

Czech Republic

Population: 10.24 m. **Fertility rate:** 1.18. **GDP per capita:** USD 15 100. **Children under 6 years:** 540 000.

Female labour force participation: Female labour force participation rate for women 15-64 is 62.2%, 5.2% in part-time employment (male part-time employment rate is 1.5%).

Labour force participation rate of women with children: 27% of women with a youngest child under 6 are employed and 16.7% of women with a child under 3 (OECD, *Society at a Glance*, 2005).

Maternity and parental leave: 28 weeks maternity leave paid at 69% of earnings, followed by a flat-rate, parental leave benefit paid until children reach their 4th birthday.

Average duration of parental leave: not available, but at least three years.

Compulsory school age: 6 years.

Social expenditure as % of GDP: 20.1%. **Child poverty rate:** 6.8% (OECD average is 11.2%).

Funding of pre-primary educational services (ISCED Level 0): 0.46% of GDP (0.43% public and 0.03% private), corresponding to 10% of the education budget, for 13% of education enrolments.

Unit cost per child: (in USD converted using PPP): USD 2 724 (OECD, *Education at a Glance*, 2005).

Funding of services for children under 3: Government funding is directed almost exclusively to parental leave policies. Child care services are a municipal responsibility.

Major service types and daily duration: Children 0-3 years: almost all children 0-3 years are cared for by their families or through informal care arrangements. Centre-based crèches, providing care for 0.5% of 0- to 3-year-olds are few. Children 3-6 years: public *mateřská škola* (kindergarten) is the predominant service; with 76-95% coverage from 3 years to 6 years – full day). Out-of-school provision (*školní družina*) for children 6-12 years, enrolling 36% of children, during the school year.

Average costs to parents: Fees are capped at 50% of costs for the first two years of the *Mateřská škola*, with the last year being free. Fees are reduced or waived for families in need.

Legal entitlement to a free service: From age 6, when compulsory primary schooling starts.

Rate of access to regulated services: Children 0-3 years: almost no access. Children 3-6 years: 67-98% coverage.

Designation and qualifications of key staff: Child nurses staff the few remaining crèches. Their three-year, secondary/vocational level course has a strong health and hygiene orientation. Kindergartens are staffed by pedagogues, 95% of whom are trained through a specialised four-year secondary level course in one of 18 pedagogical vocational schools.

Child-staff ratios: In public kindergartens (*mateřská škola*), a ratio of 12:1 is recommended, at least during the core period of the day. A ratio of 23:1 is practised in out-of-school provision.

Maximum group size: 28 children.

Auspices

Early education in the Czech Republic is almost entirely a public service. *Mateská kola* (kindergartens) are part of the educational system, under the responsibility of the Ministry of Education, Youth, and Sport. Since transition, regional and municipal education authorities have increasing responsibilities, and centres enjoy much autonomy. Financing is drawn from multiple sources – the regional school authority (teacher's salaries, books and equipment), municipalities (running costs and capital investments) and from parental fees (capped at 50% of costs for the first two years and free for the final year), while funds to improve material conditions or purchase equipment and toys are often generated through sponsoring contracts with private enterprises. Some private and church kindergartens are now in operation, though on a small scale.

Crèches are administered by the Ministry of Health and therapeutic child care centres are part of the Ministry of Social Affairs. In practice, there is no longer an organised day care network for children from 0-3 years, compared to a coverage rate of 20% in 1989. The introduction of an extended period of maternal leave after transition reduced demand for public child care outside the home. Only 60 crèches (in 2004) have survived from the previous regime. Former crèche buildings have been sold or allocated to other purposes. However, children over 2 years of age can attend kindergartens (at the present time, only about 20 000 do so).

Context

Labour force rates: In 2004, 62.2% of women participated in the labour force (OECD, 2005). Of the women employed, 5.2% work part-time compared to 1.5% of men (OECD, 2005). 27% of women with a youngest child under 6 are employed and 16.7% of women with a child under 3 (OECD, *Society at a Glance*, 2005).

Parental leave: The Czech Republic offers universal, paid maternity leave of 28 weeks (69% of earnings) with a flat-rate, parental leave of 4 years. Parental leave is still taken almost exclusively by mothers. Only 16.7% of women with a child under 3 are in the workforce (OECD, *Society at a Glance*, 2005).

