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Organisation of School Time in the European Union

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ABSTRACT

The comparison of school times in Europe is a difficult task because of the autonomy enjoyed by establishments and local authorities in most countries in this field.

However a comparison like this reveals several common points particularly that of the five-day week, criticism of the non-stop day deemed to be unsuited for working women, and the development of extra-curricular activities outside of school hours.

Differences also emerge, notably in terms of the length of summer holidays: up to 12 weeks in Spain and Italy but only 6 or 7 in Germany, the Netherlands and in the UK.

INTRODUCTION

In the traditional French school system there are a great number of lessons, spread over a short period of time in the year so that the days are long and tiring. Based on this, the steering committee of the Conférence nationale sur les rythmes scolaires delivered a report to the Education Ministry on 4th July 2011 putting forward about ten measures aiming to improve the balance of school time, that is not only the organisation of the school year but also the weekly and daily timetable.

It advises that the school year, totalling 38 weeks, be organised into five teaching periods of 7 to 8 weeks that are divided, as is the case at present, by two-week breaks (autumn, end of the winter, and spring). As for the summer holidays, their length would be reduced to 6 weeks.

The week would be divided into ten half days in primary school and into at least nine at secondary school with its duration being limited to 23 hours in primary and also in the first two years in secondary school. Hence the four-day week would be abolished.

There would fewer lessons but the day would not be shortened: a midday break would be obligatory and the hours set, but there would be no fixed starting time and the duration of the day – seven or eight and a half hours, depending on whether the children go home for lunch or not – would be the same in both the primary and secondary school. Moreover the length of teaching time would be limited to five hours in primary and also during the

first two years in secondary school and to six hours in the last two years of secondary school. In addition to lessons, two hours of “educational assistance” would be given to the youngest and an hour to pupils in the last two years in secondary school.

These proposals lead us to consider the situation in other EU member states. Five countries were selected: Germany, Spain, Italy, the Netherlands and the UK[1]. This choice was governed both by geographical proximity and the greater or lesser degree of decentralisation, which typifies the education systems in the various countries. In each case it seemed appropriate to present the annual, weekly and daily school time as well as pointing to issues that are currently under debate, if there are any.

Only the primary and secondary school systems have been taken into account in this analysis.

GERMANY

Education is the competence of the Länder, but the Standing Conference of the Ministers of Education and Cultural Affairs (Kultusministerkonferenz: KMK), which unites the ministers of the Länder responsible for education, ensures that education policies are uniform, notably in terms of school time.

The number of days or hours in class in the year

The number of days in class totals 188 or 208 depending on how long the week is.

1. As far as the UK is concerned the measures in force in England and Wales are the ones analysed.

The annual school calendar

This is set by the KMK according to the Hamburg Agreement principles, made between the Länder in 1964:

- the total length of holidays cannot extend beyond 75 days;
- the summer holidays must occur between July 1st and September 10th;
- other breaks are possible in the autumn, at Christmas, Easter and at Whitsun.

In practice the summer holidays are limited to six weeks. The KMK has divided the Länder into five groups of similar population size. It determines the starting date of the summer holidays (between 20th June and mid-July) on a rota basis between the five groups. The KMK's decisions can be modified slightly by each Land. In May 2008 the KMK set the summer holidays for the years 2011-2017. The dates of the other, shorter holidays are set by each Land according to local, notably religious criteria. Some Länder, such as Berlin and Brandenburg, decide on their school calendar together. Generally the holidays fall as follows:

- 5 to 10 days at the end of October;
- 10 to 15 days at Christmas;
- 5 to 10 days in February;
- about ten days at Easter;
- 5 to 10 days for Whitsun.

Moreover in most Länder there are about ten public holidays that are not included in the general holiday calendar.

The length of the school week

The school week ranges from five to six days depending on the choices made by the Länder. Even when the week covers six days pupils do not go to school every Saturday: two Saturdays per month must be free. Most Länder have opted for the five-day week.

Organisation of the school day

Traditionally lessons start between 7:30 a.m. and 8:30 a.m. and end between 11:30 a.m. and 1:30 p.m. depending on whether the week lasts six or five days; lessons last 45 minutes. The number of these increases with the pupils' age: varying in general from 19 to 28 in primary school and from 28 to 32 in secondary school.

