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Abolishing the Ninth Grade: The Pros and Cons of Education Reform

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Abstract

The debate over abolishing the ninth grade is largely based on the mistaken assumption that removing the final year of primary school would automatically make education shorter and less expensive. If nine years of compulsory schooling are retained, the reform would primarily mean shifting one year from primary to secondary schools. The history of the Czech education system also shows that the number of years spent in primary school and the length of compulsory schooling are not the same thing. International comparisons further indicate that Czechia is among the countries with a relatively short period of compulsory schooling. The debate should therefore focus not only on abolishing the ninth grade, but on a more comprehensive reform. One possible option is an 8+4 model, consisting of eight years of primary education followed by four years of compulsory secondary education.

Key Takeaways

- Abolishing the ninth grade does not mean shorter compulsory schooling: If nine years remain compulsory, the ninth year would simply move to secondary school. The reform itself would therefore not deliver the suggested billions in savings.
- Czechia does not have unusually long compulsory schooling: With nine compulsory years, Czechia is among the countries with a relatively short period of compulsory education.
- The 8+4 model as an alternative: Eight years of primary education could be followed by four years of compulsory secondary education, giving students more opportunities to specialise without leaving compulsory education prematurely.

Introduction

At first glance, the debate over the future of the ninth grade may seem like a simple question: do Czech children need nine years of primary school, or would eight be enough? In reality, the issue is much broader. Proposals to abolish the ninth grade often conflate two different things: the structure of primary education and the length of compulsory schooling. This assumption has a major impact on arguments about potential savings, young people entering the labour market earlier, and supposed inspiration from education systems abroad.

This analysis therefore begins by placing the current debate in its political and historical context. It examines how the role of the ninth grade in the Czech education system has changed over time, the arguments for and against its abolition, and how the Czech system compares with other OECD countries. Finally, it raises a broader question: should education policy really aim to shorten compulsory schooling, or should Czechia consider moving in the opposite direction, given the needs of its economy and the high rate of secondary education completion?

The Current Debate on Abolishing the Ninth Grade

Over the summer, the debate over the future of the ninth grade in Czech primary schools resurfaced. The possibility of abolishing it was raised by Tomio Okamura, Speaker of the Chamber of Deputies and leader of the SPD. “I propose abolishing the ninth grade of primary school, as is the case in Germany, Poland and Hungary. According to economists, this change would save the state budget CZK 50 billion a year without any demonstrable decline in the quality of education. It would also reduce costs for families and allow young people to enter the labour market earlier.” (Okamura 2026).

The proposal was subsequently supported by Prime Minister and ANO chairman Andrej Babiš. “My view is that eight grades would be enough. The timing is important, as two-year groups would finish at the same time, so we need to consider what opportunities would be available to those students. We have an analysis, and we will look into it. Students spend an awfully long time studying, including at university. I studied for four years. Overall, education takes far too long.” He also argued that “common sense tells us that the state, schools and parents would save money”, while stressing that this was his personal view rather than the position of his party or the governing coalition (Hronová 2026).

The proposal was criticised not only by the opposition but also by members of the government. Matěj Ondřej Havel, leader of TOP 09 and chairman of the Chamber of Deputies Committee on Science, Education, Youth and Sport, described it as a populist gesture, while ODS MP Renáta Zajíčková called it an ill-conceived proposal (iRozhlas 2026a; Křovák 2026). Education Minister Robert Plaga of ANO firmly rejected Okamura’s claim that the reform would save CZK 50 billion: “I am certainly open to a substantive debate on greater flexibility and shorter university studies, extending pre-school education, or changes to primary and secondary education. However, education cannot be viewed solely through the lens of potential savings, especially when those savings are unrealistic and potentially very distant. The interests of children must come first, which means high-quality education and, as a result, long-term benefits for society as a whole.” (Plaga 2026).

Following a meeting with Prime Minister Babiš, the minister said that the debate over abolishing the ninth grade had been put on hold. “I think the conclusion is that it is not on the agenda, because we clarified that the claim that it would bring immediate savings is a dead end. Moreover, it is simply not true. (...) What may look like a summer storm, with an immediate decision to ‘throw everything out and start all over again’, is not what is happening. I can reassure everyone of that, also on the basis of my meeting with the prime minister,” he said (iRozhlas 2026b).

