FACTSHEET

What's the secret of Estonian education?

If you want to start early, start with the kids

Estonia's education system consistently ranks among the best in the world. Here are some of the factors behind that success:

World-class results

The 2025 PISA results place Estonian students among Europe's best and top performers worldwide in reading, mathematics, science, and computational problem solving. Estonia has more top performers than the OECD average (13% vs 8%) and fewer low performers (17% vs 35%).

In the PISA 2022 creative thinking assessment, Estonian students ranked first in Europe.

Every student matters

Estonia believes in equal opportunities for all. Basic and secondary education in public schools is free, including school meals and learning materials. Higher education in Estonian is also tuition-free for full-time students. Going further than access alone, Estonia's inclusive education approach ensures that every child gets the right support, be it those with special needs or the exceptionally talented. This encompasses free psychological services and dedicated programmes for the gifted.

Highly educated teachers and autonomy

Estonian teachers are highly educated, requiring a master's degree to work as a teacher and a bachelor's degree for kindergarten teachers.

Estonia has a culture of trusting and empowering teachers. The curriculum only sets the results children should know by the end of each educational level while teachers decide how to achieve those results. Parents and the state trust teachers to make the best decisions for their students.

Building a strong foundation

Estonia recognises the critical role that high-quality early childhood education plays in a child's development. Kindergartens in Estonia are not just for childcare, they are educational institutions with their own curriculum designed to prepare children for school. Although preschool attendance is not mandatory, over 94% of children attend kindergarten before starting school, demonstrating parents' desire for their children to be well-prepared for their learning journey.

Blending tech and education

In Estonia, where 100% of state services are online, digital integration extends deeply into education. Since the school management platform eKool was launched in 2002, a wide range of e-solutions, state-sponsored and private, have enriched the learning experience.
Estonia also continues to invest in future-ready skills through initiatives such as AI Leap, launched in 2025 to support the responsible use of artificial intelligence in education

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Tiger Leap into the future

Estonia's efforts to leverage technology for teaching and learning began in the 1990s with an ambitious Tiger Leap programme that kickstarted the digitalization of the entire public sector. The aim of the programme was to provide internet access to all schools. By 2001, Estonia had already met this goal. However, Tiger Leap also prioritised training teachers, students, and citizens to become tech-savvy, recognising that digital opportunities are only as good as the people who use them.

Digital literacy and teacher training

With a focus on digital literacy, digital competence is one of the core skills students develop across all subjects, as outlined in the national curriculum in Estonia. Teachers are also encouraged to enhance their digital skills through ongoing training, with teachers supported by ongoing digital competence training.

E-tests

Estonian schools also use e-tests to save teachers' time and make testing and feedback more efficient. Estonia is moving towards electronic final exams, making testing and feedback more efficient.

Digital learning materials

In Estonia, digital learning materials are widely available across all education levels and subjects. This proved invaluable during the COVID-19 pandemic, making the transition to distance learning in Estonian schools much smoother in 2020, as digital learning materials were already available for all education levels and subjects. It seems as if Estonia had been preparing for such a digital shift for 25 years.

Data-backed decisions

Pragmatic Estonians value evidence-based decision-making. Since 2004, Estonia has been using the Estonian Education Information System to gather information on its education system. The database provides policymakers, educators, and researchers with a wealth of information on student performance, teacher qualifications, and more.

Infrastructure

Digital opportunities are only as good as the infrastructure supporting them. Recognising this, the Estonian government has invested in the infrastructure of schools to ensure that they have access to high-speed internet connections. This has allowed for
a more seamless integration of digital tools and materials in the classroom, improving the learning experience for students and teachers alike.

Cybersecurity and media literacy

To create a cyber-aware society, Estonian education guidelines suggest students start taking the first steps in kindergarten. Also, media literacy is an important topic in Estonia. The results are evident - Estonia consistently ranks among the top countries in the Media Literacy Index, alongside the Nordic nations.

Even kindergartens teach robotics

Estonia wants children to develop a positive relationship with technology from an early age. Opportunities for learning programming, robotics, and other modern technologies are available as early as preschool. The ProgeTiger programme, launched in 2012, has played a key role in making coding and technology a natural part of Estonian education from the earliest years onwards.

Additionally, students have access to numerous extracurricular activities, including Unicorn Squad — a programme designed to inspire girls to explore technology and coding.

Shaping ICT education

To ensure a steady supply of IT professionals, Estonia has adopted a comprehensive approach. This includes government and private sector partnerships aimed at improving the quality of IT education and training, evident in initiatives like the IT Academy programme.

Estonia's commitment to ICT education places it at the forefront, with a high share of students choosing ICT studies, significantly above the EU average. Furthermore, the number of female ICT students at Estonian universities is on the rise, underscoring the country's success in fostering an inclusive and forward-thinking educational environment.

Practical and entrepreneurial

Children in Estonia believe their performance is in their own hands. This is evidenced by the fact that Estonian students have, on three consecutive occasions, led the growth mindset category in PISA surveys.
With the country's commitment to promoting entrepreneurship, innovation, and digital literacy, it is no wonder that Estonia boasts the highest number of unicorns per capita in Europe. In fact, entrepreneurship is also one of the key competencies in Estonian curricula, and creating student companies is popular in Estonian schools.

Learning beyond the classroom

In Estonia, learning extends far beyond traditional settings. Hobby education and youth work offer diverse opportunities to explore passions in music, sports, art, technology, and more. Environmental education is also emphasized, with a nationwide network of environmental education centres offering free educational programmes and learning materials. These activities not only enhance talents but also foster creativity, build confidence, and create community connections, complementing school education.

Engaging the next generation

In Estonia, youth voices matter. Young people actively shape their communities, from the right to vote in local elections at 16, to widespread youth and student councils backed by law and state funding.

Lifelong learning as a lifestyle

Lifelong learning is actively promoted, with successful programmes like Vali IT offering the opportunity for people with no prior experience in the field to become IT professionals in a matter of weeks.

Leaping into AI

In 2025, Estonia launched AI Leap — a nationwide programme supporting the use of artificial intelligence in teaching and learning. The programme focuses on teacher training, curriculum development, and ensuring that both students and educators are prepared to learn and work in an AI-driven world.

The best investment a country can make is to raise smart children

In conclusion, there is no single clear secret to the success of Estonian education. In international comparisons, Estonia has been shining due to a systematic approach, including a commitment to equal opportunities, inclusive education, highly educated teachers, early childhood education, and fostering entrepreneurial spirit and digital innovation.

Interested in learning more? The online course Understanding Estonia's Education System offers a structured, expert-led overview for anyone curious about how Estonia's schools work.