in class. As soon as the host students possess sufficient knowledge of German resp. French or Italian they are expected to write tests.

C Grading System

The grading system applied in most cantons comprises marks from 6 to 1.

6 = excellent

5 = good

4 = satisfactory

3 to 1 = failing

D English Training

Since in Switzerland the first foreign language required is French resp. German, English training only starts in the 8th or 9th grade.