

# Grade Retention during Compulsory Education in Europe: Regulations and Statistics







**Grade Retention during  
Compulsory Education in Europe:  
Regulations and Statistics**

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## PREFACE

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I am very pleased to present this study by Eurydice on the critical subject of grade retention. This issue is part of the wider struggle against school failure and early school leaving; problems which have long been priorities of national education policies and now have a high priority in the European policy agenda. The Europe 2020 strategy to exit the economic crisis and to build smart and inclusive growth includes the commitment to reducing early school leaving from the current rate of 14.4 % to below 10 % by 2020. Strategies for combating school failure are, therefore, at the centre of discussions at European level. This has led to a renewed focus on practices for grade retention and their impact on children having difficulties at school and has been the subject of research.

The communication entitled 'Improving Competences for the 21st Century: An Agenda for European Cooperation on Schools' (European Commission, 2008a) commented as follows on the practice of repeating a year as a strategy to combat difficulties:

'in some education systems up to 25 % of pupils repeat a year whilst in others this rarely happens. This measure is very costly. Whilst some pupils who repeat a year catch up, the vast majority do not. The repetition rate is clearly higher for children from disadvantaged groups and, in the long term, the results of children who repeat a year are often worse than those weaker pupils who were not held back.'

In order to reach the targets set at European level, effective education policies, based on evidence, are essential. Similarly, by learning from each other and exchanging good practices, countries can critically examine and improve their policies. In order to better understand national practices regarding grade retention, the European Commission has engaged the Eurydice Network to carry out a comparative analysis of the policies in place in European countries.

I am convinced that this study has produced a valuable inventory of the legislation and practices in place regarding pupils' repetition of a school year and that it will be of great interest to policy-makers, practitioners as well as to the wider public.

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Androulla Vassiliou', with a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

Androulla Vassiliou

Commissioner responsible for  
Education, Culture, Multilingualism and Youth

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## INTRODUCTION

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This study is a contribution from the Eurydice Network to the debate on school failure and early school leaving within the framework of the European Commission's policy on education and training (European Commission, 2011) <sup>(1)</sup>. In all education systems, in one form or another, pupil progress is assessed throughout the school year and various measures are put in place to support pupils who are having difficulties to ensure that they make satisfactory progress. In a large number of countries, at the end of a school year, retaking the year can be an option for pupils who, in spite of the support measures implemented during the course of the year, have not been able to make sufficient progress. It is important to stress immediately that the question of promotion to the next class cannot be separated from the background and traditions of education in a particular country. This explains why the frequency with which countries have recourse to year repetition and the criteria which are applied can vary significantly from one country to another.

This study is focussed on the regulations in force <sup>(2)</sup> relating to the repetition of a school year in primary and lower secondary general education in Eurydice Network countries. This corresponds to the period of compulsory full-time education in the majority of countries. The various support measures which exist everywhere and the individual help given to pupils in difficulty during the school year are not considered here. The focus of the study is mainstream education only. This means that if there are separate regulations or separate classes or provisions outside mainstream education for children with special education needs or children with an immigrant background, then these arrangements are not considered. The issue surrounding early entry and accelerated promotion of pupils identified as gifted or talented is also excluded from this analysis.

The analysis covers three important stages of compulsory education. Chapter 1 is devoted to access to primary education. The normal starting age of primary education and the particular time during the year when a child is deemed to have reached this age varies between education systems. In some countries, age is not the only condition of access. Criteria such as maturity and the child's general level of development may be taken into account and these comprise the factors which can justify deferment of entry to primary education. Chapters 2 and 3 are concerned with the regulations linked to progression and moving up to the next class during primary and lower secondary education respectively. These two chapters explore several aspects relating to repetition including the established criteria which govern the procedure, restrictions in place to limit its use, opportunities provided to help pupils catch up and the participants involved in the decision-making process. Each chapter contains a final section devoted to the available statistical data on the numbers of pupils who start primary education late and those who repeat years. This data helps to improve our understanding of the differences between countries in the practice and implementation of grade retention. The section on statistics is based on figures for the 2007/08 school year from the EUROSTAT database and the 2009 PISA study.

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<sup>(1)</sup> Council conclusions of 12 May 2009 on a strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training ('ET 2020'), OJ C 119, 28.05.2009.

<sup>(2)</sup> National documents regulating children admission to primary level and pupils' progression throughout compulsory education are listed in the references.

The study relates to the school year 2009/10 and covers all countries in the Eurydice Network. The comparative analysis has been written by the Eurydice EACEA Unit based on the detailed national descriptions of education systems published on the Eurydice website. The information has been completed and updated by the National Units during the verification of this study. All those who have contributed have been acknowledged at the end of the report.

## CHAPTER 1: CONDITIONS FOR ADMISSION TO COMPULSORY PRIMARY EDUCATION

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This chapter focuses on children's admission to compulsory primary education (ISCED 1). In Europe, the official age for starting compulsory primary education varies from one country to another. There are also differences between countries regarding the time when a child must have reached the official admission age. Criteria other than age may apply when determining the admission of a child to the first year of primary education and, consequently, entry to compulsory primary education might be postponed. Some children may therefore start the first year of primary education when they are a year older than the theoretical starting age. It is important, therefore, that the process of primary education admission is considered alongside the issue of progression to the next class.

The different criteria that a child must satisfy in order to be enrolled in the first year of compulsory primary education are examined in the first section of this chapter. The second section looks at those who are involved in the decision-making process surrounding the postponement of school admission. The third section outlines the provisions made for children who are not admitted to the first class of primary education while the last section provides an estimate of the percentage of pupils who have reached the required school age but are still enrolled at pre-primary level.

In comparing the different policies and practices relating to primary education admission in Eurydice countries, our analysis only considers the official age stated in regulations. The possibility of early entry to primary education is not taken into account nor are the specific admission conditions of pupils officially recognized with special educational needs.

### 1.1. Admission criteria

In most countries, the start of compulsory education coincides with the start of primary education. Almost everywhere, children who have reached compulsory school age must be enrolled in an educational institution. In some countries children must attend a pre-primary institution. In Greece, Cyprus, Hungary and Poland, the last pre-primary year is compulsory for all children, while in Latvia and Luxembourg the last two years are compulsory. In Denmark, the pre-primary class (*børnehaveklasse*) integrated within the *folkeskole* (primary and lower secondary school), taking children from the age of 6, has been compulsory since 2009.

#### 1.1.1. Age of admission

The age laid down by law is, in all countries, a criterion for entry to compulsory primary education. In the majority of countries (24), this age is fixed at 6. The statutory age is fixed at 5 in Malta and the Netherlands, as well as in the United Kingdom (England and Wales). The lowest age is 4 in Northern Ireland. The highest age is 7 in the three Baltic countries, in two countries in Central Europe (Bulgaria and Poland) and in three Nordic countries (Denmark, Finland and Sweden). In Poland, from 2012, the age of starting primary education will be 6.

In all countries the law lays down a specific date or period in the year by which the child must have reached the required age to enter primary education. In the majority of countries, a child starts primary education when he or she reaches the statutory age in the course of the calendar year. It is not necessary for the child to have reached the required age at the start of the school year, but he or she must have reached it before the end of the calendar year.

The United Kingdom (England and Wales) forms exception regarding the admission periods. Children reach compulsory school age at different points in the school year – at the start of the school term following their fifth birthday, i.e. in September, January or April. However, many children enter primary school before they reach compulsory school age, most commonly in September following their fourth birthday. Children are normally taught in the reception class (ISCED 0) at primary school until September following their fifth birthday, when they progress automatically to Year 1.

In other eleven countries, the child must have reached the statutory age before a specified date. This means that children who reach the required age after that date must wait until the following school year to attend primary education. The reference date usually corresponds to the start of the school year. This is the case in the Czech Republic, Cyprus <sup>(1)</sup>, Luxembourg, Austria, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia and Liechtenstein, and a little later in Estonia, in October. In Northern Ireland, the cut-off date is 1 July, so a child whose fourth birthday falls after this date does not reach compulsory school age until September of the following year. In Scotland, the reference period extends into the school year until the end of March, allowing pupils born at the end or beginning of the calendar year to be admitted to primary education at the start of the school year. In Germany, pupils reaching the age of 6 before the end of September are admitted to primary school. However, this reference period may be modified by the *Länder*. In Berlin and in the *Länder* of Bayern and Nordrhein-Westfalen, the reference period has been extended to 31 December: all children reaching the age of 6 by the end of the calendar year start their compulsory schooling after the summer holidays.

In four of these countries, children who turn the required age during the months following the fixed reference date might be given the opportunity to be admitted to the first year of primary education under certain conditions. In the Czech Republic, children who turn six in the period between the start of the school year in September and the end of December may be admitted to school. This is subject to their statutory representative having made the appropriate request and the relevant school guidance facility confirming that the child is ready for school following an assessment. In March 2009, the Education Act extended the period of admission to June of a given school year. This means that in order for children born between January and the end of June to be admitted, their level of maturity must be assessed by a specialist (e.g. neurologist, paediatrician) who then makes a recommendation regarding admission. In Austria, a child who reaches the official starting age of six years before the 1st of March following the beginning of the school year, may be admitted to the first grade of primary education at the request of parents and with evidence that s/he is sufficiently mature, mentally and socially, to attend school. In Portugal, children born between 16 September and 31 December are admitted to the *ensino básico* if the parents or legal guardians so request. The only limitation is the number of places available in the school of their choice. In Romania, parents or guardians of a child

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<sup>(1)</sup> Primary education is compulsory for all children who have reached the age of five years and eight months before the beginning of the school year, on the first of September. This therefore means that all the children have to turn six years old before the end of the calendar year in order to be admitted.

whose birthday falls between the start of the school year and the end of the calendar year have to request for his/her entry to the first primary year. The child must demonstrate a level of physical and mental maturity or of general development in order to be admitted.

Children who have not reached the required age before the reference date or during the period are kept at pre-primary level. These children will start their primary schooling the following year and will be one year older than the official age of entry. As a result, in these countries, according to international statistics (see Section 1.4), a greater proportion of children appear to be one year behind at the start of primary education.

### 1.1.2. Other admission criteria

As Figure 1.1 shows, in 14 countries, reaching the required age is the only condition for admission of pupils to the first year of primary. The situation is similar in eight other countries (Latvia, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, Finland, Sweden and Turkey) but parents have the right to postpone their child's entry to the first year of primary education. In all other countries there are other admission criteria, in addition to age, defined by education authorities; a child who has reached the required age within the period laid down may be kept at pre-primary level if he or she does not fulfill the other conditions for the start of primary schooling.

The other criteria most frequently applied is based on the concept that a child must have attained a certain level of development, maturity or readiness to start primary education. Children who are not considered to be sufficiently ready for primary school are kept at pre-primary level for an additional year, the time necessary for them to prepare for the new world of primary education and its demands.

This concept of a required level of development is put into practice either by considering the child's development as a whole (as in Belgium, Denmark, Germany and Iceland) or by specifying its many and varied dimensions: physical, mental, psychological and social. In Estonia, the child's physical, mental and social development is used as an admission criterion only when parents consider requesting a year's postponement. The same occurs in Belgium. In Turkey, even if the child has reached the required age, he or she may not be admitted to primary education if his or her level of physical development is considered to be inadequate by his or her parents.

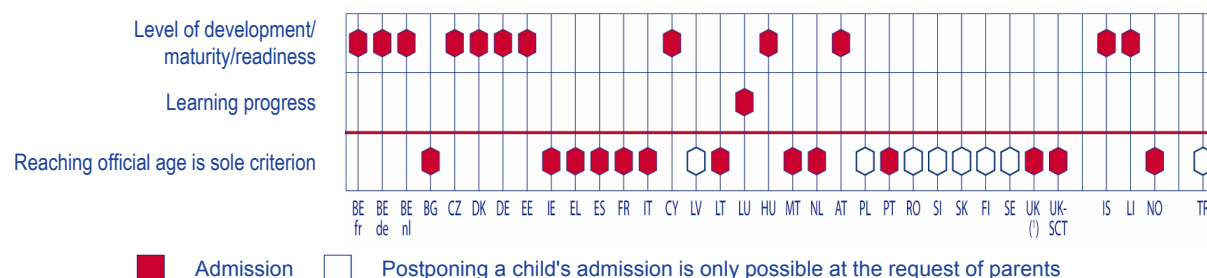
In several other countries the emphasis is placed on the child's maturity and readiness for primary education. In Austria, all the pupils of compulsory school age enter primary education in primary school (*Volksschule*) at the beginning of the school year. It is then the criterion of maturity that determines the pupil's enrolment at the pre-primary grade (*Vorschulstufe*) or at the first grade. In the Czech Republic, it is a question of establishing whether the child is physically and mentally ready. Similarly, in Latvia, the child's readiness is assessed in both psychological and health terms. In Hungary, a statement of 'readiness for school' is required as evidence that the child can start the *általános iskola* (primary and lower secondary institution). In Cyprus, a child's maturity and readiness are taken into account on the transition from the last compulsory pre-primary year of *nipiagogeio* to the first year of primary school (*dimotiko scholeio*). Similarly, in Slovakia, the law stipulates that schooling starts when the child has reached the required age and maturity in terms of readiness for school. If the child does not achieve school maturity and his/her legal guardian made the request, his/her entry to the first year of primary may be deferred.

In Liechtenstein the most important criterion taken into account when deciding whether to admit children to primary school (*Primarschule*) is *Schulfähigkeit*. This term means ‘readiness for school’ and covers three separate criteria: the state of development of the child; the requirements of the school; and the family/home environment. These criteria are considered to be interdependent and a child cannot be assessed on the basis of only one or two criteria at the exclusion of the others.

In Luxembourg, the child’s level of learning is the only criterion for moving from pre-primary up to primary education. In fact, in this country entry to primary school corresponds to moving from the first *cycle d'apprentissage* (stage of learning compulsory from the second year) to the second stage. Progression from one stage to the next within basic education is regulated which means that an assessment is carried out at the end of the first *cycle d'apprentissage*. This end of stage report is intended to certify that the pupils have developed the skills necessary to enable them to continue learning successfully at the second *cycle d'apprentissage*. Thus it may be decided that a pupil has to spend an additional year at the first stage (pre-primary education), in order to attain the skill levels required by the end of the stage <sup>(2)</sup>.

In the Flemish Community of Belgium, in the 2010/11 school year, new conditions for admission to mainstream Dutch-speaking primary education enter into force. Children aged 5 or 6 years must have a satisfactory attendance record in Dutch-speaking pre-primary education during the preceding year. If this is not the case, a language test is required in order to decide whether the child needs to be kept another year in pre-primary education.

**Figure 1.1: Criteria for admission to the first year of primary education (ISCED 1), 2009/10**



Source: Eurydice.

UK (1) = UK-ENG/WLS/NIR

### **Additional notes**

**Ireland:** Information not verified at national level.

**Hungary:** Parents have the right to postpone their child’s admission to the first primary year even if he/she passes the assessment on school readiness.

### **Explanatory notes**

Specific admission conditions of pupils officially recognized with special educational needs are not taken into consideration in this figure. Countries shown with the symbol in white are those where reaching the official starting age is the sole admission criterion set by educational authorities but where postponement of admission is possible at the request of parents.

For more details please see section 1.2.

<sup>(2)</sup> It is admission to compulsory primary education at the age of 6 which is under consideration here. With respect to compulsory schooling at pre-primary level, at the age of 4, admission may be postponed by one year at the request of parents and if authorised by the municipal council and if the state of health or the physical or intellectual development of the child justifies the measure. A certificate drawn up by a paediatrician is attached to the application to the municipal authority. This explains that the children may start their pre-primary schooling one year after the official age.

## 1.2. Parties involved in the decision-making process

The decision to postpone the admission of a child to the first year of primary education when he or she reaches compulsory school age follows not only a process of applying specific criteria but also a complex assessment and decision-making process in which various parties are involved.

In three countries, the educational institution in which the child is to be enrolled in the first year of primary level is the sole party making the decision on admission or postponement. In Germany, in most of the *Länder*, the supervisory bodies within the primary school (*Grundschule*) are empowered by law to request that children who have not yet reached the required level of development be enrolled in *Schulkindergarten* or *Vorklasse*. In Luxembourg, the teaching staff (*équipe pédagogique*) decides whether a child meets the objectives laid down for the end of the first stage (pre-primary) and may be admitted to the second stage of learning (primary education). In Austria, where all children are admitted to primary school (*Volksschule*), it is the school head who determines the maturity of the child and decides whether s/he is ready to start the first grade of primary level or needs a preparatory year in *Vorschulstufe*.

In Hungary, it is the head of the *általános iskola* who decides on a child's admission to primary education based on a maturity assessment. The kindergarten teacher, after consultation with the parents, issues a 'statement of readiness' necessary for admission. This statement is based on the monitoring of the child's development during his/her attendance at kindergarten. If the child has not attended kindergarten or, in case of uncertainties, disagreement with the parents or a negative opinion from the *óvoda*, an education counselling service issues the 'statement of readiness' after a thorough assessment of the child. The final decision to admit a child is made by the head of the *általános iskola* and may, in some cases, go against a statement which declares that a child is not ready for school; however, such cases are rare.

In many countries, parents play an important role in their child's admission to primary education. There are some instances where it is the educational institution that suggests that a child's admission to school should be postponed but no decision can be made without the consent of the parents. In other instances, the question of postponing admission only arises if requested by parents. In these cases a procedure must be followed in order to establish whether the request should be granted or refused.

In the three Communities in Belgium, although three different parties may be involved in the process to keep a child back in pre-primary education, parental choice prevails<sup>(3)</sup>. In the German-speaking Community, parents have the right to ask for the child to be kept back or must give their consent<sup>(4)</sup>, and in the Flemish and French Communities, parents make the final decision on postponement. The other parties involved are the head of the school (French and German-speaking Communities) and the pre-primary teaching staff who give their opinion and the psycho-medical-social centre which is asked to assess the child (known as CPMS, *centre psycho-médico-social* in the French Community, PMS, *Psycho-Medizinisch-Soziales Zentrum* in the German-speaking Community and CLB, *centrum voor*

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<sup>(3)</sup> According to the new admission procedures, from 2010/11 parents do not have the final say if their child's attendance has been insufficient during the last year of pre-primary education, that is, the child has not been present for at least 185 half or 220 days in the year and has not passed the language test. If the child passes the test, parents will retain the right to decide whether or not to keep their child for an additional year in pre-primary education.

<sup>(4)</sup> If the child did not attend pre-primary level, the advice from the PMS is sufficient for not allowing a child to start the first year of primary education and to enroll her/him at pre-primary level for a year.

*leerlingenbegeleiding*, in the Flemish Community). Finally, the child's development is solely assessed following this procedure when the question on postponing the child's enrolment to the first primary year arises.

In the Czech Republic, when registering for the first grade, all children are assessed by the primary school to determine whether they are ready. On the basis of these results, parents or legal guardians are informed of their option to postpone the beginning of their child's primary schooling. It is therefore the parents or the legal guardians who apply to postpone admission. If they do so, an additional assessment is carried out. It is only the parents or legal guardians who make the final decision on whether or not to postpone admission.

In Denmark, if there is any doubt about whether a child is ready for primary education, the parents, the kindergarten or other day care institution as well as the school which the child will attend, will together assess, evaluate and discuss what is best for the child. The municipality board can then decide that admission to primary education may start one year later, at the age of 7, but always at the request of the parents or with their consent.

In Estonia, parents have the right to postpone their child's entry to the first year of primary education. Pre-primary institutions or the preparatory groups located in the *põhikool* (primary and lower secondary institution) attended by the child assess his or her development, and parents can use this assessment report for making their decision on whether or not to postpone. In this case, the child's development level is considered as an admission condition. If they decide to postpone, parents must refer to a counselling committee composed of a special education teacher, a speech therapist, a psychologist, a social worker and a representative of the county or city government. The decision of the counselling committee is considered as a recommendation. Nevertheless, in case of disagreement against postponement from the pre-primary institution, the parents are not obliged to consult the counselling committee and can make the final decision themselves. In Estonia, the request for postponement as well as the final decision is the prerogative of the child's parents.