The proposal to abolish the ninth grade was also criticised by education experts from EDUin, PAQ Research and IDEA at CERGE-EI. According to their assessment, shortening primary education would

not automatically generate savings or make the system more efficient. On the contrary, it could worsen educational outcomes for some students (ČTK 2026).

The Ninth Grade Over Time

The debate over the ninth grade is not new to the Czech education system. In former Czechoslovakia, the ninth grade was introduced, later abolished, reinstated and eventually replaced once again by an eight-year primary school system. The current nine-year primary school system is therefore not a historical constant, but the result of several previous reforms.

Nine years of compulsory schooling were first introduced by Education Act No. 95/1948 Coll. as part of the unified school system. Primary education was divided into two stages, with the ninth grade becoming part of compulsory schooling. The aim was to create a more unified education system and extend general education for children regardless of their social background.

However, when the education system was reorganised in 1953, nine-year compulsory schooling was abolished, and compulsory education was shortened to eight years. One of the reasons behind this change was an effort to prepare young people for vocational education and employment more quickly. An earlier transition to vocational education was intended to better reflect the needs of the economy at the time.

This model did not last long. Education Act No. 186/1960 Coll. reintroduced nine years of compulsory schooling and established the nine-year primary school. However, this system also underwent further changes. In the second half of the 1970s, another major reform shortened primary school to eight years. From 1978, pupils therefore attended eight years of primary school, while compulsory schooling was extended to ten years. Pupils generally completed the final two years at a secondary school, secondary vocational school or another type of school.

The transformation of the education system after 1989 gradually brought back the ninth grade and led to a reassessment of the early differentiation of pupils. An amendment to the Education Act, No. 171/1990 Coll., therefore, began the gradual reintroduction of the ninth grade. The transition was not immediate. At first, the ninth grade often served as a transitional year for pupils who did not continue to secondary school after the eighth grade. Those who were admitted to secondary school could leave primary school after the eighth grade. As a result, some pupils who attended primary school in the early 1990s completed only eight years before moving on to secondary school.

From the mid-1990s, the ninth grade became a standard part of Czech primary education, gradually creating the system in place today. Nine years of compulsory schooling became the general rule, although some pupils may transfer to multi-year grammar schools after the fifth or seventh grade. These pupils must still complete their compulsory schooling at the new type of school.

The Ninth Grade and Compulsory Schooling

From the outset, the debate over abolishing the ninth grade has conflated two different issues: the number of years spent in primary school and the length of compulsory schooling. This confusion is one of the main problems with the current debate.

If Czechia retained the current nine years of compulsory schooling but shortened primary school to eight years, the ninth year would not disappear. Pupils would simply complete it at another type of school, such as a secondary school or vocational school.

This distinction is also crucial to the argument about potential savings. If the state is still required to provide nine years of compulsory education, it cannot simply “save” the cost of educating an entire

year group. Instead, much of the expenditure would merely shift from one part of the education system to another (iRozhlas 2026b).

It is therefore important to distinguish between two possible reforms. The first would abolish the ninth grade as part of primary school while retaining nine years of compulsory schooling. The second would actually shorten compulsory schooling from nine to eight years. These options would have very different implications for funding, secondary school capacity, the age at which pupils enter vocational education, and their future educational pathways.

In any case, the arguments in favour of an eight-year primary school system are not entirely new, nor are the arguments that led to the reintroduction of the ninth grade.

Arguments for Abolishing the Ninth Grade

The main argument for abolishing the ninth grade is that pupils could move into vocational and professional education earlier. This principle also shaped historical reforms that introduced an eight-year primary school system in Czechoslovakia. The argument still has some relevance today. Not all pupils need the same length of general education, and some fourteen- or fifteen-year-olds already know whether they want to pursue a technical, healthcare, business or skilled trade. For these pupils, another year of relatively general education may be less motivating than the opportunity to start developing practical and vocational skills earlier. A longer period of general education does not in itself guarantee higher quality. If much of the ninth grade is devoted to preparing for entrance examinations or revising previously covered material, it is reasonable to ask whether some of this time could be used more effectively.

Another argument is that young people could begin vocational training earlier and subsequently enter the labour market sooner. If some general education could be effectively integrated into the first years of secondary vocational schools, abolishing the ninth grade would not necessarily mean a lower standard of education. Instead, it could create a more flexible system in which pupils develop general and vocational skills at the same time. In the long term, completing vocational training earlier could also allow young people to enter employment sooner and become economically active at a younger age. The potential benefits may therefore come not only from immediate savings in education spending, but also from longer-term economic gains (Hronová 2026).