The concentration of lessons in the morning has been criticised (unsuited to working women, correlation between social origins and success at school, etc.) and so the federal government established a 4 billion euro programme in 2003 to foster the all-day opening of schools i.e. until 4 p.m. or 5 p.m.,

at least three times per week. At the end of 2009 more than 7,000 establishments had adopted this programme thanks to which various activities ranging from remedial lessons to creative work have been offered to pupils. These activities are organised by the teachers themselves or by external partners. Generally they are not obligatory and have to be paid for by the parents. The establishments which take part in the programme have to provide the children with a meal.

Issues currently under debate

Apart from the increasing number of schools that operate all day the re-introduction of the ninth year in secondary school has been under debate over the last few months. Over the last ten years nearly all Länder have decided to reduce the length of study from nine to eight years. This model has been criticised because it lengthens the school day since the amount of time spent at school is reduced by one year.

ENGLAND AND WALES

The school system is governed by law, but those in charge of the establishments enjoy a great amount of autonomy in terms of how they are managed.

The number of days or hours in class in the year

The Education (School Day and school Year) England Regulations 1999 set the annual number of school days at 190.

The annual school calendar

This is determined according to the establishment's status, either by the local authorities or by the establishments themselves.

Traditionally the school year starts in the first week in September and ends in the third week of July with the holidays being organised as follows:

- the summer holidays last six weeks;
- the Christmas holidays last two weeks;
- the Easter holidays also last two weeks;
- each term ends with one week's holiday.

Over the last few years many establishments have cut the year into six teaching periods in order to spread lessons out equally: two periods of seven weeks between the start of school in September and Christmas, and four 6 week periods thereafter. Holidays lasting one or two weeks separate the various periods of teaching, whilst the length of the summer holidays remains unchanged (six weeks).

The length of the school week

This lasts five days, but extra-curricular activities – notably sport, can take place on Saturday mornings.

The law defines the minimal number of hours of lessons: 21 for the first two years in primary school, 23.5 for the next four years, 24 for the first two years in secondary school and 25 for the next two years.

Organisation of the school day

The Education (School Day and school Year) England Regulations 1999 stipulates that, except in exceptional circumstances, the day has to be divided into two half days.

Generally lessons start at around 9 a.m. and end between 3 p.m. and 4 p.m., with an hour's break at lunchtime.

Issues currently under debate

The Education Act 2002 allows schools to offer extra-curricular activities outside of school hours. Children can arrive at school as of 8 a.m. and stay up to 6 p.m., for up to 48 weeks of the year. Often parents have to pay fees for these activities but there is help for families with modest incomes.

SPAIN

Education is the competence of the autonomous communities, with the State having the responsibility of ensuring the homogeneity of the education system in order to ensure that each and everyone enjoys the same fundamental rights.

The number of days or hours in class in the year

The minimum number of teaching days is set at 175 by the Organic Act of 3rd May 2006 on Education, which equals 35 five day weeks. In practice the number of days in class varies little from one community to another – from 175 to 180.

The annual number of lessons totals around 875 in primary and 1,050 in the first four years of secondary school, which are obligatory.

The annual school calendar

This is determined by the autonomous communities or even by the province or the school itself[2], and so it is not homogeneous. Generally the holidays fall as follows:

- school starts in the first fifteen days of September;
- the Christmas holidays last two weeks;

- the Carnival break lasts from three to six days;
- the Easter break lasts fifteen days;
- the summer holidays last 11 weeks in primary and 12 in secondary school.

In addition to this there are about ten public holidays that vary from one autonomous community to another.

The length of the school week

This lasts five days.

Organisation of the school day

This is decided upon by the administration of the establishment but has to be approved by the administration of the autonomous community. Mostly pupils have five lessons per day in primary and six in secondary school. The length of lessons varies generally between 50 and 55 minutes.

Traditionally lessons take place both in the morning and the afternoon. They start at between 9 a.m. and 10 a.m. with the morning lasting from three to three and a half of hours. There is a break of two and a half hours before lessons start again which then end at 4 p.m. or 5 p.m. Over the last few years the non-stop day has gradually gained ground: lessons start in the morning (often lasting from 9 a.m. to 2 p.m.) and the afternoon is set aside for extra-curricular activities. Hence in all autonomous communities, except for in Catalunya[3], secondary schools operate according to this principle. However in primary the situation is more contrasted: some autonomous communities continue to adhere to the midday break cutting the day into two half days whilst others have introduced the non-stop day but they do allow establishments to choose how they organise themselves.