In Cyprus, parental consent is needed for keeping a child in the *nipiagogeio* for an extra year. The *nipiagogeio* teacher diagnoses problems in the child's development and maturity and may ask for the child to be kept back in the last year of the *nipiagogeio*. In some cases, the opinion of an educational psychologist is sought.

In Latvia, deferment of admission to primary school for a child of compulsory school age is at the request of parents and must be supported by an opinion on the child's readiness for school by the family doctor or a psychologist. The institution at primary level makes the final decision.

In Poland, the School Education Act states that parents, while registering the child for being enrolled in the first year of primary education, can request to postpone school entry to the following year. The request has to be well justified and the postponement can only be for one year. The head of the school in the child's catchment area makes the decision after consultation with the centre for pedagogical-psychological support. Pre-primary teachers also play a role by providing the parents with their opinion on keeping the child one additional year at pre-primary level.

In Slovenia, parents may suggest postponing their child's entrance to the first year of the *osnovne šole*. But it is the head teacher who makes the final decision based on the opinion of a committee, usually composed of a guidance officer, a medical specialist and a teacher.



In Slovakia, at the request of the legal guardian, the head teacher can postpone the admission of a child of compulsory school age (6 years) who is not yet sufficiently mature for primary school. The request must be supported by a recommendation from a paediatrician and educational guidance service.

In Finland, parents have the right to request a postponement of admission to primary education for their child if supported by the results of psychological, or where necessary, medical tests which show that the child is not mentally or physically ready for school. Parents may choose the doctor or the psychologist who may be in private practice or a practitioner from the municipality or school. The results of the tests are binding on the school.

In Sweden, if there are special reasons and if the child's guardian makes the request, the municipality in which a child lives may decide that the child can start compulsory schooling one year later in the autumn term of the calendar year of his/her eighth birthday.

In Iceland, parents can request or consent to their child starting primary school (*grunnskóli*) one year later. The head teacher may authorise the postponement on the basis of a recommendation of a specialist (a psychologist, an education specialist, a special needs teacher or a speech therapist).

In Liechtenstein, the decision to admit a child to primary education largely results from a discussion between parents and the *Schulrat*, the council of the primary school (*Primarschule*). Children who have turned six by the deadline of 30th June are deemed to have reached compulsory school age but legislation allows parents a window of four months from 1 May to 31st August for deciding whether or not their child will start the *Primarschule*. Parents receive advice from the *Kindergarten* on the child's readiness for the *Primarschule*, based on the *Schulfähigkeit* ('readiness for school') criterion. Kindergarten teachers may consult the *Primarschule* psychology service to determine whether the child is ready or not. Although rare, if the *Kindergarten* teachers and parents disagree, the *Schulrat* makes the final decision taking into account the parents' opinion. Normally, however, parents and the *Schulrat* decide together whether the child should be admitted to the *Primarschule*.

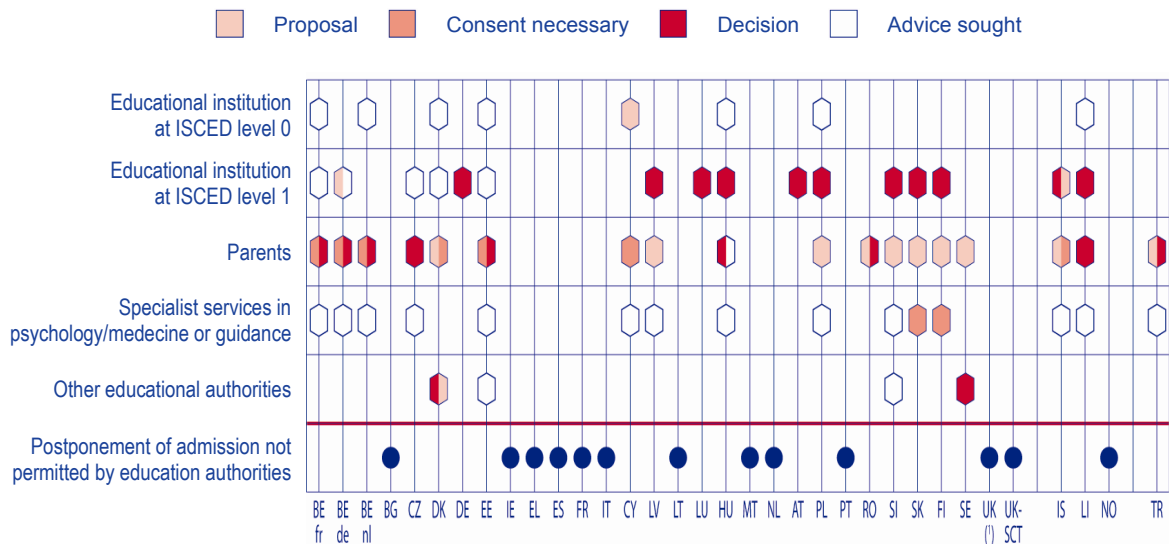
In Turkey, parents may make a written application for a year's postponement of their child's entry to the first year of the *ilköğretim okulu* on the grounds of their child's physical development.

In two countries, parents may decide to postpone the start of their child's compulsory education if they consider it necessary without being subject to any formal process. This is the case in Hungary where parents have the right to postpone their child's admission to the *általános iskola* if they so wish and even if the results of the assessment made by the *óvoda* show that the child is ready. Similarly, in Romania, parents may themselves decide to defer their child's entry to primary school for one year even if the child has reached the age of 6 by the beginning of the school year. This right is closely linked to the implementation of the 2003 reform which set the start of compulsory schooling at six years old; previously, the age was seven years old.

Finally, the decision not to admit a child of compulsory school age to the first year of primary education is a complex procedure involving various parties who have different roles. In most of the cases mentioned above, a balance is sought between the opinions of the parents and those held by the preprimary or primary education institution in order to make the most appropriate choice for the child. A third external party, such as staff in medical or guidance services, is frequently called upon to

assess the child. By showing that the child does not fulfil the criteria laid down for admission, this external involvement does in fact substantiate and hence legitimise the postponement decision made either by the parents or by the educational institution.

**Figure 1.2: Parties involved in decisions to postpone admission to the first year of primary education (ISCED 1), 2009/10**



Source: Eurydice.

UK (1) = UK-ENG/WLS/NIR

**Additional notes**

**Belgium (BE nl):** For information on the role of parents', please see sections 1.1.2 and 1.2 as new admission conditions come into force in 2010/11.

**Ireland:** Data not confirmed at national level.

**Hungary:** Parents have the right to postpone their child's admission despite the positive results of the assessment.

**Explanatory note**

Specific admission conditions of pupils officially recognized with special educational needs are not taken into consideration in this figure.

**1.3. Provision for pupils not admitted**

In most countries the non-admission of children to the first year of primary education suggests that they are being kept in the pre-primary class or centre they were already attending. This means that the child either completes an additional year or repeats the last year of pre-primary education. In certain countries transition grades have been set up to take those children who have reached the required age for entering the first primary year but have not been admitted in the light of other criteria, namely that of development and maturity.

In general, it is considered that one year is sufficient to allow the child to reach the appropriate level of development/maturity/readiness. In the Czech Republic as well as in Hungary, children may be kept at pre-primary for two additional years. Regulations allow children to start their compulsory education when they turn eight years of age at the latest.

Whether they are integrated into primary school or into another institution, these transition classes, also known as preparatory classes, are intended to allow the child to adapt to primary education. There are five countries where children may be enrolled in these transition grades: the Czech Republic, Germany, Austria, Slovakia and Liechtenstein.

In the Czech Republic, it is recommended for children whose admission to primary school has been deferred to either join a preparatory class in primary school (*základní škola*) or to rejoin the last year of the kindergarten (*mateřská škola*).

In most of the German *Länder*, children are enrolled in a *Schulkindergarten*, an institution intended specifically for children of compulsory school age who have not yet attained the appropriate developmental level to start the *Grundschule*. In certain *Länder*, children not admitted to the first year of primary education may also be accepted in a transition class, the *Vorklasse*, in certain cases rejoining younger children, usually aged 5.

In Austria, it is stipulated that children are entitled to a third year if, during the first two years or the *Vorschulstufe*, they need more time to reach the objectives of the first stage of primary education at their own speed.

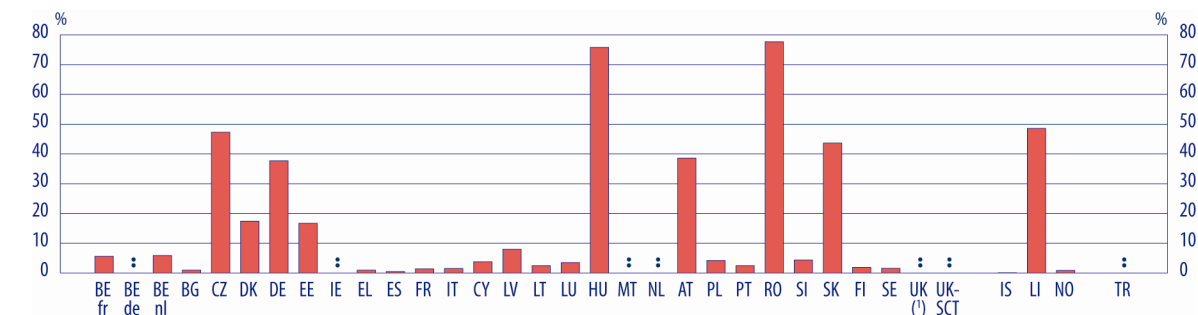
In Slovakia, pupils who have not been admitted to the first year of primary education are either kept at the *materská škola* (kindergarten) for another year. In the case of children who have not reached an appropriate level of maturity and who come from socially disadvantaged families, there is also the possibility to be enrolled in a preparatory class, known as 'year zero', at the *základná škola*. This 'year zero' accepts children aged 6 on 1st September. Pupils who experience difficulty during the first year of primary education and need more time to adapt may also be placed in 'year zero'. The legal guardian has the right to decide whether the child will attend the *mateřská škola* or 'year zero'.

In Liechtenstein, there are two facilities for children who do not meet the criterion of *Schulfähigkeit* (readiness for school) which allow them to prepare for entry to *Primarschule*. Firstly, the *Vorschule*, a pre-primary institution especially for the preparation of children to join the first year of *Primarschule*. Secondly, a two-year induction class, the *Einführungsklasse*, provided within *Primarschule*, following which a pupil moves on to the second year of the *Primarschule*.

## 1.4. Statistical data

Based on Eurostat data for 2008, the percentage of pupils who have reached the statutory school age for entry into the first year of compulsory primary education (ISCED 1) and are enrolled in pre-primary education (ISCED 0) has been calculated for each country. Eurostat data used for these estimates also include pupils with special educational needs.

**Figure 1.3: Percentage of pupils who have reached the statutory school age for entry into compulsory primary education (ISCED 1), enrolled in pre-primary education (ISCED 0), 2007/08**



BE fr	BE de	BE nl	BG	CZ	DK	DE	EE	IE	EL	ES	FR	IT	CY	LV	LT	LU
5.6	:	5.9	1.0	47.3	17.4	37.7	16.7	:	1.0	0.5	1.4	1.5	3.8	8.0	2.5	3.5
HU	MT	NL	AT	PL	PT	RO	SI	SK	FI	SE	UK (!)	UK-SCT	IS	LI	NO	TR
75.8	:	:	38.6	4.2	2.5	77.7	4.4	43.7	1.9	1.6	:	:	0.1	48.6	0.9	:

Source: Eurydice, calculations based on Eurostat.

UK (!): UK-ENG/WLS/NIR

#### **Additional notes**

**Ireland:** According to Eurostat country notes participation, 'there is no official provision of ISCED 0 education. Many children attend some form of ISCED 0 education but provision is private and data for the most part is missing'.

**Greece:** Data issued in 2006/07.

**Netherlands and Malta:** According to the International Classification Standard of Education (UNESCO, 2006), the first year of primary education is classified at pre-primary education (ISCED level 0).

#### **Explanatory note**

The calculations are based on Eurostat data on students by ISCED level and age. For each country, the estimate is based on the official age for entry into ISCED 1 (turning age). For the turning age, the percentage of pupils that were still attending ISCED 0 was calculated from the total number of pupils of that age in the respective country. Pupils with special educational needs are included. Independent private educational institutions are not taken into account.

Concerning the official turning ages of entry to ISCED levels, see the schematic diagrammes of the structure of European education systems in 2009/10 (Eurydice, 2009).

As Figure 1.3 shows, in the countries where the only requirement for admission to primary education is reaching the statutory school age in the course of the calendar year, the percentage of children attending pre-primary when they are of primary school age is very low. These countries are Bulgaria, Greece, Spain, France, Italy, Lithuania and Norway and their respective rates are under or close to 2 %. In all these countries, apart from cases where children have special educational needs, children reaching compulsory school age before the end of the calendar year are automatically enrolled in the first year of primary education. Portugal is very close to this group since estimations in Figure 1.3 seems to show that parents of children whose 6th birthday falls between the date fixed and the end of the calendar year request their admission to primary school: only 2.5 % of six-year old pupils still attended the kindergarden (*jardim de infância*) in 2007/08.

In the countries where it is possible to defer the admission of a child who reaches statutory school age in the course of the calendar year, the rate of continued attendance at pre-primary level varies widely. Estimates shown in Figure 1.3 reveal that the option to postpone entry to the first year of compulsory education for a child on the grounds of maturity, school readiness, or level of cognitive and physical development varies from one country to another. The practice is rarely carried out in Iceland. Similarly, in Sweden (1.6 %) and in Finland (1.9 %), it is unusual to defer the start of compulsory school

attendance. In five countries it is slightly more frequent: Cyprus (3.8 %), Poland (4.2 %), Slovenia (4.4 %), Belgium – French (5.6 %) and Flemish Communities (5.9 %) and Latvia (8.0 %). Denmark has the highest rate within this group with 17.4 % of children still enrolled at pre-primary level at the official age of being at primary level. Regulations allow postponing compulsory schooling, mostly at the request or with the consent of parents. However, statistics show that this does not often occur in practice.

In other countries, the official starting age must be reached before or at the start of the school year. The percentage of children not admitted to the first year of primary education is therefore higher. It is clear that a proportion of children will only reach the required school age in the last few months of the calendar year, that is, just after the beginning of the school year. Moreover, in almost all these countries, regulations also allow for postponement for other reasons. In these countries, the enrolment percentage of children in ISCED 0 when they are of an age to attend ISCED 1 may be very high: Romania (77.7 %), Hungary (75.8 %), Liechtenstein (48.6 %), Czech Republic (47.3 %), Slovakia (43.7 %), Austria (38.6 %) <sup>(5)</sup> and Germany (37.7 %). In Estonia, the rate is clearly lower – 16.7 % – but still higher than the first two groups.

The special cases of Romania and Hungary should be highlighted, given the very high percentage of children still enrolled in pre-primary when they have reached the statutory age for entry to primary education. In Romania, the age for starting compulsory schooling was lowered from 7 to 6 years from the 2003/04 school year. Although this new legislation has come into force, four years later, in 2007, when these statistics were collected, there was still little change in practice: three quarters of children were not admitted to primary school even though they had reached the statutory age. Thus the majority of parents do not allow their children to start primary school until they reach the age of 7 – the former school starting age. National statistics from Romania confirm this estimate since in 2006/07, 78.2 % of six-year old pupils were still enrolled in pre-primary education (MECT, 2007). In Hungary, it is laid down by law that a child must start compulsory schooling at primary level by the age of 8 at the latest. As the statutory age for starting compulsory schooling is 6, the child is given two additional years to attain the developmental level required to be admitted to primary school. The fact that each child is tested to ascertain whether they are ready for primary school indicates that this criterion is quite systematically applied. In addition, it seems that there is the same tendency as in Romania where a significant number of parents prefer to keep their child in pre-primary for an additional year before starting compulsory education, even if the child is considered ready for school by the pre-primary institution.

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<sup>(5)</sup> According to national Austrian statistics, one fifth of this percentage attended the pre-primary grade, *Vorschulstufe* (Statistics Austria, 2010).

In seven countries the deferral of entry to primary schooling is a normal occurrence resulting essentially from a concept of child development as well as the degree of maturity and readiness for school. The transition classes provided in a certain number of these countries are evidence of this. This concept is integrated into legislation and appears to be accepted by all the parties involved in the decision-making process, that is to say, by both parents and the school community and by other parties such as guidance services, doctors or psychologists.

## CHAPTER 2: GRADE RETENTION IN PRIMARY EDUCATION

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This chapter begins with the regulations on grade retention in the member countries of the Eurydice Network. It then examines the criteria for progression from one class to the next at primary level and looks at the opportunities provided for pupils who have fallen behind with their studies to catch up. The relationship between the transition from primary to lower secondary education and grade progression is subsequently addressed before focusing on the role of the various parties involved in making decisions about holding pupils back, in the same class, for an extra year. Finally, data from international surveys on the number of pupils falling behind at ISCED 1 are presented in order to understand to what extent repeating a year, although permitted by regulations, is actually applied in practice in primary education.

### 2.1. Existing regulations

In almost all countries, according to the legislation in force, it is possible for a pupil to repeat a class in primary education. Although pupils are given support and remedial activities when they experience problems during the school year, a pupil might still fail to meet the set objectives by the end of the year. Retention is therefore proposed as the final measure of support. It is considered that by repeating a school year, pupils have a further opportunity to improve their learning and skills. The regulations that provide for grade retention are mostly based on this principle.

There are a very few countries which do not allow grade retention. In Norway regulations state that all pupils are entitled to automatically progress through the years of compulsory schooling. In Iceland, the Compulsory School Act does not state explicitly that children progress automatically to the next school grade but explains that 'compulsory education shall generally be of ten years in duration ... in general, all children, between the ages of 6 and 16 are required to attend compulsory school (1)'. This has been interpreted to mean that no child should stay longer than 10 years at compulsory level and consequently this has become the usual practice. Furthermore, in the National Curriculum Guide currently under revision, it will be stated explicitly that children at compulsory level are to be moved up automatically from one grade to the next at the end of the school year. In Bulgaria, according to a recent amendment to the National Education Law, in 2009, a pupil may not repeat grades 1-4 which correspond to ISCED 1. In Liechtenstein also, legislation provides for automatic progression through primary education.

