Education in the Amsterdam Metropolitan Area

How does the Dutch education system work?
The Netherlands has a highly regarded national education system. **Daycare** is available for very young children, typically from 0 to 4 years old. Some may begin **preschool** from the age of 2, although this is optional. Children then attend **primary school** from the age of four, before transferring to **secondary school** after eight years. The choice of secondary school and type of education determines children’s further and higher education, for example, to attend a university of applied sciences or research university.

*Why do nearly half of all internationals in the Netherlands choose local education?*

- There’s a greater selection of schools to choose from;
- They allow your child to integrate more easily into the local Dutch community;
- According to the OECD, Dutch education is of high quality;
- Dutch schools receive state funding, making them more affordable (schools typically only ask for a parental contribution).
Daycare (0–4 years)

Children up to four years old can be looked after at a daycare centre (kinderdagverblijf), where they can stay for up to 11 hours a day. Daycare centres in the Netherlands are professionally run and employ fully-qualified childcare staff. All childcare centres must comply with strict standards as mandated by law. Daycare centres are usually open from 08:00 to 18:30 on weekdays, offering care for babies as young as three months old up to children aged four.

Parents working (or studying) in the Netherlands are entitled to a childcare allowance (kinderopvangtoeslag) for children under 12. This is a contribution to the cost of childcare, whether for a daycare centre, after-school care or a childminder (gastouder). The allowance can reduce childcare costs up to a maximum of 90%, depending on the household income and number of children. Contact the Dutch Tax and Customs Administration (Belastingdienst) about the childcare allowance.

Preschool (2–4 years)

Preschools take place within childcare facilities and have educational programmes for children aged from 2 to 4 years old. Emphasis is on language as well as and on social, physical and creative development. Children sing, play outside and listen to stories. The preschool approach mirrors that in groups 1 and 2 (ages 4-5) in primary school. This makes the transition to primary school easier for children. Preschool typically begins at 2.5 years of age, though it is not compulsory.

Some preschools provide care for four or five hours per day but are closed for holidays, school breaks and in summer. However, some may offer full-time programmes, extended care and summer options.

Check the different preschools for their policies and choose the one that best fits your personal situation.
Primary school education (4–12 years)

In the Netherlands, children start school as soon as they turn four. Schools have various educational approaches, so read up on their curricula, the education ethos of the school, and try to arrange a visit. Most schools host information days (voorlichtingsdagen) – details can typically be found on the schools’ websites – and some also accept private appointments.

Check the primary school checklist to know what to look for in a prospective school: www.iamsterdam.com/primaryschoolchecklist

Amsterdam and Haarlem’s registration procedures are centrally organised. The procedures for other primary schools in the region differ from school to school. Please check the relevant school or municipality’s website for more information. Check for primary schools in your area by visiting the ‘Scholen op de Kaart’ website (www.scholenopdekaart.nl). Simply enter your postcode to see a list of schools (in Dutch). These are listed in order by their distance from your home, along with other details, such as religious orientation or educational approach.

Most Dutch primary schools combine groups 1 and 2 (ages 4-5). The children in this class are called ‘kleuters’, and the focus is on learning through play, social skills, structure, and gradual preparation for reading and writing. Formal reading and writing starts in group 3 (from age 6). Most primary schools do not focus heavily on homework (a maximum of 30 minutes per week is assigned on average). Children attend primary school for eight years. After group 8 (age 11-12), they move on to secondary school.

Dutch school attendance law (leerplichtwet) is very strict. From the age of 5, your child is not allowed to miss school. There are a few exceptions to this law: work commitments, family events, religious celebrations and, naturally, illness. Please take this law very seriously, as you can be fined if you do not request official permission to keep your child away from school.

Parents do not pay school fees for state-funded primary education in the Netherlands, but schools may ask parents for a voluntary contribution towards the costs of extracurricular activities (usually up to €100 per year). Parents do pay for after-school care and lunchtime supervision, as they are run by external organisations.

