



# Austria Report

## Integration of refugees at school

### **General learning situation**

Austria is trying to integrate refugees and migrants after taking in over 90,000 in 2015 – around 1% of its population.

In the Austrian kindergarten system, measures consist primarily of teaching services (support staff, sensitive intercultural educational work, parent counselling), which are funded and organized by federal provinces, refugee and integration organizations as well as different private organizations.

Austrian education policy rejects the idea of segregation. Hence, pupils who are not Austrian nationals and who have a mother tongue other than German are not taught in separate schools or classes but are educated alongside Austrian pupils. The establishment of separate classes needs the consent of the Federal Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, which is usually given only in special or emergency cases.

Pupils are admitted to school according to their age. There are no formal test procedures for assessing the child's competence in German. When a six-year-old child is enrolled at school, the head teacher usually talks to the child in order to find out whether she/he understands German. Pupils whose competence in German is not yet sufficient to follow classes held in German are admitted as so-called ex-matricular pupils for a maximum period of two years. This is the case for six-year-olds as well as for 'late comers' (pupils older than 6) who have not studied German as a foreign language in their country of origin.

Additional German classes in the afternoon are offered as soon as there is the need to support 12 or more ex-matricular pupils. After a maximum of two years the pupils can take their exams and if they pass, they become an ordinary pupil attending regular classes.

### **General information to personal belongings of refugees**

It is essential that especially children have a person they trust and can easily communicate with him/her, because the change of language and culture is enough they have to cope with. Therefore the teachers who speak the child's mother tongue play a key role as mediator between the refugee child and the school staff (note: unfortunately they are not available in many schools). It needs much time and mental efforts to cope with the flight experiences and the new world they now live in. Behavioral disorders or increased propensity towards violence as well as refusal of performance and withdrawal can originate from the traumatization they have experienced. The teachers themselves as not qualified for such situations can't manage these problems on their own. Thus, the cooperation with qualified school staff (counselling teachers, educational psychologists, school social worker and interpreters if necessary) is required. (note: The realization often fails due to funding problems.)



## **Fact sheet for teachers**

### **on integration of minor refugees in the school system**

(compiled by the department for school psychology on behalf of the Federal Ministry of Education, Science and Culture)

#### **Several tips how to treat minor refugees in school life**

Inform the pupils of your class prior to the arrival of the new classmate about his/her special situation. Explain what it means to flee (a home country) and that they should welcome the new pupil in their school and class. Let them ask questions and inform them well in order to prevent prejudices.

Find (story) books regarding flight, tolerance and diversity to have a good basis for further discussions.

Think ahead of situations which can cause fears or bring back memories in minor refugees (e.g. fire drill)

Create welcome posters together with the pupils in order to facilitate the first meeting. The children can bring photos and pictures of themselves, their favorite place or their hobbies. The new pupil can then take the picture home to remember the warm welcome.

Security, stability and exact structures are critical because many of the children are still not used to the Austrian school system and its procedures. Simple rules make it easier to guarantee a good coexistence and the integration of the new pupil. The rules should be explained clearly to the child to avoid unnecessary troubles.

The new pupil should know that the teachers are there for him/her if he/she needs help. Determine a mentor for the refugee child to help him/her to orientate and find support, especially at the beginning.

The child should have the opportunity to talk to the teachers or a responsible person but don't force him/her to do so.

#### **The opportunity to invite external people to the lessons:**

Private NGOs mostly funded by the state offer workshops of several hours in affected classes to familiarize them with topics like integration, refugees, etc. Here are a few examples:

- workshops called 'Afghan kites in Austrian skies' – While the pupils are building kites together, they get an insight into the lives of young Afghan refugees
- workshops involving role-playing games to get and convey experiences of flight and the efforts to claim asylum in Austria
- workshops treating the topics of prejudices and racism