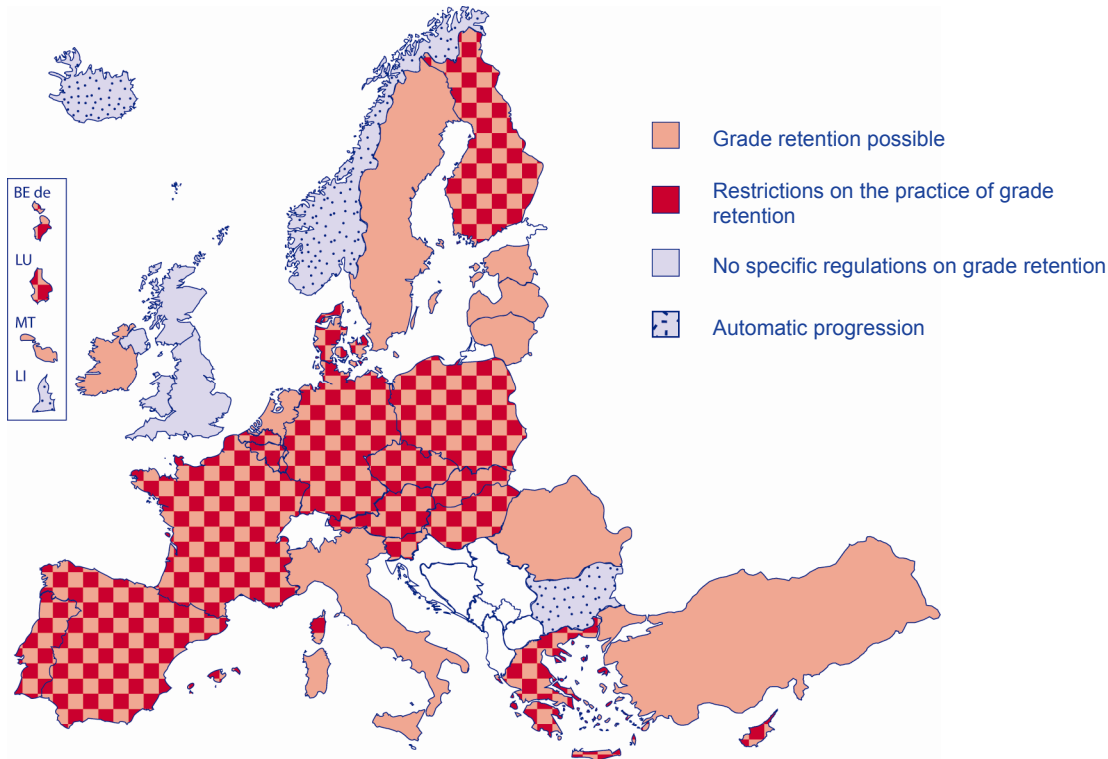
The case of the United Kingdom is very particular. There are no specific requirements that children should progress to a new age-related group each year and no legal requirements about how schools should be organised. However, there is a fundamental principle, enshrined in legislation, that education should be suitable for a child's age, ability and aptitude. In line with this, the structure of the curriculum is designed to accommodate differences in pupil ability and performance. This framework provides the context in which schools organise their teaching groups. This means that children with different levels of performance are normally taught with their own year-group and are placed 'out of year-group' only in exceptional circumstances.

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(1) *Lög um grunnskóla* [Compulsory School Act] 2008.

In some countries where retaining a pupil in the same year is allowed, in order to avoid premature use of the grade retention process, regulations limit its application to the first years of primary education. Criteria for progression from one grade to another based on pupil assessment are therefore not applied at the start of primary education. In consequence, automatic progression becomes the rule. This happens in Germany, Hungary, Austria and Portugal in the first year of primary education. However, in Hungary according to regulations, if a pupil does not meet the requirements during the first year in the *általános iskola*, the year will be considered as a preparatory year. Therefore the following year will, in fact, be the pupil's first year. This only applies for one year and for children who started their compulsory schooling no later than the age of 7. In Greece, pupils do not repeat in the first two years. In Poland, automatic progression is extended to the first three years <sup>(2)</sup>.

**Figure 2.1: Grade progression in primary education (ISCED 1) according to existing regulations 2009/10**



Source: Eurydice.

**Additional note**

**Ireland:** Information not confirmed at national level.

**Explanatory note**

**Restrictions on the practice of grade retention include:** the exclusion of particular grades from the retention process and a limit on the number of times pupils can repeat a grade in the course of primary education.

<sup>(2)</sup> In exceptional cases, the teaching council can decide on pupil repetition based on an opinion issued by a physician or a public psychological-pedagogical support centre while also taking into account the views of the pupil's parents or legal guardians. From the 2010/11 school year, such decisions will be made on the basis of a request issued by the class teacher.



Other guidelines prescribed in regulations aim to reduce the frequency of grade repetition and restrictions are therefore placed on the use of the practice during primary education. In some countries, there is a limit set on the number of times that pupils can repeat years during this phase. In the Flemish Community of Belgium, a pupil's primary education career cannot exceed eight years. In the French Community of Belgium, a pupil can only repeat one year in each of the two stages: from the pupil's admission to primary school until the end of the second year, and between the third and the sixth primary year. In only specific circumstances, such as a long period of illness, can a child be retained for the maximum nine years at primary school. In the German-speaking Community of Belgium, a pupil can be retained for an additional year after the six years of primary education, or even for a further year under certain circumstances. In Denmark, the total number of repeated years across the whole period of compulsory schooling is limited to two. In Luxembourg where schooling is organised into cycles, even though it is possible to repeat a year during any cycle, school attendance over the three cycles cannot be extended by more than two years. In other countries, regulations state that a pupil can only be retained once during primary education. This is the case in the Czech Republic, Spain, France, Cyprus and Slovakia.

## **2.2. Criteria governing grade retention**

At primary level, various elements are taken into account in the decision to allow a pupil to progress from one class to another. In almost all countries the criteria on which these decisions must be based are specified in regulations at central level. However, a few countries form an exception to this rule.

In Denmark, regulations do not define any specific criteria for progressing to the next grade. Where there is a question about whether a pupil should repeat a year, it is decided on the basis of the child's best interest. In the Netherlands, there are no statutory rules relating to the conditions for progression at primary level. Schools and/or the competent local authority (*bevoegd gezag*) must specify their own procedures in their school plans. In the United Kingdom, there are no criteria defined in regulations for placing a child out of their year group. It is the school's responsibility to consider the needs of each individual pupil. It is only in exceptional circumstances that a decision would be made that a child's needs would best be met by placement in a lower year group.

In countries where criteria are laid down in central regulations for deciding whether a pupil should progress to the next grade or not at the end of the school year, the most common criterion applied is the academic progress shown by a pupil during the school year. Other parameters which might also be set are the pupil's behaviour, attendance record or other factors related to absenteeism such as family or health problems.

Absence from school may result in a pupil being required to repeat a year. If a child has not attended a minimum number of lessons it may be considered that a reliable assessment cannot be carried out as there would be insufficient evidence on which to make the decision whether the pupil had met the conditions for progressing to the next class. In a few countries, regulations define situations in which absence from school might lead to a pupil being held back and/or state a figure for the number of absences which, if exceeded, would require a pupil to repeat the year.

The main reason for a prolonged absence is illness or hospitalisation. In the French Community of Belgium, the Czech Republic, Ireland and Slovakia, under existing regulations, a prolonged absence

due to ill-health is considered sufficient reason for a pupil to be held back for an additional year. In Ireland, changing schools is also a reason for which a child may have to repeat a year. In other countries, the reasons for absenteeism are not specified, regulations focus only on the length of absence that is considered acceptable during a school year. Thus, in Greece, a pupil may not progress if there is evidence that s/he has been absent for more than half of the school year. In Portugal, there is a limit on the number of unauthorised absences which cannot be exceeded otherwise the pupil may have to repeat the year. The same applies in Hungary where this is the only reason for repeating the first year of primary school. However, in Poland (grades 4 to 6) and in Romania, a pupil who has missed more than 50 % of compulsory lessons is still able to sit tests, the results of which would form the basis of his/her assessment and, subsequently, the basis of the final decision-making on moving up to the next class or repeating the year. Romanian legislation also takes into account a large variety of circumstances related to pupil absence including that of children who have studied abroad for a time, or those pupils authorised by the school to be absent in order to participate in festivals and/or national or international competitions of a cultural, sporting, artistic or professional nature. Regulations affect these pupils in a similar way to those pupils who are absent for a long period; they are declared to have 'deferred to the following semester/following year' which means that they will have to sit a test at the end of the first semester or school year.

Behaviour may in itself constitute a reason for repeating the year. In Poland, behaviour is assessed but not taken into account when the decision is made to move a pupil up to the next class. However, it is possible to prevent a pupil from progressing to the next class if s/he obtains the lowest end-of-year mark in behaviour for a second time. If the pupil obtains the lowest mark for a third time, s/he automatically repeats the year. As of 2010/11, it remains up to the teachers' council to decide whether the pupil should repeat the year if he/she obtained the lowest mark in behaviour, at the minimum twice in two subsequent years. In Romania, the legislation stipulates that a pupil who has received the final grade 'unsatisfactory' for his/her behaviour cannot be moved up to the next class, even if s/he passes the other subjects.

Besides these two criteria – school attendance and behaviour – the most common and important criterion for progression to the next grade is the pupil's academic progress. At primary level, there are two different approaches which may be used to decide whether a pupil has made satisfactory academic progress at the end of the school year and can therefore move up to the next class.

Firstly, an overall assessment of the pupil's academic progress can be made. This can encompass a pupil's marks but marks are not the decisive factors in determining whether a pupil is held back or progresses to the next year. Therefore, even if a pupil's marks are not satisfactory, other criteria are taken into account in the final decision on the pupil's progression. This happens in Belgium, Spain, France, Cyprus, Luxembourg, Lithuania, as well as in Portugal during the first cycle of the *ensino básico* (except at the first grade), in Slovenia from the first to the 3rd grade and in Sweden.

In the French Community of Belgium, there are two approaches to assessment: firstly, the pupil's work done during the year (observations and grades resulting from a formative assessment) as well as the results of the end-of-year tests (where organised) and, secondly, the pupil's attitudes and abilities such as the effort made, the quality of work, the ability to work in teams and to think independently as well as the ability to analyse and summarise. In Spain, the assessment takes into account different elements such as objectives, basic skills, assessment criteria etc. Every area of knowledge is

assessed using a verbal classification but the general evaluation of a pupil's progress and the degree to which competences have been acquired are important as well as the level of maturity shown by the pupil. In France, a pupil's learning progress determines whether s/he moves on to the next class or stays behind. In Cyprus, regulations stipulate that a pupil may have to repeat the year if s/he has not made the expected progress required by the curriculum. In Luxembourg, as described in chapter 1, the core skills (*socle de compétences*) must be acquired by a pupil in order to successfully meet the challenges of the next *cycle d'apprentissage* <sup>(3)</sup>. The assessment takes account of a variety of work to demonstrate that the pupil has acquired the *socle de compétences*. In Portugal, from the second to the fourth grade of the first cycle of the *ensino básico*, a pupil progresses if s/he has the necessary skills to succeed in the following year and to develop the core skills required by the end of the cycle. Both in Lithuania and Slovenia, an overall assessment of the pupil's achievements is used from grades 1 to 3. In Sweden, when the decision about a pupil's progress or retention is made, written commentaries on all pupil attainment in each subject are taken into account as well as his/her general development.

The second approach to decision-making on pupil progression which is followed in a larger number of countries is the classification of a pupil's academic progress during the school year according to a pre-defined scale. This classification largely consists of the aggregation of a range of marks which leads to an overall, final mark for all subjects or to an average mark for each subject. Marks might also combine various aspects of the pupil's academic progress including knowledge, skills, and attitudes. In order to determine whether the pupil's academic progress is satisfactory or not, regulations define a scale where a minimum level must be reached in order to allow the pupil to progress to the next school year. In some countries, regulations also specify the subjects whose marks count in this process, usually the compulsory subjects, as well as the number of subjects in which a pupil must be judged satisfactory in order to progress.

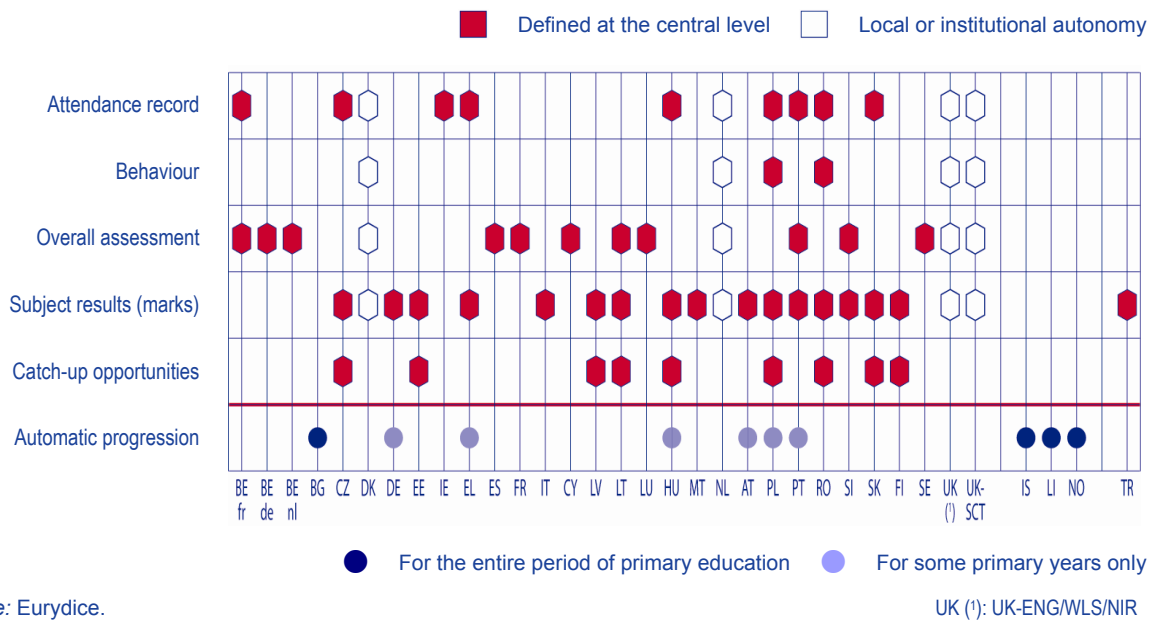
These general principles are applied in different countries in various ways. In the Czech Republic, a pupil who has passed all the compulsory subjects, as specified within the school educational programme, proceeds to the following year. In Germany and Malta, the end-of-year grades are assessed but, in the former, marks in all subjects are taken into account and, in the latter, it is limited to compulsory subjects, i.e. Maltese, English and mathematics. In Estonia, a pupil who has been given the grade 'poor' or 'weak' for the full academic year in at least three subjects has to repeat the year. In Greece, pupils must repeat the year when low grades (D and below) predominate among the final averages for the various subjects in the 3rd and 4th years, and when, in the 5th and 6th years, the overall average is below 4.5 out of 10. In Italy, it is the results of the summary of grades (*scrutinio*) which are used to estimate pupils' progress. In Latvia, a pupil may have to repeat the year if s/he fails in more than one subject at grades 1-4 and two subjects at grades 5-6. In Lithuania as well as in Slovenia, from the 3rd to the 6th year, a single failed subject may be sufficient reason for a pupil to repeat the year. The situation is similar in Poland from the 4th (last) year of primary school. In Hungary, a numerical classification is recommended from the second grade. If the school chooses another assessment method, this has to be converted into a numerical classification. In Austria, an unsatisfactory assessment in one compulsory subject may lead to the pupil having to repeat the year. In Romania, pupils who obtain annual average marks below 5 at a maximum of two subjects have to

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<sup>(3)</sup> The French and Luxembourgish languages are not taken into account in the assessment.

repeat the year. In Portugal, the assessment is no longer descriptive at the second cycle of the *ensino básico*. A pupil who has not gained satisfactory grades in the main subjects, Portuguese and mathematics or in a certain number of subjects <sup>(4)</sup> is considered not to have acquired the skills necessary to progress to the next class and must therefore repeat the year. In Finland a pupil's performance in all subjects is assessed; if a pupil fails in one or more subjects (grade less than or equal to 4 out of 10), s/he may have to repeat the year. In Turkey when the arithmetic mean of the grades of the two semesters is less than 2 in two subjects, the pupil might repeat the year.

**Figure 2.2: Criteria governing grade retention in primary education (ISCED 1), 2009/10**



Source: Eurydice.

**Additional note**

**Ireland:** Information incomplete and not confirmed at national level.

It is important to note that when it comes to deciding whether a child should progress to the next class or repeat a year at primary level, the effects of any poor results may be mitigated by taking account of other elements of the pupil's assessment or other aspects of her/his academic career. Indeed in Germany, under certain circumstances, a pupil may be allowed to repeat a year even if a decision had been made to allow him/her to pass into the next class. In other countries, however, a pupil whose results would, according to the rules and regulations, normally lead to him/her having to repeat the year, might be admitted to the next class. This is the case in Austria and Slovenia. When a pupil's results are judged to be satisfactory in other subjects, s/he is allowed to go into the next year. In Finland, in certain cases, either repetition or progression may be allowed regardless of the normal rules relating to marks. In Poland, a conditional promotion is only allowed once in a cycle (at grades 4-6), and in a single subject, provided that the subject is being continued in the following grade.

<sup>(4)</sup> That is, a grade of less than 3 in the two main subjects, Portuguese and maths, or in three other subjects or in two subjects (other than the two main subjects) plus an 'unsatisfactory' assessment in the subject called *área de projecto* (design and production of class projects running across the school year).

### 2.3. Catch-up opportunities at the end of the school year

In many countries, the end-of-year results are decisive for progressing to the next year at primary level. However, regulations generally provide opportunities for pupils to catch up if they are in danger of having to repeat a year. Pupils must be given a second chance to be assessed and meet the conditions for admission to the next class. In Estonia, additional work is provided at the end of the year to pupils who might have to repeat the year; pupils are given additional work only in the subjects where they achieved low marks at the end of the school year. The aim is to help pupils gain the knowledge and competences required by the programme which they had been unable to master during the school year. The situation is similar in Latvia: at the end of the school year, pupils have additional lessons and tests in the subjects in which they had low grades or failed. In Lithuania, teachers can prescribe additional work at the end of the school year in order to give pupils a second chance to be assessed and, consequently, of being admitted to the next grade. In the other countries, the Czech Republic, Romania and Slovakia, examinations/tests are set at the end of the year in subjects which the pupil had failed. In Hungary and Poland also, pupils may re-sit tests respectively from the second and the fourth year of primary school. There may, however, be limits on taking re-sits. In the Czech Republic and in Poland, pupils cannot re-sit examinations/tests in more than two subjects. In Finland, according to regulations, pupils must be given an opportunity to demonstrate that they have achieved an acceptable level through different methods of assessment adapted to their abilities, such as written tests or discussions with the teacher.

### 2.4. Transition from primary to secondary education and grade retention

In many countries, there is a transition procedure by which pupils move from primary to lower secondary education <sup>(5)</sup>. Three different types of transition procedure have been identified: transition on the basis of a primary school certificate; transition after successfully completing primary education; and transition following educational guidance from school authorities. The transition procedure can therefore affect whether or not a pupil progresses directly to the next level when s/he comes to the end of his/her last year of primary schooling.

In some countries, a primary school certificate is required for admission to lower secondary education. If a pupil does not obtain this certificate it can mean that s/he must repeat the final year of primary school. This is the case in Greece, Cyprus and Poland. The situation in the French and German-speaking Communities of Belgium is different in that pupils who fail to obtain the CEB (*certificat d'études de base*) do not necessarily have to repeat the year. These pupils may enter the first common year of secondary education (*première année commune*) but with certain restrictions. In the French Community, they may enter an alternative preparatory class, the *première année différenciée* where they can re-sit the test leading to the CEB. If they pass the CEB, they can join the common pathway of secondary education. If they fail, they must follow the school pathway in the *enseignement différencié* (alternative schooling). At the end of the second or the third year, pupils must continue their school pathway in technical or vocational education.

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<sup>(5)</sup> In a certain number of countries, progression from primary to lower secondary education is automatic since compulsory education forms one single structure. Countries with a single structure are Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Latvia, Hungary, Slovenia, Slovakia, Finland, Sweden, Iceland, Norway and Turkey.

In other countries the end of primary education is followed by general education which is differentiated and streamed at lower secondary level. The decision to guide pupils towards one or other of the academic streams is made on the basis of the results obtained at primary level. If a pupil has difficulties, s/he might be streamed to a less demanding course of education at secondary level rather than repeat the year. Conversely, repeating the last year of primary schooling may be seen as a strategy to improve results and thereby gain access to the desired educational stream the following year.