Supporters of the reform could also argue that vocational schools should not automatically be seen as unable to provide high-quality general education. The issue may lie not in the type of school, but in its curriculum, the quality of teaching and its ability to combine general and vocational subjects. If implemented as part of a broader reform, the general education component of secondary vocational education could be strengthened. Abolishing the ninth grade would therefore not necessarily mean less education, but rather a different distribution of education across the school system.

Arguments Against Abolishing the Ninth Grade

The strongest argument against the proposal is that if nine years of compulsory schooling are retained, abolishing the ninth grade would not in itself deliver the promised savings. One year of education would not disappear; it would simply move from primary to secondary schools. This would require changes in school capacity, staffing, buildings, curricula and funding. According to economist Daniel Münich, it is therefore unrealistic to expect straightforward savings amounting to tens of billions of Czech crowns (Münich 2026).

Münich also points to a broader issue: the future labour market is likely to require a broader rather than narrower range of skills. Critical thinking, digital and media literacy, mathematics, language skills and the ability to adapt to technological change are becoming increasingly important.

The development of artificial intelligence further reinforces this trend. In this context, shortening general education too early could be counterproductive (Münich 2026).

Another concern is the age at which pupils would have to decide on their future educational path. If the transition to secondary school took place a year earlier, fourteen-year-olds would have to make decisions about their future even earlier than they do today. Not everyone at this age is mature enough to realistically assess their abilities, interests and future opportunities. The risk is greater for children who lack sufficient support at home when making these decisions.

This also highlights the social dimension of the reform. The earlier a child has to choose between a grammar school, vocational school and vocational training, the greater the influence of their family background may be. Well-informed and educated parents are better able to assess the available schools, help their children prepare for entrance examinations or pay for private tutoring. The ninth grade, by contrast, can provide additional time for pupils to mature and help reduce some of these differences (Hronová 2026).

Experts also point out that abolishing the ninth grade would not in itself address problems with entrance examinations or pupil motivation. If the current ninth grade is too focused on preparing for entrance examinations, changing the admissions system may be a better solution than removing an entire school year. Otherwise, the problem would simply shift to a younger age. Pupils would prepare for entrance examinations a year earlier, potentially increasing the pressure on them.

Abolishing the ninth grade could therefore worsen educational outcomes for some pupils. Any reform must address the education system as a whole rather than simply remove one school year. The situation would be particularly challenging in vocational education, where schools would need to determine how to incorporate some of the general education that pupils currently receive in primary school (ČTK 2026).

Compulsory Education: How Czechia Compares

When assessing the proposal to abolish the ninth grade, it is useful to look beyond Czechia. International comparisons show that the Czech system is not unusual in terms of the length of compulsory education. In fact, it is among the systems with a relatively shorter period of compulsory schooling. At the same time, countries differ considerably in how they combine the length of compulsory education, the structure of primary and secondary schools, and the age at which pupils begin to follow different educational pathways.

According to OECD data, compulsory education in Czechia normally lasts nine years. The same applies, for example, to Estonia, Japan, South Korea, Latvia, Greece, Slovenia and Sweden. In many other OECD countries, however, compulsory education lasts longer. Ten years is the standard in countries such as Denmark, France, Ireland, Iceland, Canada, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Hungary, Norway, New Zealand, Slovakia, Spain and Switzerland. In some countries, compulsory education even includes one or more years of upper secondary education. According to the OECD, in around three-fifths of the education systems covered, at least one year of upper secondary education is part of compulsory full-time education (OECD 2025; MŠMT 2025).

Germany, which Tomio Okamura explicitly cited as an example to support his proposal, is particularly interesting in this respect. The German system cannot simply be described as one in which “there is no ninth grade”. The length of compulsory schooling varies between federal states and in some cases exceeds nine years. According to the Standing Conference of the Ministers of Education and Cultural Affairs, full-time compulsory schooling lasts ten years in Berlin, Brandenburg, Bremen and Thuringia. In North Rhine-Westphalia, it lasts nine or ten years depending on the length of the education programme. The German example therefore primarily illustrates different ways of organising

educational pathways rather than simply demonstrating the advantages of an eight-year primary school system.