Access and provision

The operating hours and annual duration of services vary according to service type. In early education, 3-6 years, the system is almost entirely public. It is now decentralised, with a great deal of autonomy given to municipalities and to each centre. Helped by falling fertility rates, sufficient numbers of places are available, although access is said to be limited or inadequate in rural areas. Parental fees are capped at 30% of costs, and are reduced or waived for families in need. There are special supports for low-income/ethnic areas and families. Despite this, the families considered to be most in need are least likely to enrol their children in pre-school settings. From 2005, parental fees will be raised to 50% of costs, however with the exception of the last kindergarten year which will be free.

Rates of provision

0-3 years: The policy of long-term maternity leave has limited the availability of crèches for children of this age. Children in this age group are cared almost exclusively by mothers and/or by informal caregivers (about 20 000 of 2- to 3-year-olds attend kindergartens).

3-6 years: 76% of 3-year-old children enter public fee-paying, full-day pre-school, reaching 95% at 5-6 years. Children of this age group are entitled to a place in a public kindergarten. The average coverage rate for children aged 3-6 years is 88%. The State Social Support Act (No. 117/1995) limits kindergarten access of children in care of mothers on paid maternity leave to 5 days per month. Kindergartens remain open eight or more hours per day. The compulsory school age is 6 years, although a child deemed not developed enough may enter primary school at a later age. The average percentage of postponed education is at least 22%, more than half these initiatives coming from parents (Background Report for the Czech Republic, 2000). In principle, these children have preferential placement in kindergartens.

Children with diverse needs

Children with disabilities: There is growing inclusion of children with disabilities, though many special kindergartens and schools still exist, even for children with relatively light handicaps. Disabled children amount to 4.2% of the total number of children attending kindergarten; almost a half of them (48.8%) attend special kindergartens. A parent responsible for a chronically ill or long-term disabled or handicapped child is entitled to parental benefit until the child is age 7 years.

Children from low-income families: The child poverty level is 5.9% after taxes and transfers, and specific and means-tested benefits are available to families with young children. Some children from socially and culturally disadvantaged environments, with postponed entry to kindergarten at age 5, access preparatory classes where assistants have special knowledge of their specific environment and/or culture.

Ethnic and bilingual children: Problems of poverty, social exclusion and education under-achievement are most acute among Roma families. Other ethnic groups, e.g. Polish, German, generally organise education in their own language. It is estimated that the Roma community constitutes 0.7% of the population. High rates of unemployment are recorded among the group and levels of education are low compared to Czechs, 84% of whom complete upper secondary education. Since 1993, the government has invested in several pilot projects for Roma children, and preparatory classes for socially or culturally disadvantaged children of 6-7 years of age, whose entry into compulsory school had been delayed. In 2004, 126 preparatory classes with 1 779 children were in operation. The Ministry of Education provides grants to NGOs to support work with Roma parents and schools in order to increase the enrolment and adequate inclusion of Roma children.

Quality

Licensing and regulatory regimes: The state authorities, school authorities, municipalities, private entities or churches are each responsible for setting up and maintaining kindergartens. Legislation defines the rights and duties of kindergarten heads, sets the number of children per class, conditions for boarding and rules for health, care and security. However, it does not define basic standards of educational quality from the point of view of children or in terms of the goals of education.

Funding: Expenditure on pre-primary education as a percentage of GDP is 0.46%. Of this expenditure, 92.7% derived from public sources, 6.1% from household expenditure, and the remainder from private sources. 10.3% of all expenditure on educational institutions is allocated to pre-primary whereas 13% of the children/students are enrolled at this level of

education (OECD, *Education at a Glance*, 2005). Public expenditure on services for children under 3 is for the moment very low.