Thus, in four countries, as the school pathway taken and the pupil's assessment at the end of primary school are closely linked, the preference for a more academic and demanding educational pathway might lead a pupil to repeat a year on a voluntary basis. Improved results would give the pupil the opportunity to follow a more academic path. This is the case in Germany where a pupil might repeat a year in order to obtain better results and qualify for a different type of lower secondary school than the one s/he was destined for in the previous year. In Luxembourg, pupils might decide to repeat the last year of the *enseignement fondamental* in order to have access to the *lycée*, rather than the *lycée technique*. In Malta, if the aim of a pupil is to join a *junior lyceum* instead of a *secondary school* where the curriculum is less demanding, it is possible for parents and the school head to decide jointly whether s/he must repeat the sixth and final year of primary school and follow the Year 7 class. This additional year is therefore the opportunity to prepare for the examination for admission to the *junior lyceum*. Only the top-performing pupils in these tests are admitted to the *junior lyceum* which provides a more demanding educational path than *secondary schools*. But, as part of the reform on the transition from primary to secondary education, the *junior lyceum* examinations are no longer available from September 2010 and this Year 7 class has therefore been removed. In Liechtenstein, even though automatic progression is the rule, the final year of *Primarschule* can be repeated since the procedure for streaming pupils into the various branches of secondary education takes place at the end of this year. Knowing that the allocation is done on the basis of educational performance and a quota system, parents can request that their children repeat the last year of primary but only with good reason. The approval of the school board is also necessary.

## **2.5. Participants in the decision-making process on grade retention**

### **2.5.1. Role of education professionals within and outside the school**

In most countries, almost all the subjects at primary level are taught by a qualified class teacher who is a generalist. Specialist teachers may, however, teach subjects such as music, foreign languages and physical education. In addition, in some countries, in the upper years of primary education, some individual subjects are taught by specialist teachers. Whether generalist or specialist, teachers are normally responsible for assessing a pupil's learning and skills. In a certain number of countries, it is only the teachers responsible for the class who make decisions on pupil progression. In Slovakia, the generalist teacher is the only person who decides whether the pupil progresses to the next class or repeats the year. When more than one teacher is responsible for the class, the decision to repeat a year is based on the assessment given by all the teachers involved with the class. This occurs in Germany (except for difficult cases), Greece, Spain, Latvia and Malta. Furthermore, in Italy, a decision not to allow a pupil to go into the next class is only made if it is a unanimous decision made by all of the teachers of the class.

Other parties might be involved with class teachers in the decision-making process on grade progression. In some countries, the teaching staff of the whole school discusses and decides jointly. In Belgium, in all the three communities, the class council (teachers and school head) decides on grade progression. In Germany, in difficult cases, the decision on progression is made not at class level by the *Klassenkonferenz* (class teachers) but at school level by the *Lehrerkonferenz* which is chaired by the school head and comprises all the teachers in the school. The *Lehrerkonferenz* can decide to retain a pupil even if the *Klassenkonferenz* had previously decided in favour of progression. In France, as the criteria for progression apply throughout a cycle, whether a pupil progresses or not is determined by the *conseil des maîtres de cycle* which consists of the class teachers of the cycle in question. However, the pupil's own class teacher makes the initial recommendation. In Luxembourg, education specialists as well as teaching staff who make up the teaching team responsible for classes in the same cycle decide whether pupils progress or repeat the year. In Austria where a pupil receives an unsatisfactory assessment in one compulsory subject, which would normally mean that the year must be repeated, the teaching council may allow the pupil to move up to the next class if his/her results are sufficiently good in other subjects. In Portugal, in the first cycle of the *ensino básico*, the class teacher decides whether the pupil progresses or not in articulation with the teachers council of the school (*conselho de docentes*). In the second cycle, it is the class council (*conselho de turma*) which makes decisions on pupil assessment and progression. This council usually includes all class teachers as well as representatives of pupils and their parents or guardians. However, when meetings concern pupil assessment, only class teachers attend.

In Slovenia, at grades 1 and 2, the decision on retaining a pupil is made either at the request of parents' or on the recommendation of the teachers with the parents' consent. At grades 3 to 6, the procedure is different; the class teacher makes the recommendation for repetition and the teaching council makes the decision unanimously.

In contrast, five countries (Estonia, Lithuania, Hungary, Poland and Romania) share some similarities with respect to the parties from school involved in the decision-making process and their respective roles. In these countries, it is class teachers who make the recommendation on a pupil's progression or retention based on their own assessment. The final decision is made at a different level usually within a council comprising all the teachers of the school, including class teachers, and chaired by the school head. In Estonia, the school council (all teachers in the school and the school head) decide on a pupil's progression based on the recommendation of the class teachers. In Lithuania, the main class teacher makes a recommendation for the progression or retention of a pupil. Members of the teaching council, that is, all school teachers, management staff and other education specialists deliberate and make the final decision. In Hungary, the class teacher presents his/her assessment and school teaching staff consider the marks given to each student at the end of the year. On this basis, they decide whether pupils can progress to the following year. In Poland, (grades 4 to 6), it is a subject teacher who presents his/her assessment to the pedagogical council which includes all teachers employed in the school and is led by the school head. Subsequently, it is the pedagogical council that makes the decision on retaining a pupil in the same year. In Romania also, the main class teacher makes a recommendation for the retention of a pupil and members of the teaching council comprising all school teachers, management staff and other education specialists, deliberate and make the final decision.

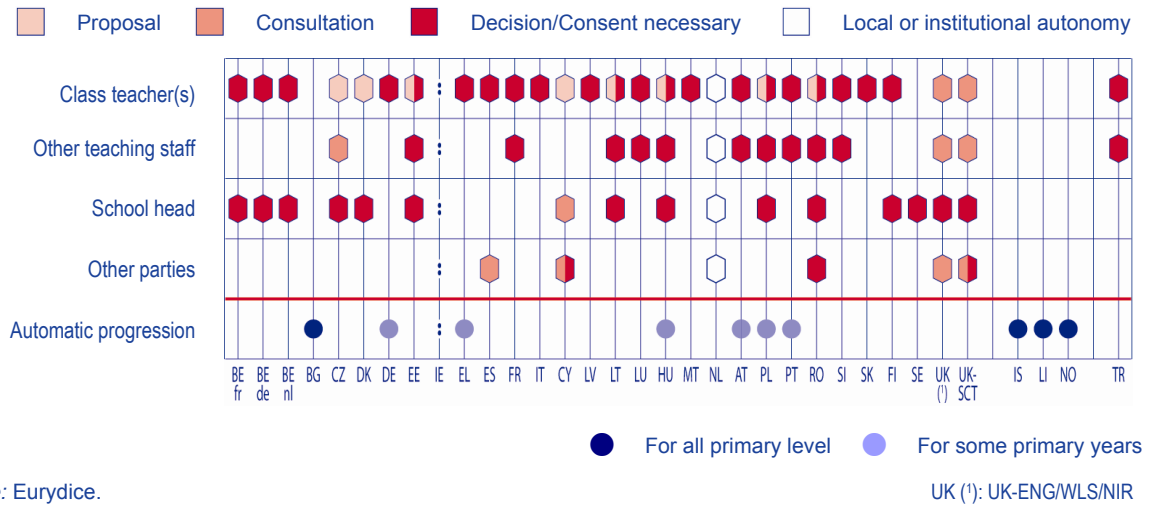
The school head or the school administrative body can take on different roles in the decision-making process on progression depending on the country concerned. In some countries, although they may take part, their influence is slight. In France, according to the regulations, the primary school head is the person who presents parents with the recommendation of the *conseil des maîtres de cycle* on progression or repetition. In Lithuania, the school head becomes involved at the end of the process to formally implement the decision made previously by the teaching council. In other countries, the decision on a pupil's retention or progression rests with the school head. This occurs in the Czech Republic. However, in making a decision, the school head takes into account the opinion of the teaching council which exists in all schools and comprises all members of the school's teaching staff. The role of the teaching council is to deliberate the cases of pupils who have not met the progression criteria and make recommendations to the school head. In Denmark, after the teacher has recommended that a pupil needs to repeat a year, the school head makes the final decision. In Sweden, the school head is the only person to decide whether a pupil should repeat a year. In the United Kingdom (England, Wales and Northern Ireland), the responsibility for the decision to hold a pupil back lies with the school head. Before making a decision, the school head would seek the views of professionals outside the school such as an educational psychologist or school improvement officer, any staff within the school involved with the child, as well as the parents and the child her/himself. In the United Kingdom (Scotland), there is a difference in that the local authority joins the school head in the decision-making process and they make the final decision together. In Finland, progression to the next class is decided by the school head together with the pupil's teachers.

Although staff from within the school are the main participants in the decision-making process about whether pupils should repeat a year, in some countries, parties from outside the school also play a significant role. These external participants are often educational psychologists and/or guidance services who provide either advice or approval to ensure that the best informed decision is made about a pupil's case. In Belgium, for keeping a pupil back for an eighth year at primary level, the opinion of a specialised centre in psychological, medical and social matters (the CLB (*centrum voor leerlingenbegeleiding*) in the Flemish Community; the CPMS (*centres psycho-médico-social*) in the French Community and the PMS centre (*Psycho-Medizinisch-Soziales Zentrum*) in the German-speaking Community). In Spain, specialist staff from the guidance and educational psychology teams gives advice or provides evidence to support a pupil's assessment and progression. In Portugal, in the case of a second year being repeated, an 'extraordinary' evaluation is carried out requiring the opinion of an educational psychologist.

Finally, in Cyprus, the situation is different since, according to regulations, the role of the teacher is firstly to identify those pupils who should repeat the year. The teacher then issues recommendations and discusses each case with the head teacher, the parents and sometimes even with an educational psychologist. However, the final decision rests with the inspector assigned to the school who then approves or rejects the teacher's recommendation.



**Figure 2.3: Role of education professionals within and outside the school in the grade retention decision-making process in primary education (ISCED 1), 2009/10**



Source: Eurydice.

UK (?): UK-ENG/WLS/NIR

#### **Additional notes**

**Estonia, Lithuania, Hungary, Poland and Romania:** Class teachers make a proposal and then decide as part of the body i.e. council which deliberates on pupil retention. The school head is also a decision-maker as head of the council.

**Cyprus and United Kingdom (SCT):** Some parties are consulted, others decide.

**Portugal:** It is only in the first cycle of the *ensino básico* that the school teaching staff as part of the *conselho de docentes* takes part in the decision-making.

**Slovenia:** Participants shown in this figure are those involved in the decision-making process as from the third primary year. Concerning the first two primary years, see section 2.5.1.

#### **Explanatory notes**

Specific situations corresponding to parents participation in the decision-making process, such as lodging an appeal, are not taken into account in this figure (see section 2.5.2).

**Other parties:** This category corresponds to either professionals within the educational institution or external centres (social workers, educators, guidance counsellors, psychologist etc) or existing local or educational authorities.

### **2.5.2. Parents' role**

In all countries, schools regularly inform parents or legal guardians about their child's progress and development. Where applicable, the decision whether a child will progress or repeat a year is transmitted to parents at the end of each school year. In a few countries, parents or legal guardians may be consulted during the decision-making process. In Denmark, the school head consults the parents although the final decision is made with or without their consent. In Estonia, a 'balanced and justified' decision on year repetition implies that the opinion of the pupil's legal representatives is heard by the teaching council when the decision is being made. In Malta, some schools simply inform parents of the decision regarding a pupil's progression to the next year while others consult parents before deciding to retain a pupil for an extra year in primary school. In the Netherlands, school representatives and parents or guardians discuss the pupil's development, achievements/results and attitudes. If there is disagreement on the decision on grade retention, parents/guardians can discuss the matter with the school and put forward arguments for a different decision. However, if they cannot agree, the school makes the final decision. In Sweden, the school head may, after consultation with the guardians, decide that the pupil shall remain in the same school year.

In nearly half of the countries, legislation provides for a more active role for parents during the decision-making process on pupil progression. Depending on the country, three possible options are open to parents: they may lodge an appeal if they object to the decision to make their child repeat the year; they may request that their child repeats the year; or their agreement or consent is required in any decision regarding repetition.

In ten countries, legislation gives parents or guardians the option of appealing when they do not agree with a decision to repeat the year. The appeal lodged by the pupil's parents implies the involvement of another party or body whose decision will confirm or overrule the original decision. In the Czech Republic, in case of doubts about the validity of a pupil's assessment, the legal guardian has the right to request the school head to have the pupil re-examined by an examination board. If the subject failed was taught by the school head him/herself, then the parents or guardians may contact the regional authority to request that the pupil sits another examination. In the majority of the Communities in Spain, legislation specifies the right of parents to lodge an appeal against the decision on their child's assessment or retention. In some of the Communities, the appeals procedure is clearly defined. In France, after having received a recommendation for repeating the year, parents can contest it within a period of 15 days. The appeal, including arguments for their case, must be submitted to the academy inspector, the head of National Education Departmental Services who makes the final decision. In Latvia, when parents object to their child's final results at the end of the school year, the school head forms an assessment commission with teachers and members of the methodological board (*mācību priekšmetu metodiskās komisijas*)<sup>(6)</sup>. This commission has to prepare an assessment of the pupil's academic achievements based on national educational standards. It is then the school head who makes the final decision taking this assessment into account. In Lithuania, if parents disagree with the decision for their child to repeat the year, the school head takes into account his/her assistant's information on the class teacher's work. Based on the school head's recommendation, the teaching council then makes the final decision. In Luxembourg, if there is disagreement with the decision of the teaching team (*équipe pédagogique*) about repetition, parents may lodge an appeal within 15 days with the regional inspector (*inspecteur d'arrondissement*) who will reach a decision within one month. In Austria, after parents or legal guardians have lodged an appeal against the teaching council's decision, the school must forward it to the *Bezirksschulrat* (district school board) which has the final say. In Portugal, in primary as in lower secondary education, lodging an appeal is a procedure which starts within the school but might, in the end, involve an external administrative body, the Regional Direction of Education. Thus, at the end of the school year, parents with good grounds can make a request to the executive body of the school or group of schools for a review of their child's grades. The class teacher, in conjunction with the teachers' council of the school (*conselho de docentes*) in the 1st cycle, or in conjunction with the class council (*conselho de turma*) in the 2nd and 3rd cycle, examine all relevant documents and reach a decision that confirms or modifies the initial assessment. The *conselho pedagógico*<sup>(7)</sup> must confirm this decision. It is then the school executive body who notifies the parents of the decision. In cases where a procedural error occurs, parents may eventually lodge an appeal to the Regional Director of Education who makes the final decision on the

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<sup>(6)</sup> This board does not involve any particular teaching staff member on a continuing basis. Most often the head of the board is the assistant of the school head in education matters. But if each subject or subject area is taught by several teachers, the methodological subject board might be headed by one of the subject teachers.

<sup>(7)</sup> The *conselho pedagógico* is the body responsible for the coordination, supervision and guidance of the school on what namely concerns teaching/learning matters, students guidance and monitoring, initial and continuing training of teaching and non-teaching staff.

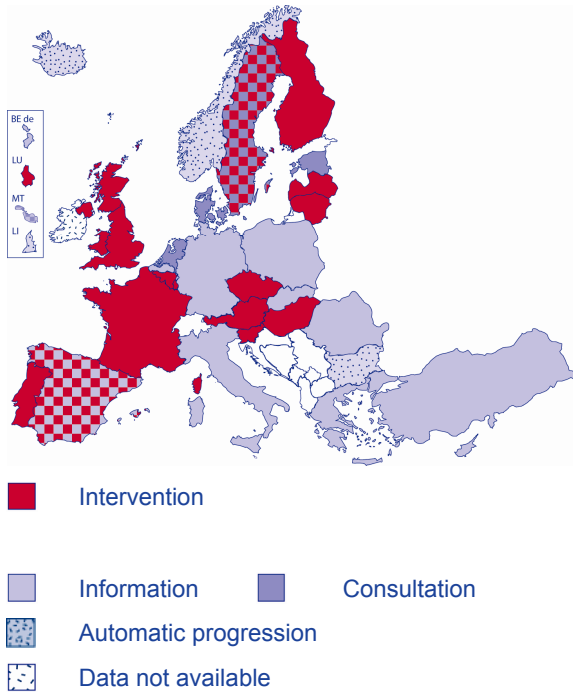
pupil's grade retention. In Slovenia, when parents or legal guardians lodge an appeal, it is a committee (*Komisija*) comprising three members (one of whom is from outside the school and the two others members of the professional staff) which makes the final decision. In Finland, when a decision concerning a pupil's progression is obviously flawed, parents have the right to request the Regional State Administrative Agency (replacing the Provincial State Office since 2010) to ask for the teacher(s) to carry out another assessment or reach a new decision on whether the pupil is to progress or not.

In contrast to the right to lodge an appeal against a decision on retaining a pupil, in Hungary and Slovenia parents have the right to request that their child repeats a year even when they have already been given permission to progress to the next class. However, the approval of the school head is still required in Hungary, while in Slovenia the teaching assembly makes the final decision. In the Czech Republic, it is also possible for parents to request that their child be held back, but only in the case of serious health problems. Specialist advice should support the request. However, it is still the school head who decides in the end. In Sweden, the school head can, at the request of a pupil's guardian, allow the pupil to repeat the school year. The school head and the guardian do not need to agree on the decision to make as it is always the school head who decides.

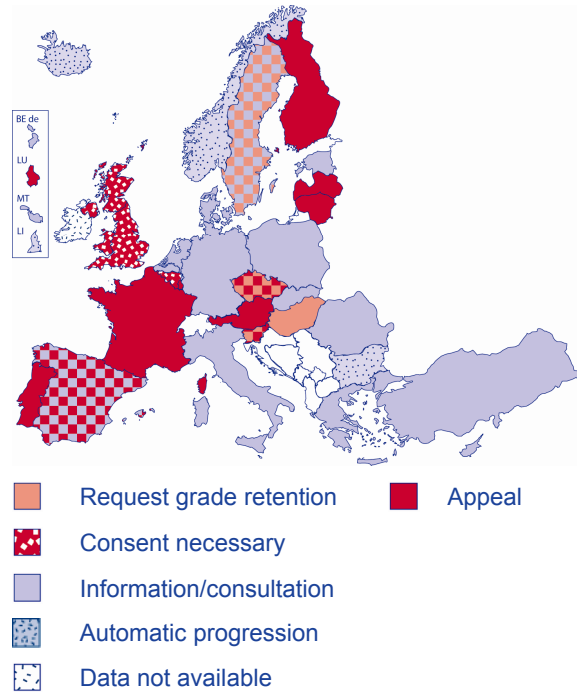
In other countries, parental agreement is needed to have a pupil repeat a year at primary level. In the French Community of Belgium, parents have the right to object either to the teaching staff's decision on retaining their child in the same year, or to request that their child is held back even if teachers do not consider it necessary. Although regulations prescribe that the parents' position must be accepted by the school, in practice, parents normally respect the decision of the teaching staff. In the German-speaking Community of Belgium, parents decide upon the proposal from the class council as well as the advice from the PMS centre whether their child has to spend an 8th year at primary level. In Poland, according to the regulations in force, a decision to make pupils repeat a year at the 1st, 2nd or 3rd class in the *Szkoła podstawowa* must be accepted by the parents or it cannot be implemented. In Slovenia, although parents are given the right to lodge an appeal at any stage in their child's primary education, in the first three grades their opinion is paramount. Pupils may only repeat these years if their parents or guardians give their consent. Likewise, in the United Kingdom, the school head would normally seek parental agreement for placing their child out of year-group, following a detailed discussion of the possible implications for the child.

**Figure 2.4: Parental participation in the decision-making process on grade retention at primary level, 2009/10**

**Figure 2.4a: Level of parents' participation**



**Figure 2.4b: Types of parents' intervention**



Source: Eurydice.

#### **Additional notes**

**Belgium (BE de):** In case of retaining a child for an 8th year at primary level, parents make the final decision upon the proposal from the class council as well as the opinion from the PMS centre.

