



School life in Spain

Language, holidays and school hours



There are many considerations to take into account when choosing an appropriate school in Spain, not least the language of study. The only schools in Spain using English as the teaching language are foreign and international private schools. A number of multilingual international schools also teach pupils in the English and Spanish languages.

If your children attend any other school, they must study all subjects in Spanish. For most children, studying in Spanish isn't such a handicap as it may at first appear, particularly for those aged below ten. The majority of children adapt quickly to a new language and most become reasonably fluent within three to six months. However, not all children adapt equally well to a change of language and culture, particularly children aged ten or over, many of whom have great difficulties during their first year. Children who are already bilingual, such as Dutch and Scandinavian children, usually have little problem learning Spanish, while American and British children tend to find it more difficult. Spanish children are generally friendly towards foreign children, who often acquire a 'celebrity status' (particularly in rural schools) which helps their integration.

Some state schools provide intensive Spanish lessons ('bridging classes') for foreign children, although this depends on the school and the province or region (e.g. the regional government of Andalusia operates a scheme for non-Spanish primary pupils, some 6,000 children from 122 different countries, although the scheme is at present implemented only in Malaga and Almeria). It may be worthwhile enquiring about the availability of extra Spanish classes before choosing where to live. Foreign children are tested and put into a class suited to their level of Spanish, even if this means being taught with younger children. Children who don't read and write Spanish are often set back a year to compensate for their lack of Spanish and different academic background. Once a child has acquired a sufficient knowledge of spoken and written Spanish, he's assigned to a class appropriate to his age.

If your local school doesn't provide extra Spanish classes, your only choice will be to pay for private lessons or send your children to another (possibly private) school, where extra Spanish tuition is provided. Some parents send children to an English-speaking school for a year, followed by a move to a bilingual or Spanish school, while other parents believe it's better to throw their children in at the deep end, rather than introduce them gradually. It all depends on the character, ability and wishes of the child. Whatever you decide, it will help your children enormously if they have intensive Spanish lessons before arriving in Spain.

An added problem in some regions is that state schools teach most lessons in a regional language such as Basque, Catalan and Galician, although parents may be offered a choice of teaching language. For example, in Catalonia and Valencia (including the Costa Blanca) children aged between 3 and 12 are generally taught most subjects in Catalan except for Spanish which is taught for a few hours a week. Learning a regional language can be a huge problem, not only for foreign children, but also for Spanish-speaking children. However, immersion courses in the local language are usually offered to Spanish-speaking children. If you live in an area where education is dominated by a regional language, you may need to consider educating your child at a private school.

School Hours in Spain

School hours vary from school to school, but are usually from 9am until 4pm with a one-hour break for lunch, although an increasing number of schools don't have a lunch break and finish classes at 2pm. Lessons are usually divided into teaching periods of 45 minutes. Some schools offer school lunches, although many children bring a packed lunch or go home for lunch if they live nearby. Most schools provide a subsidised or free bus service to take children to and from their homes in outlying regions. Some schools are now opening early (e.g. at 8am) and providing activities after school until

5 or 6pm in an attempt to make childcare provision easier for working parents.

School Holidays in Spain

The academic year in Spain runs from mid-September to mid-June, with the main holidays at Christmas, Easter and the long summer break. Spanish schoolchildren have very long school holidays (*vacaciones escolares*) compared with those in many other countries. The school year is made up of three terms, each averaging around 11 weeks. Terms are fixed and are generally the same throughout the country, although they may be modified in autonomous regions to take account of local circumstances and special events (such as local fiestas).

Some provinces (e.g. Malaga) also include a week's holiday in the middle of the spring term (usually in February), known as 'white week' (*semana blanca*). Pupils transferring from primary to secondary school are sometimes given an additional two weeks' summer holiday, which usually includes an 'end of school' trip (*viaje de estudios*) with fellow pupils. Schools are also closed on public holidays when they fall within term time.

School holiday dates are published by schools and local communities well in advance, thus allowing parents plenty of time to schedule family holidays. Normally, you aren't permitted to withdraw a child from classes during the school term, except for visits to a doctor or dentist, when the teacher should be informed in advance.

This article is an extract from *Living and Working in Spain*.

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