Staffing and training: Both crèche and kindergarten staff are trained at upper secondary level. More than 95% of pedagogues in the *mateřská škola* have completed four years of training (15 to 19 years) in one of the 18 upper secondary pedagogical schools in the country. Particular emphasis is placed on skills in art, music and sports, areas that traditionally have been deemed important for Czech pre-schools. Further accreditation through in-service courses has not yet been organised. Though often of high quality, the location and level of training tends to keep early childhood studies separate from university support and research. More recently, some tertiary education programmes have been opened, leading either to a bachelor degree or a tertiary diploma. Graduates from the kindergarten pedagogical secondary schools are almost all female, but increasingly fewer of them actually enter the profession.

Work conditions: In 2004, the average wage of pedagogues in the *mateřská škola* was 76% of the average wage in the Czech Republic (the teacher wage in basic schools is 96% of the average wage). Statutory working time is 40 hours weekly, with 31 hours assigned for “direct, obligatory teaching” work. Pedagogues are entitled by the Education Staff Act (No. 563/2004) to 12 days of a study leave. Kindergarten pedagogue status is still lower than that of basic school teachers. Only few men work as a kindergarten pedagogue although they can study pre-school pedagogy.

Child-staff ratios: Child-staff ratios are 12:1, but classes will often have up to 25 children, looked after by more than one teacher for, at least, part of the day.

Curriculum and pedagogy: In 1989, the choice of the educational programme and teaching/assessment methods became the responsibility of the kindergarten head. Curriculum and programme strategies were no longer centrally defined, but kindergarten staff were to assess the local context and determine a relevant curriculum and select suitable strategies/pedagogy. However, concern was expressed about the lack of support for local curricula/pedagogical initiatives, in terms of expert advice, training or implementation support. In 2001 a Framework Programme for Pre-school Education was introduced defining the basic values, aims and goals of kindergarten education. The programme was again modified in 2004. Until 2007, every kindergarten will prepare its own *mateská kola* programme, based on the Framework Programme, with implementation being supported by focused in-service training.

Monitoring, evaluation and research: Evaluation in kindergarten is conducted within the frame of general indicators set by the Czech School Inspectorate for all types of schools, including respecting accepted pedagogical, psychological and health related principles defined by examiners/inspectors (Background Report for the Czech Republic, 2000). While helpful, these indicators are deemed insufficient by ECEC experts if early childhood expertise and practice is to be enhanced. With regard to ECEC research, the authors of the Background Report are critical of limited activity and feel that comparative research, with recommendations for programme improvement linked to such research is needed.

Parent and community involvement: The family is recognised as the most important educational environment for young children. Parental involvement in ECEC services is deemed important to the successful conduct of kindergarten education and good quality care. At the national level, the Union of Parents operates as an interest group to strengthen the influence of parents within the Czech education system. However, school boards made

up of parents, municipality members, sponsors and others are not obligatory in the case of kindergartens. The Education Act (No. 561/2004) indicates that pre-school education should provide education support and help to parents as well as children. Access to kindergartens by parents differs from school to school. Their involvement in classes is a recent development in some kindergartens.

Policy developments in the areas identified by the OECD

- Since the “velvet revolution” of 1989, the Czech Republic has renewed its links with its long tradition of early childhood education. There has been an impressive increase in diversification and pedagogical freedom. The understanding of education as conformity to accepted knowledge and social norms has given way to a spirit of enquiry and innovation. There is a fresh appreciation of the child as a subject of rights, reflected both in the desire to lessen the pressures placed on children in pre-school institutions, and to integrate children with special needs. Pedagogical approaches and methods of work more suited to the young child’s needs and mentality have been encouraged, and daily routines in kindergartens have been relaxed. Greater emphasis is placed on free play and creative expression. Age-integration in classes has become a common practice.
- Decentralisation has taken place, and great efforts have been made to change the relationships between the education partners. Outreach to parents as equal partners has improved immeasurably, and men have been invited into the previously female world of kindergarten teaching.
- Work on the preparation of a framework curriculum for the kindergarten was completed in 2001. The new curriculum orients kindergartens to offer systematic and appropriate programmes to young children, yet remain open enough to allow innovation and experimentation. The content of education is worked out in five spheres: biological, psychological, interpersonal, socio-cultural and environmental. General competences (personal, cognitive and operational) that children should acquire in the kindergarten are set, linked with behaviour and knowledge expected in the primary school. This well-conceived curriculum is inspired by the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, and children’s agency and participation are given a strong emphasis.