**Spain:** The level of parents' participation varies according to Autonomous Communities.

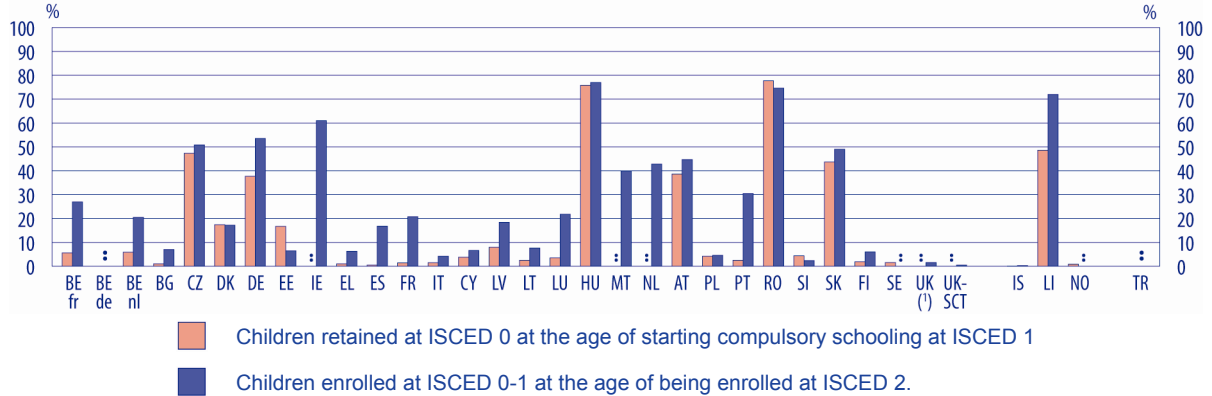
**Poland:** Progression is automatic during the first three primary years. When, in exceptional circumstances, retention is decided, parents must give their consent.

**Slovenia:** Consent from parents is only necessary during the first two primary years.

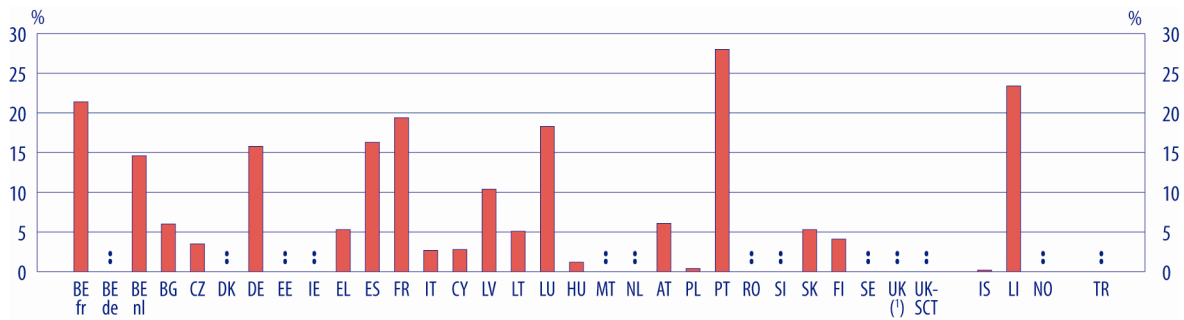
## **2.6. Statistical data**

In order to estimate the extent to which pupils are falling behind at primary level in European countries, the percentage of children still enrolled in pre-primary or primary education (ISCED 0 and 1) who have reached the official age for lower secondary level (ISCED 2) has been calculated from the Eurostat database (2008). This percentage includes pupils who started primary education late, those who repeated a year at primary level and also children who had come from abroad and were enrolled in a lower class than the normal one for their age. This global rate is compared with the percentage of children retained in pre-primary at the age when primary schooling normally begins (see Figure 2.5a). The difference between the two rates allows us to estimate the extent to which repeating a year is implemented at primary level in each country (see Figure 2.5b). Eurostat data used for these estimates also include pupils with special education needs.

**Figure 2.5a: Percentage of pupils falling behind at pre-primary (ISCED 0) and primary level (ISCED 1), 2007/08**



**Figure 2.5b: Estimate of grade retention at primary level (ISCED 1), 2007/08**



**Data (Figures 2.5a and 2.5b)**

	BE fr	BE de	BE nl	BG	CZ	DK	DE	EE	IE	EL	ES	FR	IT	CY	LV	LT	LU
■ (Orange)	5.6	:	5.9	1.0	47.3	17.4	37.7	16.7	:	1.0	0.5	1.4	1.5	3.8	8.0	2.5	3.5
■ (Blue)	27.0	:	20.5	7.0	50.8	17.2	53.5	6.5	61.0	6.3	16.8	20.8	4.2	6.6	18.4	7.6	21.8
Δ	21.4	:	14.6	6.0	3.5	:	15.8	:	:	5.3	16.3	19.4	2.7	2.8	10.4	5.1	18.3

	HU	MT	NL	AT	PL	PT	RO	SI	SK	FI	SE	UK (!)	UK-SCT	IS	LI	NO	TR
■ (Orange)	75.8	:	:	38.6	4.2	2.5	77.7	4.4	43.7	1.9	1.6	:	:	0.1	48.6	0.9	:
■ (Blue)	77.0	39.9	42.8	44.7	4.6	30.5	74.6	2.4	49.0	6.0	:	1.6	0.5	0.3	72.0	:	:
Δ	1.2	:	:	6.1	0.4	28.0	:	:	5.3	4.1	:	:	:	0.2	23.4	:	:

Source: Eurostat, 2008.

UK (!): UK-ENG/WLS/NIR

**Additional notes**

**Bulgaria:** When Eurostat data were collected in 2007/08, the automatic progression rule at primary level had not been introduced. During this period, pupils did not repeat the first grade but might have repeated a year in grades 2 to 4.

**Ireland:** *Infant classes* receive children into primary education at the age of 4, before starting compulsory schooling.

**Greece and Malta:** Data issued in 2006/07.

**Sweden and Norway:** Data not available because the age distributions given by Eurostat are estimated by school year.

**United Kingdom:** Data from Department for Children, Schools and Families, DCSF (now Department for Education, DfE). Public and private schools counted together, special schools excluded. Reference year 2008/09.

**Turkey:** There is no distinction between ISCED 1 and ISCED 2.

**Explanatory notes**

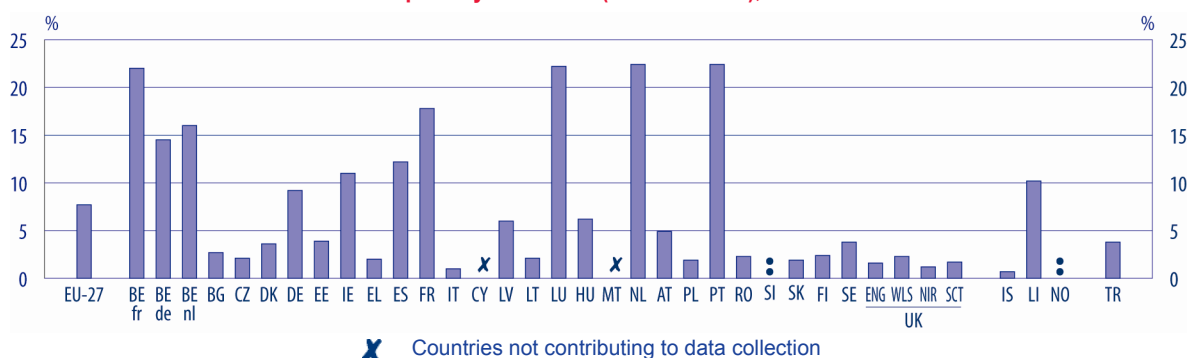
The calculations are based on Eurostat data on students by ISCED level and age. For each country, the estimate is based on the official age for entry into ISCED 1 and ISCED 2 (turning ages). For the official turning ages, the percentage of pupils that were still attending ISCED 0 or ISCED 1 was calculated from total number of pupils of that age in the respective country. Pupils with special education needs are included. Independent private educational institutions are not taken into account. Concerning the official turning ages of entry to ISCED levels, see the schematic diagrams of the structure of European education systems in 2009/10 (Eurydice, 2009).

The estimate of grade retention at primary level is computed by subtracting the percentage of pupils falling behind in pre-primary level from the percentage of pupils falling behind in primary level. It is an estimate since different cohorts of pupils are considered for the same reference year. Negative values are considered missing.

For specific country notes regarding the percentage of children retained at ISCED 0 at the age of starting compulsory schooling at ISCED 1, see additional notes of Figure 1.3.

The estimates on pupils falling behind at primary level based on the Eurostat figures are supplemented by the latest data from the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA). In the 2009 edition of this international survey, 15-year old students were asked to answer the following question: 'Have you ever repeated a year?' Students were asked to respond by selecting one of the following statements: 'No, never', 'Yes, once' and 'Yes, twice or more' and by specifying the level of education in which they repeated a year at ISCED levels 1, 2 or 3. The answers to this question allowed the proportion of repeaters among 15 year-olds in primary education to be calculated.

**Figure 2.6: Proportion of 15-year-old pupils who have repeated a year at least once in primary education (ISCED level 1), 2009**



EU-27	BE fr	BE de	BE nl	BG	CZ	DK	DE	EE	IE	EL	ES	FR	IT	CY	LV	LT	LU	
7.7	22.0	14.5	16.0	2.7	2.1	3.6	9.2	3.9	11.0	2.0	12.2	17.8	1.0	x	6.0	2.1	22.2	
HU	MT	NL	AT	PL	PT	RO	SI	SK	FI	SE	UK-ENG	UK-WLS	UK-NIR	UK-SCT	IS	LI	NO	TR
6.2	x	22.4	4.9	1.9	22.4	2.3	:	1.9	2.4	3.8	1.6	2.3	1.2	1.7	0.7	10.2	:	3.8

Source: Secondary analysis from 2009 PISA database, OECD.

**Additional notes**

**Slovenia:** The question has not been asked to the students for ISCED level 1.

**Norway:** The question has not been asked to the students because of the automatic progression.

**Turkey:** There is no distinction between primary and lower secondary education. The rate covers both education levels.

From the Eurostat data in Figures 2.5a and 2.5b, in comparing the two rates a distinction can be drawn between two main groups of countries. In the first group which contains more than half of the countries, the difference is small, showing that a very low percentage of pupils repeat a school year during primary schooling. In the other group, which contains nine countries, the difference is considerable, showing that a significant percentage of pupils repeat at least one year at primary level. Within these two groups, even more specific patterns can be seen.

Indeed in most of the countries belonging to the first group, both rates are fairly low: it is uncommon not to admit children to primary school when they have reached compulsory school age, but also very rare for children to repeat a year. This is the case in Bulgaria<sup>(8)</sup>, Greece, Italy, Cyprus, Lithuania, Malta, Poland, Slovenia and Finland. In Iceland, given that progression from one class to another is automatic, the difference between the two rates is virtually nil. The 2009 PISA data (Figure 2.6) corroborate the evidence that, in these countries which participated in the survey, the proportion of 15 year-olds pupils having repeated at least once at primary is very low, ranging from 0.7 % in Iceland to 2.7 % in Bulgaria. In the United Kingdom also, the proportion is low; in Sweden, it amounts to only 3.8 %. In Norway, the question was not asked to pupils, reflecting the existing rule on automatic progression in this country.

In eight other countries (the Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Latvia, Hungary, Austria, Romania and Slovakia), although the percentage of pupils enrolled at primary level when they should be enrolled at secondary level is high, the difference compared with the rates of children being kept down in pre-primary is small. This means that in these countries it is common to delay the admission of children to primary school. However, once they do start their schooling, the vast majority of pupils progress through primary education without ever repeating a year. The 2009 PISA data on students confirm this practice at primary level in these eight countries. In Slovakia, in the Czech Republic and in Romania, only 1.9 %, 2.1 % and 2.3 % respectively of 15 years-old students had repeated a year at primary level. The proportion of repeaters at primary level was 3.6 % in Denmark, 3.9 % in Estonia and 4.9 % in Austria. Finally, although less marked, the same situation seems to happen in Latvia and in Hungary where it is possible to delay a child's start to primary education. According to 2009 PISA data, 6.0 % and 6.2 % respectively of 15-year-old students repeated once at primary level in these two countries.

With regard to the second group of countries where Figure 2.5b reveals a significant difference between the two rates, a distinction can first be made between the countries where almost all pupils start primary education on time and countries where schooling might be delayed at the start of primary education.

In Belgium, Spain, France, Luxembourg, the Netherlands and Portugal, very few children who reach the official age of entry have their admission to the first year of primary education postponed. However, the number of pupils who have fallen behind at the end of primary education is very high, which means that a considerable percentage of pupils must repeat a year at least once during their primary schooling. In Figure 2.6, according to 2009 PISA data, these same six countries show the highest proportion of repeaters at primary level among the participating European countries: ranging

<sup>(8)</sup> Before the implementation of automatic progression in all grades of primary education in 2009/10, regulations had allowed retaining pupils at grades 2 to 4 in case of failing in one or more subjects.

from 12.2 % in Spain to 22.4 % in the Netherlands and Portugal. Ireland also shows a high proportion of repeaters at ISCED level 1 with a percentage of 11.0 %.

Among this second group of countries with a significant grade retention rate, Germany and Liechtenstein present a different pattern. As explained in chapter one, a high percentage of children start the first primary grade one year older than the official starting age and are enrolled in transition classes. The difference between the two rates in Figure 2.5a is rather significant in that it means that there are more pupils falling behind at the end of primary education than pupils who started their first primary year late. PISA data confirm that, apart from pupils who had a delayed start to their primary education, there is also a significant number of pupils who have repeated a year during their primary schooling. In Germany, 9.2 % of pupils said that they had repeated at least once in ISCED level 1. In Liechtenstein, despite the fact that automatic progression is the rule at *Primarschule*, PISA data shows that 10.2 % of the students stated that they had repeated a year at primary level. Moreover, the difference in the two rates in the Eurostat data is also high. This might be explained by the existence of transition classes (*Einführungsklasse*) classified as ISCED level 1. It is possible that a high percentage of pupils were not directly admitted to the first grade and enrolled first in an *Einführungsklasse*. This would explain why these pupils were falling behind at primary level. Finally, once again, in these two countries it might also be necessary to take into consideration the placement of children from abroad in a class other than the normal one for their age.

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\*            \*

Some countries have similar regulations for repeating a year with respect to the criteria used and the parties involved in the decision-making process. However, when looking at the statistics, there seem to be differences in the way these regulations are put into practice. For example, a maximum number of years spent at primary level are stipulated in Belgium, Spain, Cyprus and Slovakia. However, the proportion of pupils repeating years at primary level in the first two countries is far higher than that seen in the other two countries.

In some of the countries where the practice of repeating a year is allowed, there is a low repetition rate. These countries require additional procedures to be carried out after teachers have made their assessment of pupils. These procedures are intended to limit the practice of repeating years at primary level. In Greece, a complex procedure is put in place if a teacher suggests that a child should repeat a year. In Italy, all the teachers of the class must agree unanimously before a pupil can be made to repeat a year in the *scuola primaria*. In Cyprus, although it is the school which begins the procedure, the final decision to hold a pupil back is not taken at school level but by an external person – the Inspector assigned to the school. External control or automatic progression from one class to another does not, in all cases, explain why a country has a low rate of repetition. Indeed in Denmark, although legislation permits teaching staff to ask pupils to repeat a year, the percentage of pupils retained at primary level is very low. Moreover, no external body is involved in the decision-making process on pupil progression from one year to another, nor are there any control procedures or any other form of limitations in place.



Finally, differences between countries in the rates at which pupils fall behind at primary level cannot be directly correlated to the different regulations in force. The practice of repeating a year seems to be only well-established in countries where there is a general consensus that repeating a year is beneficial to pupils' learning. This culture seems to be particularly strong in Belgium, namely in the French Community, but also in Spain, France, Luxembourg, the Netherlands and Portugal. These beliefs in the positive benefits of repeating a year are commonly shared by the majority of teaching staff and parents and explain why the practice is still used, often in spite of limitations imposed by official regulations.



## CHAPTER 3: GRADE RETENTION IN LOWER SECONDARY EDUCATION

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This chapter examines several aspects of the regulations relating to grade retention in the countries where the practice is in use at lower secondary level <sup>(1)</sup>. It will look firstly at the legislation in force in European countries and also at the main criteria which would justify holding back a student in difficulty for a year. The chapter will then focus on any restrictions on retention procedures such as the provisions made for students to catch up, conditional progression to the next class, not allowing pupils in particular school years to be held back, or putting a limit on the number of times a student can be held back during his/her school life. The provisions put in place for students during their repeated year are also considered before focusing on the participants in the grade retention decision-making process. To complete the analysis, some statistical data is presented which reveals how the practice of grade repetition is implemented in European countries.

In all countries, pupils experiencing difficulties have access to some kind of additional learning support during the school year. Under the law as it stands in many countries, if this support is insufficient and a pupil does not make satisfactory progress by the end of the school year, the year can be repeated as a remedial measure to help the pupil overcome his/her difficulties. Most countries stipulate regulations and criteria in their legislation which govern progression to the next year of schooling, or retention in the same year. There are only two countries – Iceland and Norway – where, according to legislation, pupils progress to the next year automatically, regardless of their academic performance. Their progression, in other words, is continuous and does not require an end-of-year assessment of individual pupils. The legislation in Norway stipulates that all pupils are entitled to progress throughout the years of compulsory school and the education prescribed by the curriculum. According to the Icelandic legislation, children in compulsory schooling are to be moved up from one grade to the next at the end of each year and that no child will spend more than ten years in compulsory education. Nevertheless, exceptions may occur since pupils in Iceland can choose voluntarily to prolong their schooling, but less than one per cent avail themselves of this option.

In the United Kingdom, there are no regulations on grade retention throughout compulsory education. However, for a number of reasons (see chapter 2), it is custom and practice that children with different levels of performance are normally taught with their own year-group and are placed ‘out of year-group’ only in exceptional circumstances.

### 3.1. Criteria governing grade retention

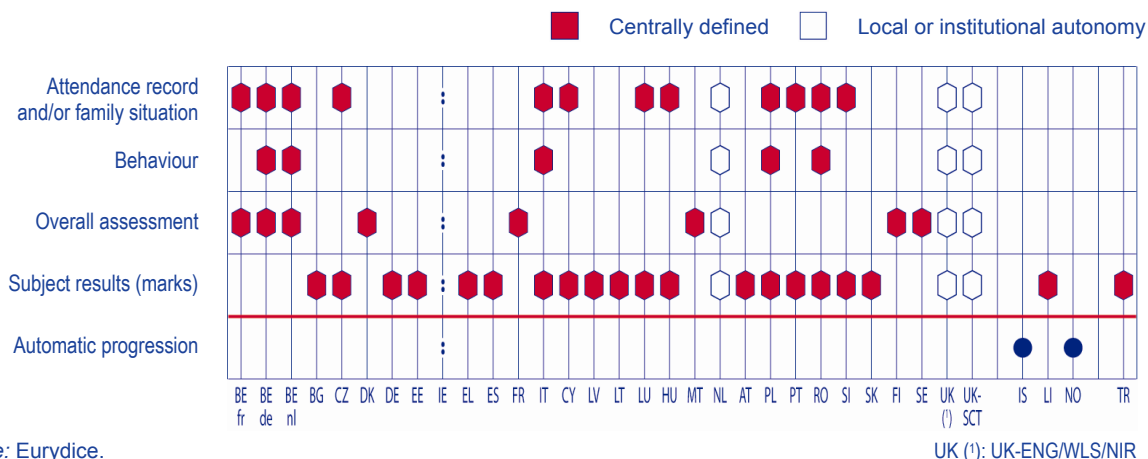
In every country where grade retention may be used as a means of overcoming difficulties, the regulations in force define criteria according to which a student can be held back in a lower grade. The Netherlands is an exception. Grade retention is possible, since there are no restrictions on time devoted to obligatory secondary education and pupils may take as long as they need to complete this level of education. However, all criteria of grade retention or progression are set at school level and all decisions are also made for both grade retention and progression by the school.

There are several reasons why pupils experiencing difficulties may have to repeat a school year at lower secondary level. Among the different possible criteria defined in countries’ legislation, the most common are failure to make the expected academic progress, pupil's attendance record, behaviour and family situation.