Issues currently under debate

The non-stop day is increasingly being criticised, because it is said to be the source of inequalities.

ITALY

The administrative organisation of the education system is decentralised. The education minister defines the fundamental principles of this but delegates its organisation to the regions and even to the authorities below this and to the schools themselves. Over the last few years the education system has undergone major change and the situation has still not stabilised.

2. Some autonomous communities have delegated the setting of the calendar to the provinces, others leave this to the schools.

3. In Catalunya a mixed model prevails: lessons take place five mornings and three afternoons per week.

The number of days or hours in class in the year

These figures are defined nationally: at least 200 days in school are equal to 891 hours per year for primary education (i.e. 33 weeks of 27 hours) and 990 in secondary school (i.e. 33 weeks of 30 hours).

The annual school calendar

This is defined by the regions, with the ministry setting however the examination dates, as well as the national bank holidays. Moreover each establishment can make changes to the regional calendar. Generally the annual school agenda is established as follows:

- the Christmas holidays last two weeks;
- in some regions during Carnival, lessons stop for a few days;
- the Easter holidays last one week;
- the summer holidays last 12 to 13 weeks.

In addition to this there are five national public holidays and there are also several local holidays.

The length of the school week

Lessons have to be spread over at least five days. Depending on the establishment the week lasts between five or six days.

When parents enrol their children they choose the weekly number of lessons. This choice is applied for the entire school year.

In the primary school 27 hours are standard. However the 24 hour model has gradually been introduced since 2009-2010, starting with the youngest classes. Conversely parents can ask for their children to have three additional hours per week (music, cinema, IT workshops etc.). They can also choose a weekly total of 40 hours which covers meals taken at school. The choice of 30 or 40 hours depends on whether the staff and necessary infrastructures are available and parents have to have made inquiries prior to enrolment. Classes are homogeneous according to what the parents want.

During the first part of secondary education the weekly standard is 30 hours but parents can, with the same rules applying as in primary, choose a 36 hour week (facultative activities) or 40 hours (to include lunch).

Organisation of the school day

Generally and contrarily to the system before the 1990's, pupils go to school in the morning and the afternoon. However in primary scho-

ols where there are only 24 hours of lessons per week, it is possible to have six mornings of teaching only.

Issues currently under debate

The reforms of primary and secondary teaching have succeeded each other rapidly over the last few years but the school system is not the focus of debate.

THE NETHERLANDS

The education system is uniform and governed by law, but the management of the schools is decentralised. Schools enjoy a great amount of autonomy.

The number of days or hours in class in the year

The Primary Education Act sets the total number of lessons for the eight years at school at 7,520 and stipulates that schools are free to distribute these as they wish as long as at least 3,520 hours (i.e. an average of 880 hours annually) are given in the first four years and 3,760 (i.e. an annual average of 940 hours) over the next four years.

According to the Secondary Education Act[4], pupils must have 1,000 hours per year and 700 in the year of their final exams.

The Inspectorate of Education, which is responsible for ensuring "the quality of teaching", checks that schools adhere to these standards.

The annual school calendar

The Education Ministry defines the dates of the summer holidays which are imperative: establishments can deviate from these dates if they have specific permission. However the dates of the other holidays are simply indicative. Those managing the schools are encouraged to follow the rule whereby a period of lessons lasting seven to eight weeks must be followed by one week of holidays. Most schools fall in line with the ministry's recommendations.

The country is divided into three zones: north, south and centre.

In general the calendar is as follows:

- the school year starts as of mid-August lasting to the start of September;
- the autumn holidays of one week fall in the second half of October;
- the Christmas holidays last two weeks;

4.Secondary education applies to children as of 12 years old. The length of this depends on the option that has been taken: professional, technical or general.

- the February holidays last one week;
- the May holidays also last one week ;
- the summer holidays last 7 weeks and start in July;

The ministry defines the calendar several years in advance but it can be changed after an assessment that takes place every three years. Likewise the division of the provinces into three zones can be changed after this assessment.

The length of the school week

According to the Primary Education Act the normal length of the school week is five days as of the third year in school but establishments can reduce the week to four days seven times per year. In 2003 Parliament opposed the Education Ministry's proposal to abolish this legislative measure, which would have enabled some schools to open four days a week only for the entire school year.