Even more important than the number of years is the amount of instruction pupils receive. According to the OECD, Czech pupils receive an average of 865 hours of compulsory instruction per year in lower secondary education, compared with an OECD average of 909 hours. Czechia is therefore not a country where pupils spend an unusually large amount of time in compulsory instruction at this stage of education. There are considerable differences between countries, showing that the number of years of compulsory education alone does not provide a complete picture of how much education pupils actually receive (OECD 2025; MŠMT 2025).

International comparisons therefore challenge the simple assumption that Czech children spend too long at school and that removing one school year is automatically the solution. OECD countries use different combinations of compulsory education, teaching hours and the age at which pupils begin to follow different educational pathways. Some systems maintain a longer period of general education, while others allow earlier specialisation but still require pupils to continue their education at secondary school.

This is precisely where the current debate becomes “lost in the assumption”. The ninth grade is not synonymous with nine years of compulsory schooling. Abolishing it could form part of a broader reform of the education system, but it would not constitute such a reform on its own.

The debate should therefore address the broader questions: should compulsory education be shorter or longer? What should it include? At what age should pupils enter vocational education? How can movement between different educational pathways be ensured, and how can we prevent a decision made at the age of fourteen from becoming a premature choice that is difficult to reverse? Only then does it make sense to consider changing the number of years spent in primary school.

Sometimes More Is More

The debate over the ninth grade raises a much more fundamental question: should Czechia be considering extending compulsory education rather than shortening it? If the aim is to raise educational attainment, prepare young people for a rapidly changing labour market and reduce early school leaving, would it not make more sense to keep young people in education for longer?

This would not be a radical change. Czechia already has a very high rate of secondary education completion. According to the latest data, around 94% of people aged 25–64 in Czechia have completed secondary education, compared with an OECD average of 79% (OECD 2026; Trading Economics 2026). Secondary education is already the norm in Czechia, so why not formally make it part of compulsory education?

If, however, the idea of abolishing the ninth grade were used as an opportunity for a broader reform, a much more ambitious 8+4 model could be considered: eight years of general primary education followed by four years of compulsory secondary education, whether general, vocational or apprenticeship-based. The ninth grade would, in effect, still be “abolished”.

Higher levels of education are generally associated with higher employment rates, productivity and earnings. The OECD explicitly points to a direct link between completing upper secondary education and young people’s position in the labour market. In Czechia, the unemployment rate among young adults without upper secondary education was 9.5% in 2024, compared with just 2.8% among those who had completed it (OECD 2025).

The 8+4 model would therefore represent a fundamental shift in the philosophy of the Czech education system. Rather than simply “removing” the ninth grade, it would shift the focus of compulsory education from primary to secondary school. Eight years of general primary education would be

followed by four years of compulsory secondary education, during which pupils could choose between different educational pathways.

Compulsory education would therefore not end at the age of fifteen but would continue until the completion of secondary education. A pupil interested in a skilled trade could develop practical skills. Another could continue in general education and prepare for university. Others could combine vocational education with practical training provided by an employer. Crucially, none of these pathways would mean the end of compulsory education at the age of fourteen or fifteen, ultimately benefiting society.

Tomio Okamura is right about one thing: the Czech education system needs change. But this does not automatically mean that abolishing the ninth grade is the answer. If the aim is genuine reform, the question should not be “eight or nine years of primary school?” but rather “how long should compulsory education last, and what should it offer children during that time?”

Conclusion

The debate over the ninth grade should not end with the question of whether to keep or abolish one year of primary school. This is too narrow a view of the issue. If the real goal is to make education more effective, better prepare young people for the labour market and provide more flexible educational pathways, the structure of the system itself needs to change.

The 8+4 model offers one possible approach. After eight years of general primary education, pupils would move on to secondary schools, where they would complete another four years of compulsory education, whether general, vocational or practically oriented. The aim would therefore not be to get young people out of education a year earlier, but to allow them to enter a more suitable educational pathway sooner while ensuring that they remain in education into adulthood.

Such a reform would also reflect the fact that secondary education is already the norm in Czechia. The question, therefore, is not simply whether the ninth grade is necessary. A more fundamental question is why its potential abolition should be used to shorten education rather than to restructure the system and extend compulsory education to twelve years. This is precisely the difference between simply making a cut and pursuing genuine reform.

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