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<sup>(1)</sup> Lower secondary level as defined in the ISCED corresponds to the last years of single structure compulsory education in the 12 relevant countries and includes only the first two years of secondary education in Belgium.

**Figure 3.1: Criteria governing grade retention at lower secondary level (ISCED 2), 2009/10**



### 3.1.1. Attendance record, family situation and behaviour

Absenteeism (absence from school for health, family, social or unjustified reasons) is one of the criteria which may lead to a pupil having to repeat a school year since it is difficult to evaluate the progress made by a pupil who has been absent for long periods. In half of the countries, a long period of absence due to illness is one of the reasons for grade retention even if this is not stipulated in legislation but decided at school level, as for example in the Netherlands and in the United Kingdom. Health reasons may be cited by schools or parents who want to use the facility of grade retention as a remedial measure. In Luxembourg, for example, a lengthy absence caused by illness<sup>(2)</sup> may be grounds for the teaching council (*conseil de classe*) to give an authorisation for the repetition of a year whereas in Slovenia, parents may request that their child repeats a year due to health problems. The situation is similar in the Czech Republic where parents can introduce such request notwithstanding the pupil has already repeated a year at the given stage. In Liechtenstein, on the other hand, a lengthy illness may be cited to justify the progression to the next year of a pupil in difficulty.

In some countries, namely Italy, Cyprus, Hungary, Poland, Portugal and Romania, a pupil's number of absences (for justified or unjustified reasons) may be the sole reason for holding a pupil back for a year. In each of these countries, a limit on the number of absences is set; repetition of a year may be required in the event that this number is exceeded. In Italy, if the attendance rate is less than 75 % of the total teaching time a student may have to repeat a school year. In Cyprus, pupils repeat a year if they have been absent from 51 lessons without good reason, or from 161 lessons with or without good reason. In Hungary, if a pupil's total number of absences exceeds 250 lessons in a school year, or he/she misses more than 30 % of the lessons in any subject and, as a result, the teacher is unable to assess the pupil at the end of the school year, repetition of the year is required unless the teaching staff allows the pupil to take a re-sit. In Portugal, at lower secondary level (in the 3rd cycle of *ensino básico*), the total annual amount of unjustified absence must not exceed three times the weekly amount of teaching time per subject. Under Romanian and Polish law, repetition may be required if

<sup>(2)</sup> There are no special regulations on the number of days absence, thus it is up to the *conseil de classe* to make the decision.

pupils are absent from more than 50 % of the annual number of their classes. In Poland, if a pupil's attendance rate is below 50 % of classes and his/her absence was justified, he/she can take a special re-sit test. In Romania, if a pupil misses 40 classes or more without good reason or 30 % or more of the total classes in a subject/module during the course of a school year, he/she may be expelled from the school but retains the right to re-enrol the next year at the same school and in the same year of study. Furthermore, pupils are considered to have 'deferred' if they have been excused classes to take part in festivals or in national and/or international sporting, artistic or cultural competitions. The same applies to pupils who have held a scholarship or who have attended school in another country for a certain period.

Pupils' family situation is also taken into consideration in several countries when making decisions on pupils' progression to the next year. In Luxembourg, a child may repeat a year due to a lengthy absence caused by a difficult family situation. In Slovenia, a pupil may be retained in a lower class due to moving from one area to another. In Liechtenstein, however, adverse family circumstances or a change of school may be cited to justify the progression of a pupil in difficulties to the next year.

In the French and Flemish Communities of Belgium, as well as in Italy and Romania, pupil behaviour plays a part in their progression to the next year. If their grade for behaviour is below average, they run the risk of having to repeat a year <sup>(3)</sup>. The general assessment made at the end of each cycle in the Flemish and German-speaking Communities of Belgium also entails an intellectual, social and behavioural assessment of pupils <sup>(3)</sup>. The situation in Poland is slightly different since pupil behaviour is not taken into consideration when progressing to the next year. However, a pupil can be retained in the lower year if he/she obtains the lowest end-of-year mark in behaviour (inadmissible behaviour) for a second time. If the pupil gets the lowest mark for behaviour a third time – he/she is automatically held back and, if in the last year, does not graduate.

### **3.1.2. Academic progress**

In every country where repeating a school year at lower secondary level occurs, the main criterion applied in the decision to hold a pupil back is his/her academic progress. This is defined either mainly on the basis of marks, or on the basis of an overall assessment of the pupil which takes into consideration marks, abilities and the attainment level reached in the course of the year.

In the majority of countries, the academic progress of a pupil is expressed by marks and, at the end of the school year, the decision as to whether pupils move on or repeat a year is made on the basis of the marks he/she has obtained. The marks may encompass several different aspects of performance such as test results, motivation, behaviour or skills learned and may combine to form a final overall mark, an average for each subject or an overall average for all subjects. The decision on whether a pupils progresses to the next class or has to repeat the year is based on a defined scale which shows whether the marks obtained are satisfactory or not. The number of unsatisfactory marks received will determine whether repetition is required. Some subjects may take precedence over others. In some countries, however, in cases where a pupil's progression is conditional, he/she may be subject to an overall assessment rather than one based on marks (see 3.2.2).

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<sup>(3)</sup> In the Flemish Community, this is only possible if it is stipulated in the school regulations.

In the 20 countries where the final mark is the main criterion for deciding whether pupils must repeat a year, the number of subjects a pupil may fail before having to repeat a year varies from country to country. In Bulgaria, Germany, Italy and Austria, pupils must have a minimum mark in all subjects for the year in order to progress to the next class. Pupils who fail in two subjects may have to repeat a year in Hungary, Poland, Romania and Slovakia. In the Czech Republic, Estonia, Spain, Latvia and Slovenia, pupils are liable to repeat a year if they have three or more unsatisfactory marks. A minimum average mark for all subjects is the main criterion for progressing to the next year in Luxembourg, Liechtenstein and Turkey.

In three countries – Greece, Cyprus and Portugal – some subjects take precedence over others, and results in those priority subjects play an important part in the progression of pupils to the next year. In Greece, school subjects are divided into two groups. Scores achieved in group ‘A’ subjects outweigh those in group ‘B’. Group ‘B’ comprises physical education, art and music, economics, technology and school vocational guidance. All other subjects belong to group ‘A’. In Cyprus, pupils do not move on to the next year unless they obtain passes in Modern Greek and mathematics. In addition, pupils do not move on to the next year if they have failed in three or more of the subjects in which examinations are held at the end of the year (Modern Greek, history, mathematics and physics) or if they have failed in two of those subjects as well as in two non-examined subjects. At lower secondary education level in the Portuguese system, pupils repeat the last year if they have unsatisfactory marks in Portuguese and maths simultaneously, or if they have unsatisfactory marks in three subjects or in two subjects plus their project area (*área do projeto*).

In other countries, the academic progress of a pupil is done through overall assessment. Although overall assessment may take marks into account (final mark, averages in each subject or overall average for all subjects), marks are not the only criteria under consideration when deciding on a pupil’s progress to the next class or repetition of the year; pupils’ abilities, general development, predicted results and the level achieved during the year are also subject to scrutiny. This situation prevails in six countries: Belgium, Denmark, France, Malta, Finland and Sweden.

In Belgium, the decision on pupil progression, delay of progression or retention is based on his/her work throughout the entire school year. In the German-speaking Community, the results of two examinations are also taken into account to ascertain whether the learning objectives have been achieved in all subjects. In the French and Flemish Communities, examinations can be also organised. However, schools have the autonomy to choose assessment methods and progression procedures.

Denmark, France, Malta and Sweden have defined similar criteria for grade retention. In France, the teaching council (*conseil de classe*) bases its deliberations on a pupil assessment and issues a recommendation for progression or repetition taking into account the main criterion which is whether a pupil has mastered the core skills defined for level 3 (*collège*). In Malta, the main criterion of progression taken into consideration is the achievement by a pupil of a minimum performance in the assessment of a subject learnt at an educational level. In case a pupil in difficulty has not achieved these competences, grade retention is needed since this measure is considered as a second chance to enable a pupil to reach the expected level. In Denmark, the final assessment of a pupil who runs the risk of having to repeat a year is also based on the skills required at a particular level of education. However, in this country, unlike in France and in Malta, the final assessment may be carried out only if

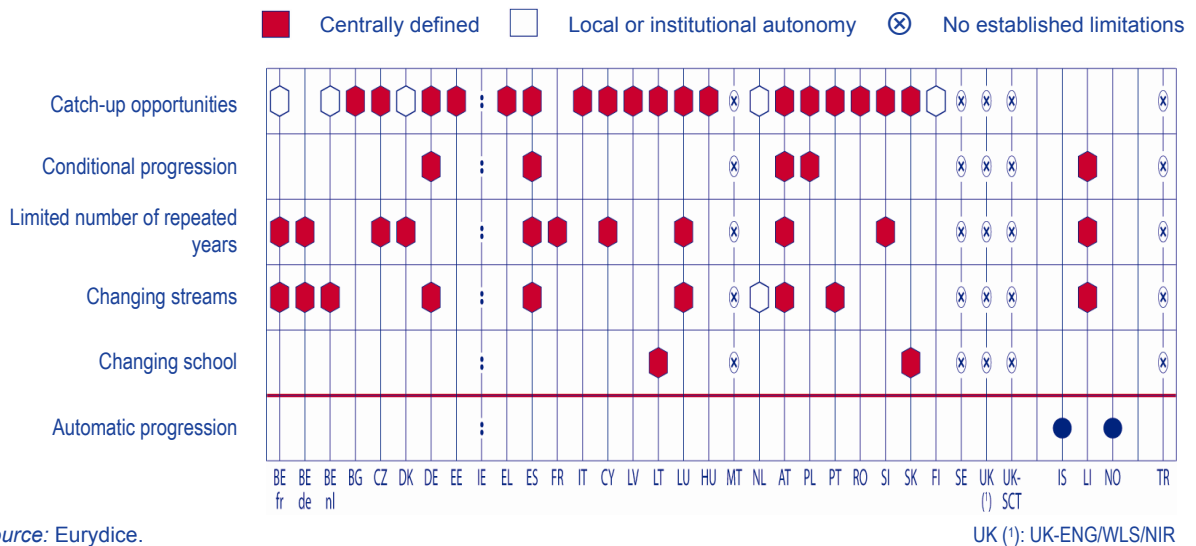
questions have been raised on the pupil’s progress in the course of the year. In Sweden, the only prescribed central criteria for holding a pupil back is his/her general development and the decision is based on the view whether this measure is appropriate for the student in question.

In Finland, there are only two scenarios in which pupils repeat a year, namely if, after assessment, they are deemed to have failed in one or more subjects or if, in spite of satisfactory marks, their overall academic progress has been sufficiently poor to warrant a repetition of the year. Similarly, pupils who have unacceptable marks may be allowed to move on to the next year if they are deemed capable of successfully completing that year.

### 3.2. Limitations on grade retention

In the countries where it is possible for pupils to repeat a year of schooling, several measures have been taken with a view to limiting and/or avoiding repetition. Such measures include catch-up opportunities, awarding pupils conditional progression to the next year, not allowing pupils to repeat one or more specific school years or limiting the number of times a pupil can repeat a year at secondary level.

**Figure 3.2: Limitations on grade retention at lower secondary level (ISCED 2), 2009/10**



#### 3.2.1. Catch-up opportunities at the end of the school year

Almost in all countries where repeating a year is established practice (except for France, Malta and Portugal), pupils who have failed a year are given the opportunity to re-sit examinations or to do extra study to help them to improve their marks and so avoid the need to repeat the year. The results received in re-sits or through extra study influence the final decision made regarding pupil's progression or retention.

In most countries where opportunities for getting back on track are available, the number of subject exams that may be re-taken is limited to one or two. Greece, Spain and Slovenia (in the 9th grade) are exceptions, in that pupils in difficulty are entitled to re-sit examinations in every subject in which they

have failed. In Estonia, Lithuania and Luxembourg, pupils experiencing difficulties are referred and given extra study in order to help them improve their results. If they succeed, they are admitted to the next year. In Lithuania and in Luxemburg, the school also must provide individual support to students who are receiving extra study.

In Belgium (French and Flemish Communities), Denmark, the Netherlands and Finland, the decision as to whether such opportunities should be made available and what form they should take is a matter for the school. In the decree on basic education in Finland, it is prescribed that a pupil in difficulty should be given an opportunity to demonstrate that he/she has achieved an acceptable standard. The procedures of the decision-making process should be described in the local curriculum. Normally, re-sits include a written test and a discussion with the teacher. The method of re-assessment should be appropriate for the pupil's age and abilities.

### **3.2.2. Conditional progression**

In Germany, Spain, Austria, Poland and Liechtenstein where the marks are important (see 3.1.2), pupils experiencing difficulties may be given the opportunity to obtain conditional progression to the next year. In Germany, conditional progression is allowed in particular school years and in particular types of school. It may be granted if the pupil has not acquired the necessary grades for progression, but is expected to learn successfully during the next school year, due to his/her achievement and general development. A conditional progression is not granted when progression leads to a formal qualification or an entitlement, e.g. at the end of lower secondary education. In Spain, pupils who have obtained no more than two fail marks at the end of the year may progress to the following year but must enrol in a remedial and revision programme set up by teaching staff and undergo the necessary assessment. The assessment is taken into account in determining whether pupils are eligible to continue with the subjects they failed and in decisions on their progression and certification. In exceptional circumstances, progression to the next year may be authorised even if the pupil in question has failed the assessments in three subjects, provided the teaching staff consider that progression to the next year is not likely to end in failure and will contribute to the pupil's academic recovery. In Poland, pupils who have failed resits can obtain conditional progression only in one subject under the condition that this failed subject is continued in the year to which he/she is progressing. In Austria, pupils in difficulty may be able to avoid the need to repeat a year if in the previous year they had passed the subject in which they failed in the given year and if their present abilities seem to indicate that they will succeed in the following year, if they are moved up. In Liechtenstein, the decision as to whether a pupil in difficulty can be granted a conditional progression to the next year is based on the pupil's current level of performance, his/her marks, the learning process and a prediction of the pupil's personal and academic development.

### **3.2.3. Limited number of repeated years**

Some countries have placed limits on the practice of repetition by introducing rules on the number of times a pupil may repeat a year, and on the specific years in the lower secondary cycle when a pupil may be held back. In Liechtenstein, for example, pupils are allowed to repeat the same year only once. In Luxembourg, pupils cannot enrol more than twice for the same year except for the final year of lower secondary or the last year of a training course when they can enrol up to three times. In Slovenia, students cannot be obliged to repeat the last year of compulsory secondary education and therefore are given several opportunities to catch-up. In Cyprus, the number of repeated years allowed



is linked to the institution: pupils are only allowed to repeat a year twice in one school. If they are required to repeat the year for the third time they must enrol at a different school.

The French and German-speaking Communities of Belgium, Luxembourg and Austria have also placed restrictions on the whole of the lower secondary cycle. In the French and German-speaking Communities of Belgium, a pupil cannot take more than three years to complete the first two-year-cycle (*degré*) of lower secondary. In the German-speaking Community, an exception may be made in the event of a serious illness. In Luxembourg, the total number of repeated years at lower secondary level is limited to two. In Austria, a pupil experiencing difficulties may not remain at the eight-year *Allgemeinbildende höhere Schule* for more than ten years.

In France, legislation imposes limitations for certain years of lower secondary level (*collège*) which is organised in three teaching stages: adjustment stage (11-12 years), main stage, guidance stage (14-15 years). The teaching council (*conseil de classe*) can suggest that a pupil repeat a year at the end of each cycle (end of the 6th, 4th, and 3rd years). In the *college*, repetition may only take place within a cycle at the request, or with the agreement, of the parents or by the pupil if he/she has reached adulthood.

In the Czech Republic, Denmark and Spain, there are restrictions across the whole period of compulsory schooling; the total number of repeated years is limited to two. In the Czech Republic, a pupil may repeat only one year within the first stage (primary level) and one year within the second stage (lower secondary level). A pupil who has already repeated a year within a stage proceeds to the next year regardless of his/her results. In Danish law, it is stated that pupils may not be placed in a lower class more than once in the pupil's entire school life except on very rare occasions. In Spain, a pupil can repeat twice only the 4th grade of lower secondary education and only if he/she did not repeat any grade at lower secondary level.

### 3.2.4. Changing streams or school as an alternative to grade retention

Several types of education are available at lower secondary level in Belgium, Germany, Lithuania, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Austria, Liechtenstein and Slovakia. The structure of the school system provides for pupils to be streamed into different types of course or school, in almost all these countries at the start of their secondary education.

In Belgium, at the end of the first two-year-cycle (*degré*) of lower secondary education, pupils can opt for courses with an academic, technical, artistic or vocational emphasis. Regardless the fact whether the pupil has completed the first stage of secondary education, he/she may be admitted to the second stage of vocational education at the age of 15.

In Luxembourg, pupils in difficulty are either streamed into a different type of course (technical, vocational or technician training system) or kept at the same level for an extra year. The second option is intended for pupils who have failed but are considered capable of making up ground during the repeated year.

In Germany, it is possible to transfer a pupil from one course to another or from one school to another, for example from a *Gymnasium* to a *Realschule* or *Hauptschule*. A similar procedure can take place in the Netherlands where a student experiencing difficulties in pre-university education (*Voorbereidend*

*wetenschappelijk onderwijs* – VWO) can be streamed into another type of course such as senior secondary education (*Hoger algemeen voortgezet onderwijs* – HAVO) or pre-vocational education (*Vorbereidend middelbaar beroepsonderwijs* – VMBO) instead of repeating a year.

In Spain, initial vocational qualification programmes (*Programas de Cualificación Profesional Inicial* – PCPI) are aimed at preventing early school dropout, opening up new possibilities for training and qualification and facilitating access to employment. PCPI programmes are aimed at those students aged over 16 who do not hold the *Graduado en Educación Secundaria Obligatoria* certificate. In exceptional circumstances, this may apply to children aged 15 who have taken the second academic year of compulsory secondary education but do not meet the requirements to progress to the third year and who have already had to stay down once during this stage.

Guiding pupils towards an alternative course is also practised in Portugal, where pupils experiencing difficulties may opt for the Education and Training Courses (*Cursos de Educação e Formação* – CEF) in order to avoid repeating a year of their course at lower secondary level. These courses allow young people aged 15 or over who have failed to complete the 6th or 9th year of schooling in mainstream education another opportunity to do so and, at the same time, prepare themselves for the world of work with professional and academic qualifications.

In Austria, in the *Hauptschule*, pupils can also change streams within the same school and the same year group. Pupils can avoid repeating a year by continuing with the next stage of their course in a lower ability group where they can improve their performance in a particular subject.

Changing schools is used as a means of avoiding repeating a year in Lithuania and Slovakia. Pupils who do not wish to repeat a year in Lithuania may move to a school for pupils of a lower ability level (in another comprehensive school, vocational school or youth school<sup>(4)</sup>) or continue their education independently. In Slovakia, students are guided to either special schools or special classes in mainstream schools.

### 3.3. Measures taken during grade retention

In some countries where grade retention is used as a means of overcoming difficulties, the law prescribes measures to be taken during the repeated year. The repetition of a year in Spain is accompanied by a specific individualised programme, the purpose of which is to help pupils overcome the difficulties of the previous year. Schools run these programmes in consultation with the education authorities. In Luxembourg, the repetition of a year is always accompanied by remedial measures determined jointly by the pupil's class teachers, meeting in the teaching council (*conseil de classe*). Subject to the agreement of the school head, the *conseil de classe* may propose a modified timetable for the pupil repeating the year. In this way, the pupil may be excused lessons in particular subjects on condition that he/she spends the relevant periods on remedial measures or revision work. In Portugal, the *conselho de turma* (class council) draws up an analytical report on each pupil repeating a year, which specifies the learning outcomes that the pupil did not attain during the previous year as well as the type of learning that should form the basis of the pupil's syllabus and curriculum during the repeated year. In Hungary, if a pupil repeating a year has previously repeated one or more years, the school must provide him/her with support lessons to enable him/her to attain the required level.