Centralized end test for group 8

In the last year of primary school, all students take a national aptitude test known as the Centrale Eindtoets Basisonderwijs. This measures what students have learned during primary school. All primary schools are must participate in the test, held in April each year. Before it takes place, the group 8 teacher assesses what level of high school education would best fit each student. They base their recommendation on the student’s test scores for their whole school career, as well as their intelligence, attitude towards learning, interests, etc. Based on the outcome of the test and the opinion of the teacher, the students receive advice about the appropriate level of high school education. The assessment of the teacher is the decisive factor.
Secondary school education (12–18 years)

After group 8, pupils leave primary school for secondary education (voortgezet onderwijs).

There are different types of Dutch secondary education:

- VMBO*: preparatory secondary vocational education (4 years), followed by MBO (secondary vocational education);
- HAVO*: senior general secondary education (5 years), followed by HBO (university of applied sciences);
- VWO*: pre-university education (6 years), followed by a research university.

*These are standard paths followed by most students but there are exceptions (indicated by arrows on the diagram).

Many secondary schools offer a mixed-level “bridge class” in the first year. After obtaining a diploma for a lower level, if the student’s grades are good enough, they may proceed to the next level. This educational pathway may take some additional time.

For a summary, watch this video produced by Nuffic entitled “School system in the Netherlands”: youtu.be/nes7RfuNqvU
4–6 years

Generally, at this age international children enrol in a Dutch school even if they don’t speak any Dutch. In a few cities, children need to attend a newcomers’ class to begin learning Dutch before they start at a local Dutch school.

6–12 years: Newcomers’ classes

Newcomers’ classes are available at many Dutch primary schools for students who have just arrived in the country and do not yet speak Dutch.

**Criteria for attending newcomers’ classes:**
- The child speaks little or no Dutch, and;
- The child has been in the Netherlands for less than one year.

**Enrolment procedure**
Children spend approximately one year in the newcomers’ class. After this, they join their local Dutch school, usually attending the same class as other children their age. Some newcomers’ classes request that you apply to a local Dutch school first, as this will be your future Dutch school. As policies vary from city to city, please check for local information.

12 years and over: International class

From the age of 12, children who are new to the Netherlands and don’t speak Dutch are placed in an Internationale Schakelklas (ISK). After enrolment, the child will be tested by the school to be taught at an appropriate level. Students stay in an ISK for approximately 1 or 2 years.

**Enrolment procedure**
Students can enrol at any time of the year and must be present for enrolment. Contact the school to make an appointment.

View a map of all newcomers’ classes and international classes in the Amsterdam Area and learn more about their individual enrolment procedures and policies: www.iamsterdam.com/newcomersclasses

International schools (2–18 years)

There are many international schools in and around the Amsterdam Metropolitan Area which offer an international curriculum at primary and/or secondary levels. Some are subsidised by the government and others are private. View all international schools in the Amsterdam Area, plus other major Dutch cities, on this map: www.iamsterdam.com/internationalschoolmap

You can also learn more about current enrolment availability for international schools in the Amsterdam Metropolitan Area: www.iamsterdam.com/internationalschoolavailability

Foreign language education and bilingual schools

By law, all schools have to start teaching English no later than in group 7 (10-11 years). Increasingly, schools are beginning early foreign language education, often from 4 years old (mostly in English).

A newer development is bilingual schools that split the curriculum between Dutch and (usually) English. For example, 30-50% of their curriculum may be taught in English. Bilingual secondary education is more commonly known in Dutch as tweetalig onderwijs or TTO. Check the list of bilingual secondary schools in the Netherlands: www.nuffic.nl/tto-scholen

Throughout the Netherlands, 19 primary schools have also been appointed as national bilingual pilot schools. A list of these schools can be found here: www.nuffic.nl/en/pilot-bilingual-primary-education

**Please note:** most primary and secondary bilingual schools want their students to speak Dutch before they enter their school. Please check their policies.
Useful websites

Find and compare schools in the Netherlands: www.scholenopdekaart.nl
School holidays schedule: www.schoolvakanties-nederland.nl
Newcomers’ classes: www.lowan.nl & www.iamsterdam.com/newcomersclasses
Higher education in the Netherlands: www.studyfinder.nl
Dutch Education System in the Amsterdam Area: www.iamsterdam.com/education
PDF version of this brochure: www.iamsterdam.com/educationbrochure
Video - School system in the Netherlands:youtu.be/hes7RfuNqvU

Budget & Finance
Apply for the childcare benefit: www.belastingdienst.nl
Apply for child benefits: www.svb.nl