Most pupils in primary do not go to school on Wednesday afternoon.

In secondary school lessons are spread over five full days.

Organisation of the school day

This is decided freely by the schools themselves. The day generally starts at 8:30 a.m. and ends between 3 p.m. and 4 p.m. It is longer in secondary than in primary. A midday break has to be respected with the schools being obliged to accommodate pupils at lunchtime so that they can eat in the establishment. Generally this break lasts one hour.

Increasingly primary schools opt for the non-stop day. Lessons end at around 2 p.m. and children eat in class since the meal is considered to be a learning experience.

The schools define how long the lessons last

(50, 60 or 70 minutes).

Issues currently under debate

A government bill has just been elaborated on the basis of work accomplished by a committee that is responsible for examining the length of teaching time in secondary schools; this committee was formed after the Inspectorate of Education came to some conclusions, which stated that establishments were respecting the rule of 1000 hours of lessons per year less and less^[5]. The bill plans to shorten the summer holidays to six weeks and to make the Christmas and May holiday dates imperative. These changes are due to enter into force as of September 2012.

CONCLUSION

If Italy is excluded, the organisation of school time is a focus of joint concern in all of the countries under study. Reforms have attempted to adapt these rules better to working mothers and to the democratisation of the education system.

This comparative analysis reveals two features that are specific to France: the four-day week and the importance of intermediary holidays.

It also shows that by adopting the proposals put forward by the steering committee of the "Conférence nationale sur les rythmes scolaires" France would relinquish the Mediterranean model of the long summer holiday.

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5. The annual number of hours of lessons in secondary school has been the focus of ongoing debate since the 1990's. In spite of successive efforts to relax the rules and in spite of checks made by the Inspectorate of Education and demonstrations by parents some schools do not guarantee the minimum number of hours. In 2008 several schools had to pay fines.

Organisation of School Time in the European Union

Annex : Summary Table of School Time in the EU*

	Principles of Organisation	Days in class in the year	Summer Holidays	Intermediary holidays	Length of the week	Day	Issues under Debate
France	Centralisation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Primary: 144 Secondary: 175 to 180 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 8 - 9 weeks 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Autumn Christmas Winter Spring 3 zones for winter and spring 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Primary: 4 days Secondary: 4,5 or 5 days 	Two half days and midday break	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Improvement of balance: annual, weekly, daily. Abolition of the 4 day week Reduction of summer holidays Etc.
Germany	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Competence of the Länder National coordination 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 6 day week: 208 5 day week: 188 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 6 weeks Division of the Länder into 5 zones 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> End of October Christmas February Easter Whitsun Autonomy on the part of the Länder 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 5 days generally If 6 days, 2 Saturday free per month 	Traditionally lessons concentrated in the morning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Progression onto the afternoon lessons
England and Wales	Autonomy on the part of the establishments	190	6 weeks	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Autumn Christmas February Easter May Local variations 	5 days	Two half days and midday break of one hour	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Extra-curricular activities outside of school hours
Spain	Competence of the autonomous communities	At least 175	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Primary: 11 weeks Secondary: 12 weeks 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Christmas Carnival Easter Local variations 	5 days	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Traditionally, two half days and 2.5 hour break Progression over to the non-stop day 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Criticism of the non-stop day
Italy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Competences of the regions Autonomy on the part of the establishments 	At least 200	12 to 13 weeks	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Christmas Carnival Easter Local variations 	5 or 5,5 days	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Generally two half days and midday break Primary: sometimes only in the morning 	
The Netherlands	Autonomy on the part of the establishments	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Primary: 880 hours/year in the first four years, then 960 Secondary: 1 000 hours/year 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 7 weeks Project to move to 6 weeks 3 zones 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Autumn Christmas February May Local variations Project to align Christmas and May holidays 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 5 days Primary: no lessons on Wednesday afternoon 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Two half days and midday break of one hour Progression over to the non-stop day in primary 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Annual number of hours of lessons in secondary

*Five countries were selected: Germany, Spain, Italy, the Netherlands and the UK (in the UK, the law in force in England and Wales only were analysed). This choice was governed by geographic proximity and also the greater or lesser degree of centralisation that typifies the education systems in the various countries