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<sup>(4)</sup> Youth schools provide education to socially and pedagogically disadvantaged teenagers of 12-16 years old.

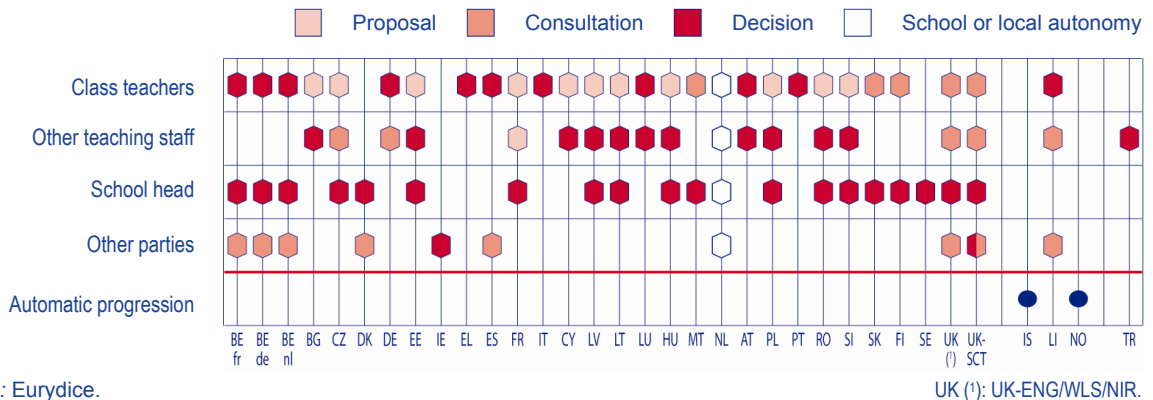
### 3.4. Participants in the decision-making process on grade retention

In most countries, decision-making procedure on grade retention and the role of the participants in this procedure are defined by the regulation in force. The participants in the process may be the school staff, the pupil’s parents or external parties such as local or educational authorities as well as counselling centres. However, in most cases, the decision whether a pupil should move up or repeat the current year is made within the school itself. As to the parents, the degree of their involvement in the decision-making process varies from one country to another. Moreover, in some countries, an external assessment is also possible while in others it is mandatory, for example, in case of a parental appeal.

#### 3.4.1. Role of education professionals within and outside the school

In almost all the countries, at lower secondary level, schools play the key role in determining whether a pupil advances or repeats the year. At this school level, teaching is provided by subject specialist teachers, and often there is a designated teacher who is responsible for a particular class. This teacher together with the other staff who teach the class (or school teaching staff in general) are the main school actors in the decision-making process. Other participants such as social workers, educators, psychologists, guidance counsellors can also take part in this process.

**Figure 3.3: Role of education professionals within and outside the school in the grade retention decision-making process at lower secondary level (ISCED 2), 2009/10**



Source: Eurydice.

**Additional notes**

**Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Hungary, Poland, Romania and Slovenia:** Class teachers, as part of the school teaching staff, participate in a teaching council which comprises all teaching and management staff of the school and is the main decision-making body.

**Ireland:** Information incomplete and not confirmed at national level.

**Portugal:** The *conselho pedagógico* (pedagogical council) is involved in cases where a second repetition is proposed and in parental appeals.

**United Kingdom (SCT):** The category 'other parties' includes educational authorities which share decision-making powers with the school head as well as other professionals such as educational psychologists.

**Liechtenstein:** The category 'other parties' includes the *Schulrat* (school council) which becomes involved and makes the final decision in cases where the *Klassenkonferenz* proposes a change of school.

**Explanatory notes**

**Other parties:** This category includes other professionals (social workers, educators, guidance counsellors, psychologist etc.) working within the educational institution and also those working outside in specialist centres or local/education authorities.

Specific situations relating to parent participation in the decision-making process, such as lodging an appeal, are not taken into account in this figure (see section 3.4.2)

The teaching council, a board comprising teaching staff, is the key decision-making body in most countries. The composition of the teaching council may vary: in some countries, it consists only of the teachers giving classes to a particular class while in others it comprises other members of teachers and other school staff. The role and the functions of this council as well as its collaboration with other school parties also depend on countries. In Belgium, the *conseil de classe/klassenraad/ Klassenrat* and the admissions board are both decision-making bodies for matters concerning progression, repetition of a year and pupil guidance. The *conseil de classe/klassenraad/Klassenrat* consists of all members of staff responsible for teaching a particular group of pupils. The school head is a member of this board and is therefore involved in the decision-making process. In Germany and Liechtenstein, it is the *Klassenkonferenz* (class council), comprising all the staff who teach the pupil and chaired by the main teacher of the class, which makes decisions on grade retention. In Germany, in more complicated cases, the question whether a pupil should repeat a year can be also dealt with by the *Lehrerkonferenz*, which consists of the school's entire teaching staff and chaired by the school head. The final decision is made by the *Klassenkonferenz*. In Portugal, likewise in the second cycle of the *ensino básico*, it is within the *conselho de turma* (class council) that the class teachers make decisions on matters concerning progression, repetition of a year and pupil guidance.

In several countries (Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Hungary, Poland, Romania and Slovenia), the teaching council, which comprises all school teachers as well as members of the management staff, is the main decision-making body responsible for issues regarding the progression and retention of pupils. The teaching council bases its decisions on the grades given by the teachers in charge of a particular class. It must be noted that in Lithuania, it is the designated class teacher who makes a recommendation regarding the progression or retention of a pupil. The situation is similar in Cyprus, where the parties involved in the decision-making process are the teachers who award the grades for each subject, and the school board of teachers (*kathigitikos Syllogos*) which approves the grades.

In some countries, the main responsibility for the decision on pupil retention lies with the school head who cooperates with various parties within or outside the school. In the Czech Republic, when making a decision on retaining a pupil, the school head takes into account the opinion of the teaching council. This body includes all members of the school teaching staff. Its role is to deliberate the cases of pupils who have not met the progression criteria and make recommendations to the school head. In Denmark and Sweden, before making the decision, the school head consults the pupil's parents. In Finland and in Slovakia, he/she makes the decision in cooperation with the pupil's class teachers. In Malta, the school head considers both the opinion of the pupil's teachers as well as that of the parents. In the United Kingdom, the school head would be informed by discussions with teachers and other staff involved with the child within the school as well as externally bodies. However, a decision to retain a pupil would normally only be made with the agreement of the parents (see 3.4.2), following a detailed discussion of the possible implication for the child.

Before making a decision on whether a pupil who is having problems should progress to the next year or not, the school may, in some countries, decide to ask for further advice, either from within the school or from an outside body in order to better assess the pupil's situation. In Spain, school counselling departments are the most widespread counselling services in secondary education. They are part of the school organization and comprise a head of department (normally the school counsellor), support teachers and social workers. Staff from the counselling department is always involved in assessment meetings, providing information, advice or evidence to support a pupil's

assessment or progression. Any member of the school community can address the counselling department (management team, teachers, pupils and families). The final decision on a pupil's progression is made collegiately by the teachers of the class. In Liechtenstein, in cases where a pupil in difficulty is at risk of being retained, the teachers, the *Klassenkonferenz* (class council) and the *Schulrat* (school council) may consult the school psychology service, social workers and remedial teachers.

In Belgium, Denmark and the United Kingdom, before deciding to hold back a pupil who is having difficulties, the school may apply to an external body for an additional assessment of the pupil. In Belgium, when assessing pupils in difficulty, the *conseil de classe/klussenraad/Klassenrat* may draw on information gathered by the centre for psychological, medical and welfare support (*Centre psychomédico-social* in the French Community, *Centrum voor Leerlingenbegeleiding* in the Flemish Community and *Psycho-Medizinisch Soziales Zentrum* in the German-speaking Community) – and from any interviews that may have taken place with the pupil and his/her parents. The final decision is made by the *conseil de classe/klussenraad/ Klassenrat*. In Denmark, if the school decides to involve external bodies for an additional assessment of pupils in difficulty, the counselling is conducted by the *Pædagogisk Psykologisk Rådgivning* (Pedagogical Psychological Counselling). It is the school head who makes the final decision. In the United Kingdom (England, Wales and Northern Ireland), before making a decision on a pupil's placement out of his/her year-group, the school head would seek the views of professionals outside the school such as an educational psychologist and the local authority. The situation is slightly different in Scotland where the decision-making power is shared between the school head and the local authorities. Only in Ireland, all decisions regarding pupil progression to the next year at lower secondary level are always made outside the school. The Department of Education and Skills approves exemptions from progression at the request of the school's management team and can authorise a pupil to repeat a year.

### 3.4.2. Parents' role

In all countries, schools regularly inform parents of their child's progress during the school year. The decision whether a child will progress to the next year or will be held back is communicated to parents at the end of each school year. In some countries (Estonia, Denmark, Malta, the Netherlands and Sweden), if a pupil is at risk of having to repeat a year, before deciding whether the pupil is to move on to the next year or to be retained, the school should consult his/her parents for their views on the matter. The final decision is, however, made at school level even without parental consent. In the Netherlands, the school and the parents discuss the child's development, achievements, results and attitude. If there is disagreement about grade retention, the parents can deliberate with the school and put forward arguments for another decision. If there is no agreement between the parties, the school makes the final decision.

In several countries, parents are given a more active role in the decision-making process. Depending on the country, parent involvement can take three forms: their consent is necessary to retain a child in a lower class; they can demand grade retention; they can lodge an appeal against the decision to repeat a year. Only in the United Kingdom, the decision to hold a pupil back is normally only made with the agreement of parents following a detailed discussion of the possible implications for the child.

In the Flemish Community of Belgium <sup>(5)</sup>, France and Hungary, parents may decide that their child should repeat a school year if they consider that it would improve his/her academic performance. In the Czech Republic and in Slovenia, parents have the right to request grade retention, but only in case of serious health problems. In Sweden, parents may also request to retain their child in the same year. However, the final decision is made by the school head who takes into account the general development of the child and considers whether this solution is the most appropriate for the pupil in question.

In several countries, parents may appeal against a decision made by the school to hold their child back in the same school year. The appeal procedure may be only an internal procedure or, in case of disagreement between the school and the family, it may become external. For instance, in the Czech Republic, Lithuania, Portugal and Liechtenstein, the parental appeal procedure is internal. In the Czech Republic, if parents are in doubt as to the validity of their child's assessment, they may request the school head to have the pupil re-examined by the school's internal examination board. Only if the pupil's teacher of the relevant subject was the school head, the pupils' parents may appeal to the regional authority. In cases where there are good grounds for appeal, the regional authority may decide that the case should be reviewed by the examination board of another school. A school inspector may be present at such an examination if requested. The outcome of this re-examination in both cases (internal or external) cannot be challenged further. In Lithuania, if parents disagree with the decision to repeat the year, the school head may review the information on which the class or subject teacher's decision was based and refer the matter to the teaching council for a final decision. In Portugal, in the 3rd cycle of the *ensino básico*, a pupil's parents may apply to the school's executive body using the same procedure as in the 2nd cycle. In Liechtenstein, the *Klassenkonferenz* makes the decision on grades and on grade retention. If parents do not agree with the school's decision on grade retention and/or the type of education recommended for their child, they may lodge an appeal against the decision of the *Klassenkonferenz* within 14 days, requesting proof of the need for this remedial measure and for the child to be given the opportunity to be reassessed. The final decision is then made by the *Schulrat* (school council).

In cases where there is prolonged disagreement between parents and the school on the pupil's right to progress to the next year, the parental appeal can be accompanied by the involvement of external bodies. This procedure exists in Belgium, Spain (in some Autonomous Communities), France, Hungary, Austria, Slovenia and Finland.

In the French and Flemish Communities of Belgium, if the internal procedure fails, parents can lodge an external appeal with the chair of an appeals board. The board takes into consideration not only the gap between the knowledge or skill levels actually acquired by the pupil and those that he/she should have attained, but it also looks at the assessment tests used by the school to ensure that they match the standards of those produced by the various examination boards. Where the appeal board's decision differs from that of the *conseil de classe/klassemraad*, it supersedes the earlier decision.

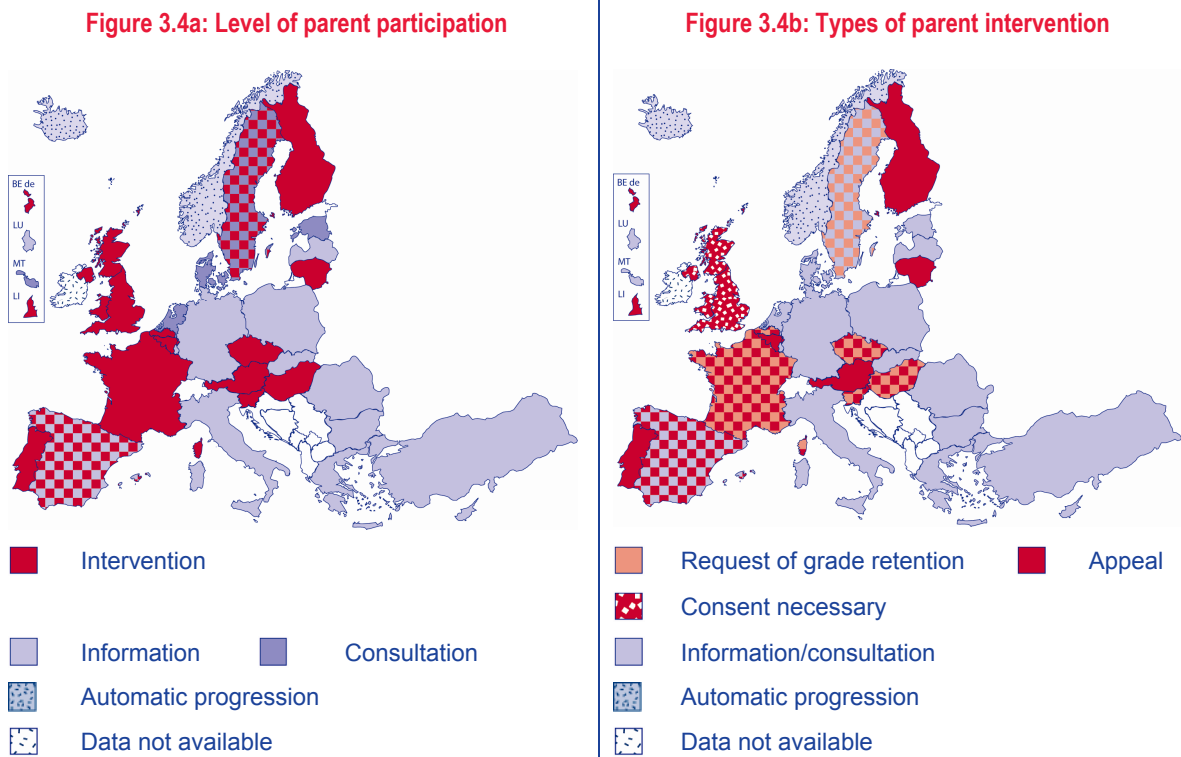
In Spain, a parental appeal process exists in the majority of the Autonomous Communities and in some of them the legislation specifies both internal and external procedures for families who wish to challenge marks or decisions regarding their child's progression. Parents first address their appeal to

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<sup>(5)</sup> In the Flemish Community of Belgium, a student having a grade 'A' ('pass') can repeat a year as a free student only with the consent of the school.

the school management team which, after consulting the teachers involved in the decision, make a judgement on the appeal. If the disagreement persists, families can appeal to the relevant ministry of education of the Autonomous Community which must resolve the case after consulting the inspectorate.

**Figure 3.4: Parental participation in the decision-making process on grade retention at lower secondary level (ISCED 2), 2009/10**



Source: Eurydice.

**Additional notes**

**Ireland:** Information not confirmed at national level.

**Spain:** The level of parents' participation varies according to the Autonomous Communities.

In France, parents may make a request for educational guidance, progression to the next class or repetition of the year. The class council examines the case and delivers a recommendation. The school head makes the final decision and transmits it to the parents. In case of disagreement with the parents, the school head meets them, explains the proposals and listens to their views on the matter. If the disagreement continues, the parents may apply to the appeals commission chaired by the chief inspector of the *académie*, the director of the government's education services for the *département*, who makes the final decision.

In Hungary, in the event of disagreement on the assessment of a pupil, the parents can submit a request to the head teacher who forwards it to the Educational Authority, the *Oktatási Hivatal*. The latter points out an independent committee in front of which the end-of-year exams may be taken/re-

taken and a student can be assessed/re-assessed. The committee makes the final decision, but in case of infringement of law parents can appeal to the Educational Authority.

In Austria, parents can lodge an appeal to the school in a written form within five days of the receipt of the decision of the *Klassenkonferenz*. The school must forward the appeal to the higher school board for the final decision: to the district school board (*Bezirksschulrat*) if the pupil is enrolled in the *Hauptschule* and to the school board of the province (*Landesschulrat*) if he/she is enrolled in the *Allgemeinbildende Höhere Schule*. These bodies make the final decision regarding a pupil's progression or retention.

In Slovenia, parents may contest the final marks of their children. The school head appoints a commission consisting of three members, one of whom is external. The commission makes the final decision on the parental appeal and a pupil may be re-assessed.

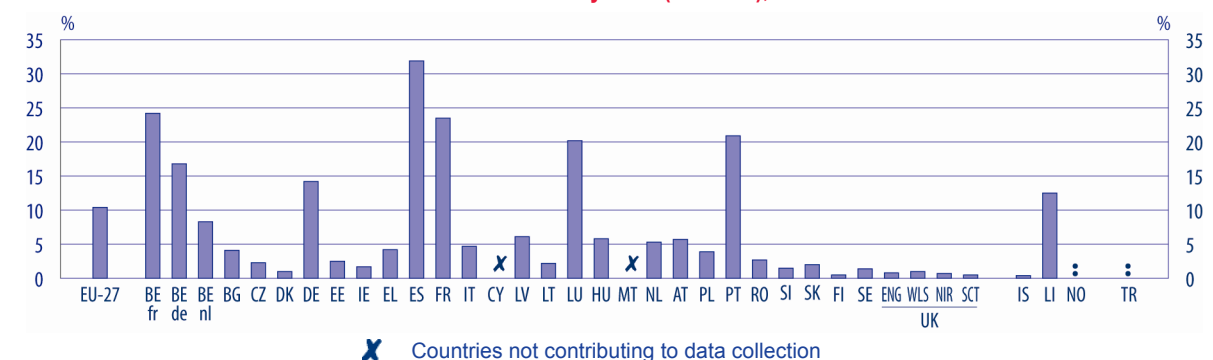
In Finland, where an obviously erroneous decision has been made on a pupil's final marks or on his/her progression to the next year the Provincial State Office may, at the request of the parents, order a re-assessment, or make a decision on the original marks and on the pupil's right to progress to the next year.

### 3.5. Statistical data

In order to assess the extent of grade repetition at lower secondary level in European countries, the most recent international statistical data available from both PISA (2009) and Eurostat (2008) have been analysed.

The data from the PISA study are based on the answers to the question posed to 15-year-old pupils: 'Have you ever repeated a grade?' Students answering this question were invited to indicate the level at which they had had to repeat a year: primary, lower secondary or upper secondary.

**Figure 3.5: Proportion of 15-year-old pupils who have repeated a year at least once at lower secondary level (ISCED 2), 2009**



EU-27	BE fr	BE de	BE nl	BG	CZ	DK	DE	EE	IE	EL	ES	FR	IT	CY	LV	LT	LU	
10.4	24.2	16.8	8.3	4.1	2.3	1.0	14.2	2.5	1.7	4.2	31.9	23.5	4.7	x	6.1	2.2	20.2	
HU	MT	NL	AT	PL	PT	RO	SI	SK	FI	SE	UK-ENG	UK-WLS	UK-NIR	UK-SCT	IS	LI	NO	TR
5.8	x	5.3	5.7	3.9	20.9	2.7	1.5	2.0	0.5	1.4	0.8	1.0	0.7	0.5	0.4	12.5	:	:

Source: Secondary analysis from PISA database 2009, OECD.



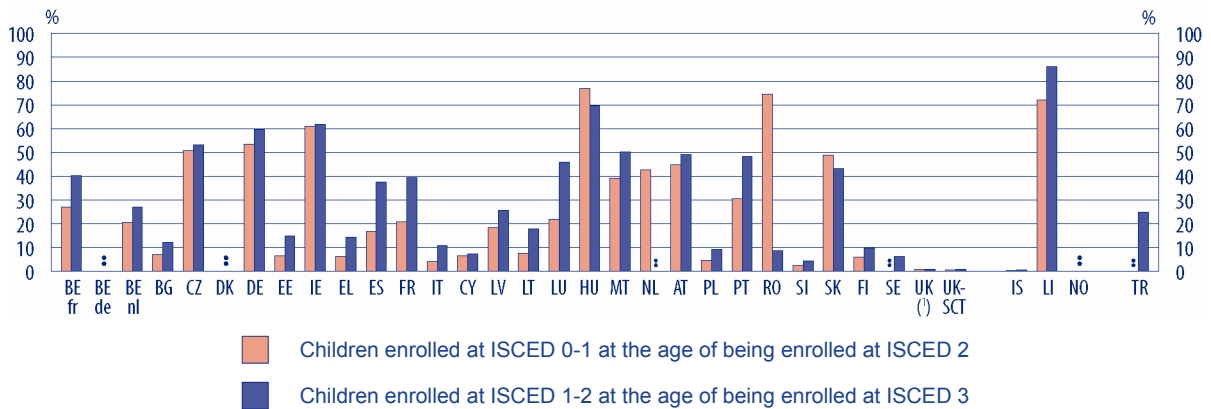
**Additional notes**

**Norway:** The question has not been asked to the students because of the automatic progression.

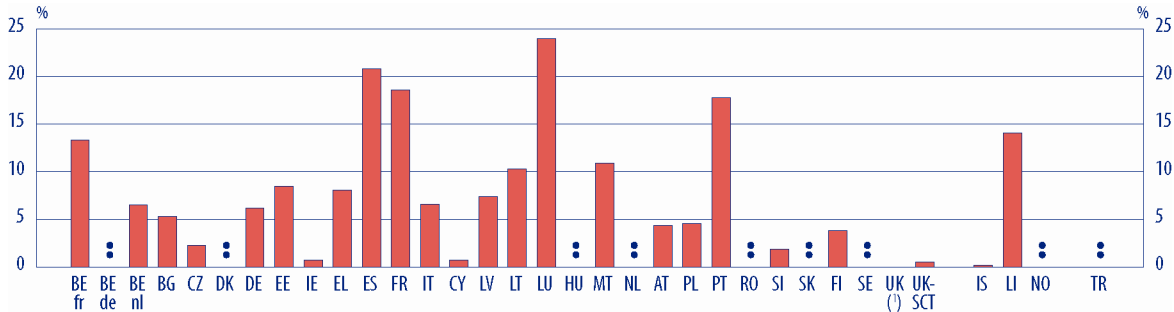
**Turkey:** As compulsory education ends at age 14, this survey of 15-year-old pupils does not take into account those pupils who left school at age 14; it is possible that some of these pupils may have repeated a year in primary or lower secondary education. There is no distinction between primary and lower secondary education. The rate covers both education levels.

Figures 3.6a and 3.6b below, based on Eurostat (2008) data, show the percentage of children enrolled in primary (ISCED 1) or pre-primary (ISCED 0) education when they have reached the normal age for lower secondary education (ISCED 2) compared with the percentage of children still enrolled in a lower education level (ISCED 1-2) when they have reached the normal age for upper secondary education (ISCED 3). This percentage includes pupils who started primary education late, those who repeated a year at primary level and also children who had come from abroad and were enrolled in a lower class than the normal one for their age, as well as pupils with special education needs. Comparing the difference between the two rates gives a proxy for the grade retention rate at lower secondary level. This proxy complements the data provided by the PISA study (2009).

**Figure 3.6a: Percentage of pupils falling behind at primary (ISCED 1) and lower secondary level (ISCED 2), 2007/08**



**Figure 3.6b: Estimate of grade retention at lower secondary level (ISCED 2), 2007/08**



Source: Eurostat, 2008.

UK (1): UK-ENG/WLS/NIR.

**Data (Figure 3.6a and 3.6b)**

	BE fr	BE de	BE nl	BG	CZ	DK	DE	EE	IE	EL	ES	FR	IT	CY	LV	LT	LU
■	27.0	:	20.5	7.0	50.8	:	53.5	6.5	61.0	6.3	16.8	20.8	4.2	6.6	18.4	7.6	21.8
■	40.3	:	27.0	12.3	53.1	:	59.7	15.0	61.7	14.4	37.6	39.4	10.8	7.3	25.8	17.9	45.8
Δ	13.3	:	6.5	5.3	2.3	:	6.2	8.5	0.7	8.1	20.8	18.6	6.6	0.7	7.4	10.3	24.0

	HU	MT	NL	AT	PL	PT	RO	SI	SK	FI	SE	UK (1)	UK-SCT	IS	LI	NO	TR
■	77.0	39.2	42.8	44.7	4.6	30.5	74.6	2.4	49.0	6.0	:	1.0	0.5	0.3	72.0	:	:
■	69.5	50.1	:	49.1	9.2	48.3	8.7	4.3	43.2	9.8	6.4	1.0	1.0	0.5	86.1	:	25.0
Δ	:	10.9	:	4.4	4.6	17.8	:	1.9	:	3.8	:	0.0	0.5	0.2	14.1	:	:

Source: Eurostat, 2008.

UK (1): UK-ENG/WLS/NIR.

**Additional notes**

**Denmark:** As the optional 10th year at the theoretical turning age of 16 is still considered to be ISCED 2, it is not possible to calculate the estimate.

**Greece and Malta:** Data issued in 2006/07.

**Sweden and Norway:** Data not available because the age distributions given by Eurostat are estimated by school year.

**United Kingdom:** Data from the Department for Children, Schools and Families, DCSF (now Department for Education, DfE). Public and private schools counted together, special schools excluded. Reference year 2008/09.

**Explanatory notes**

The calculations are based on Eurostat data on students by ISCED level and age. For each country, the estimate is based on the official age for entry into ISCED 2 and ISCED 3 (turning ages). For the official turning ages, the percentage of pupils that were still attending lower ISCED levels than expected was calculated from the total number of pupils of that age in the respective country. Pupils with special education needs are included. Independent private educational institutions are not taken into account. Concerning the official turning ages of entry to ISCED levels, see the schematic diagrams of the structure of European education systems in 2009/10 (Eurydice, 2009).

The estimate of grade retention at primary level is computed by subtracting the percentage of pupils falling behind in primary level from the percentage of pupils falling behind in lower secondary level. It is an estimate since different cohorts of pupils are considered for the same reference year. Negative values are considered missing.

For specific country notes regarding the percentage of children retained at ISCED 1 at the age of starting compulsory schooling at ISCED 2, see additional notes of Figures 2.5a and 2.5b.

However, it is important to underline that this estimate, based on Eurostat data, of the accumulated grade retention rate in schooling must be interpreted with caution, particularly for the few countries where the move from lower secondary to upper secondary level corresponds to the end of compulsory schooling. In such cases, a certain number of pupils beyond the age for compulsory schooling may have left the education system and be in the labour market. Thus, in Romania, school-leavers may in part explain the apparent decrease in the grade retention rate at the end of lower secondary level. Apart from this example, the two sources of data combined reveal several trends with regard to grade retention at lower secondary level in the countries of Europe.

In the first group of countries, where the level of grade retention is almost nil or very low at the end of primary education (see chapter 2), the practice of grade retention generally remains or increase a little at a similar level at lower secondary schooling, in spite of the differences between these countries in terms of the regulations in force. Indeed, in Iceland, the regulations in force throughout the years of compulsory education stipulate that pupils move up from one class to the next automatically, irrespective of their academic achievement. On the other hand, in Denmark, Finland and Sweden, although the practice is used only in exceptional cases, repeating a year is technically possible at any time, with the same criteria applying throughout the entire period of compulsory education, i.e. a decision is made at school level based on the general development of the child and what would be in his/her best interests. In the United Kingdom where there is no specific regulation the situation is similar. In Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Latvia, Poland, Slovenia and Slovakia, the existing

legislation also allows grade retention but provides opportunities for pupils to catch-up and sets limits to reduce or even circumvent the practice.

In some countries, where the grade retention rate is relatively high in primary education according to the 2009 PISA data, the grade retention phenomenon decreases into secondary education. This is the case in Belgium (Flemish Community), Ireland and the Netherlands. This trend can be partly explained by the use, at secondary level, of the vocational route. The organisation of lower secondary schooling into different types of education is also found in Germany, Luxembourg, Austria and Liechtenstein. However, despite the possibility of referring students to a different educational strand as an alternative to grade retention, there is a retention rate similar in lower secondary. The situation is similar in Belgium (French and German-speaking Communities) where streaming into technical and vocational courses is possible at the age of 14 years at lower secondary level. In three of the countries where the rate of grade retention is quite high at primary level (Spain, France and Portugal), all pupils follow a common type of education without separate strands or tracks. In France and Portugal, the retention rate remains about the same in secondary as in primary education, while in Spain, it increases strongly, in spite of regulations designed to limit the practice and the provision of opportunities for pupils to catch up. In all of the countries in this group therefore, there is a definite tendency to use grade retention as a remedy for pupils in difficulty at both levels of education.

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Two main patterns are evident in this analysis of regulations on grade retention in lower secondary education in European countries. Either progression to the next class is automatic or there is a possibility for a school year to be repeated. Automatic progression is recommended in official guidelines in Iceland and Norway. In the United Kingdom, the approach to progression is similar, although there is no specific legislation on grade retention. Except in exceptional circumstances such as a long absence from school, children in the United Kingdom normally move up automatically to the next school year – age being the only criterion for progression. In all other countries, legislation sanctions the practice of grade retention.

The criteria, as laid down in regulations, which provide grounds for grade retention, are rather similar in all countries. The main reason for deciding that a student in difficulty should repeat a grade is that he/she has made insufficient academic progress during the year even though additional support has been provided. Another similarity is that in all countries where grade retention is allowed, the legislation incorporates various limitations to restrict its use in practice.

However, the wide variations between countries in the rate of grade retention indicate significant differences in the application of this measure at lower secondary level: according to 2009 PISA data, in Denmark, Slovenia, Finland, Sweden and United Kingdom less than 1,5 % of pupils repeat a year while in the French Community of Belgium, Spain, France, Luxembourg and Portugal the rate is higher than 20 %. This substantial disparity reveals important cultural differences regarding grade retention among education communities in European countries. Where the rates are high, it appears that the

belief in the benefit of repetition as a remedial measure for the student in difficulty remains prevalent, despite regulations which aim to restrict its use.

In the countries where the rate of grade retention is high, the two most common limitations on its use are firstly that the repetition of a particular school year (or year within a stage) is forbidden, and secondly, that the total number of times a student may repeat a year is restricted. Such is the case in Belgium, France and Luxembourg. In many countries, provision is made for students to attempt to catch up with their studies before the start of the following school year so that they can avoid having to repeat the year. These provisions (such as re-sitting examinations or doing extra homework) are intended to allow students in difficulty the opportunity to reach the required level and continue to progress in their studies. This is generally the case in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe which have relatively low grade retention rates, with less than 7 % (2009 PISA data).

The principal participants in the grade retention decision-making process are generally members of the school staff (teachers, school head, psychologists, etc.). Legislation also provides for participation by pupils' parents. However, at lower secondary level, parents seem to play a less significant role than at primary level where their consent is often necessary before a child can be made to repeat a year. Indeed, at lower secondary level, only in the United Kingdom, the decision regarding grade retention is normally made with the agreement of pupils' parents, although there is no specific legislation. In only a few countries (Denmark, Estonia, Malta, the Netherlands and Sweden), parents are always consulted beforehand. This condition can partially explain the very low grade retention rates in Denmark and Sweden. In countries where grade retention is common practice at lower secondary level, legislation usually provides for parents to have a right of appeal against the decision made by the educational institution. In these cases, bodies outside the school often become involved in the process in order to provide an additional opinion on whether repetition is necessary or not. However, for the most part, the school remains the principal decision-making body.

## MAIN CONCLUSIONS

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### **Pupils may fall behind for a year in countries where primary education admission requirements are based on maturity and development**

Holding back a pupil of official compulsory primary school age in pre-primary education or placing him/her in a transition class can be linked to the issue of grade repetition. In essence, a pupil who is not admitted to the first year of primary education, following an assessment based on criteria of maturity and development, falls a year behind. This practice affects quite a high percentage of children in some countries (Czech Republic, Germany, Hungary, Austria, Romania, Slovakia and Liechtenstein) and reveals the strong perceptions that children should reach a pre-determined level of maturity in readiness for school. However, in other countries where regulations also allow for children's admission to primary education to be postponed for a year for developmental reasons (Belgium – French and Flemish Communities, Cyprus, Latvia, Slovenia, Finland and Iceland), this option is rarely taken.

### **Lack of sufficient progress is the most common reason stated in regulations for deciding that a pupil should repeat a year**

Two distinct patterns are evident in the regulations relating to pupil progression. Either automatic progression is recommended or grade retention is allowed. Automatic progression as an official principle is established in very few countries (Iceland and Norway as well as Bulgaria and Liechtenstein at primary level). The situation is similar in the United Kingdom because, although there are no specific regulations on grade retention, children are normally expected to progress through school within their own year group. In all other countries, grade retention is permitted by legislation but the regulations usually incorporate various limitations which are intended to restrict the use of the practice. These limitations may include, for example, automatic progression during the first years of primary education and/or a limit on the number of times a pupil may repeat a year.

Insufficient progress at school is, in all cases, the main reason for which a pupil may have to repeat a year, although, in some countries, other criteria such as absenteeism or behaviour are also mentioned in legislation. Grade retention can therefore occur when the various measures taken during the school year to help pupils overcome their learning difficulties have not enabled them to make sufficient progress. However, in many countries, poor marks at the end of the school year do not necessarily lead to retention: assessment may take other aspects into account; pupils may be given extra work to help them catch up or allowed to re-sit exams; and, in a few countries, pupils may be allowed to move up to the next class under certain conditions.

**In most countries, the major influence in the decision-making process is the opinion of teachers; parental opinion plays a minor role.**

The decision-making process on pupil progression to the next class can involve various parties; some of these play a decisive role whilst others are consulted for an opinion. In the vast majority of cases, the decision is made within the school usually by the class teacher(s). Other teachers or school heads may also play a part in the decision-making process. In some countries, it is the school head who makes the final decision. In a few countries, professionals based outside the school may also be involved including local authorities, educational psychologists and guidance services. Depending on the country and the circumstances, these professionals may either be invited to provide an opinion or they may make the final decision.

Everywhere, parents or legal guardians are regularly informed about their children's progress. In two thirds of countries they are involved in some way or another if the question of grade repetition arises for their child; regulations indicate three levels of involvement for parents. In only a few countries is their consent necessary for pupils to repeat a grade either at primary or lower secondary level. In some other countries, parents are always consulted during the decision-making process. Finally, it is more common at lower secondary level than at primary level for parents to have a right of appeal against decisions but, in these cases, although external bodies may intervene, the final decision regarding grade repetition usually rests with the school.

**Despite similar regulations, grade retention rates vary widely between European countries. In countries with high rates, the idea that grade retention is beneficial for pupils is still prevalent in the education community.**

The comparison of statistical data (Eurostat 2008 and PISA 2009) indicates that there is no linear relationship between the provision for grade retention in legislation and its actual use in practice. In many countries where retention is permitted but restricted by regulations, the rates vary significantly between countries. At primary level, some countries such as Greece (2.0 %) and Austria (4.9 %) have low grade retention rates; while other countries such as France (17.8 %), Portugal and the Netherlands (22.4 %) reveal much higher rates. At lower secondary level, these trends persist with variations between countries' rates ranging from 0.5 % in Finland to 31.9 % in Spain.

In conclusion, even though grade retention is possible in most countries, actual practice varies widely. The existence of a culture of grade retention is the reason why the practice is used more often in certain countries. In these countries, the idea that repeating a year is beneficial for pupils' learning remains prevalent. This view is supported by the teaching profession, the school community and parents themselves. In Europe, it is mainly in Belgium, Spain, France, Luxembourg, the Netherlands and Portugal that this conviction persists in practice. Changes in regulations on grade retention are not enough to modify this belief; it should be supplanted by an alternative approach to managing children's learning difficulties. The challenge lies more in questioning certain assumptions and beliefs rather than regulatory change.

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## Turkey

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## GLOSSARY

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### Country codes

<b>EU/EU-27</b>	European Union
<b>BE</b>	Belgium
<b>BE fr</b>	Belgium – French Community
<b>BE de</b>	Belgium – German-speaking Community
<b>BE nl</b>	Belgium – Flemish Community
<b>BG</b>	Bulgaria
<b>CZ</b>	Czech Republic
<b>DK</b>	Denmark
<b>DE</b>	Germany
<b>EE</b>	Estonia
<b>EL</b>	Greece
<b>ES</b>	Spain
<b>FR</b>	France
<b>IE</b>	Ireland
<b>IT</b>	Italy
<b>CY</b>	Cyprus
<b>LV</b>	Latvia
<b>LT</b>	Lithuania
<b>LU</b>	Luxembourg
<b>HU</b>	Hungary
<b>MT</b>	Malta

<b>NL</b>	Netherlands
<b>AT</b>	Austria
<b>PL</b>	Poland
<b>PT</b>	Portugal
<b>RO</b>	Romania
<b>SI</b>	Slovenia
<b>SK</b>	Slovakia
<b>FI</b>	Finland
<b>SE</b>	Sweden
<b>UK</b>	United Kingdom
<b>UK-ENG</b>	England
<b>UK-WLS</b>	Wales
<b>UK-NIR</b>	Northern Ireland
<b>UK-SCT</b>	Scotland
<b>EFTA/EEA countries</b>	The three countries of the European Free Trade Association which are members of the European Economic Area
<b>IS</b>	Iceland
<b>LI</b>	Liechtenstein
<b>NO</b>	Norway
<b>Candidate Country</b>	
<b>TR</b>	Turkey

### Statistical code

: Data not available

## Glossary

### **International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED 1997)**

The International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED) is an instrument suitable for compiling statistics on education internationally. It covers two cross-classification variables: levels and fields of education with the complementary dimensions of general/vocational/pre-vocational orientation and educational/labour market destination. The current version of ISCED 97 (UNESCO-UIS, 2006) distinguishes seven levels of education. Empirically, ISCED assumes that several criteria exist which can help allocate education programmes to levels of education. Depending on the level and type of education concerned, there is a need to establish a hierarchical ranking system between main and subsidiary criteria (typical entrance qualification, minimum entrance requirement, minimum age, staff qualification, etc.).

#### **ISCED 0: Pre-primary education**

Pre-primary education is defined as the initial stage of organised instruction. It is school- or centre-based and is designed for children aged at least 3 years.

#### **ISCED 1: Primary education**

This level begins between 5 and 7 years of age, is compulsory in all countries and generally lasts from four to six years.

#### **ISCED 2: Lower secondary education**

It continues the basic programmes of the primary level, although teaching is typically more subject-focused. Usually, the end of this level coincides with the end of compulsory education.

#### **ISCED 3: Upper secondary education**

This level generally begins at the end of compulsory education. The entrance age is typically 15 or 16 years. Entrance qualifications (end of compulsory education) and other minimum entry requirements are usually needed. Instruction is often more subject-oriented than at ISCED level 2. The typical duration of ISCED level 3 varies from two to five years.

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