

# WHERE WOULD YOU LIKE TO GO TO SCHOOL?

## A COMPARISON OF EDUCATION SYSTEMS IN THE US, UK AND THE CZECH REPUBLIC



Although the United States and Great Britain speak the same language and promote similar values, there are some differences between their education systems. What are schools like in the US and the UK and how do they compare to Czech schooling? We will examine these three systems and you can decide where students are better off.

### THE UNITED STATES

Similar to other countries, little children start their education with **kindergarten** between the ages of five and six. They are divided into groups and spend their time playing. Some children may attend pre-school from as early as three or four years. Parents have to pay for this pre-school education.

**Elementary/grade school** formally starts their **compulsory** education, and covers five grades/years. The **curriculum** is determined by a particular school district but usually essential subjects include English, math and science (where you learn what soap is made of, why the sky is blue and other basic facts from biology, physics and chemistry). On the daily schedule is also a little patriotic *Pledge of Allegiance* which children have to recite every morning before the start of their classes.

Most children go to public schools without **charge**, or they have a choice of private schools, which they must pay for. Students are graded on a system of A-F; with A being the best, and F meaning fail. There is no E grade, however.

In grade six students go to **Junior High/middle school** and in the ninth grade they change to high school. **High School** includes four grades. Each has a special name in American English. First year students are called freshmen, second year sophomores, then juniors and finally seniors. This usually lasts until students are 18-years-old, but some states allow children to leave school as young as 16. Compared to other countries, most American students are in school much longer. High school offers academic lessons as well as more **vocational** courses such as mechanics, computers etc. You don't have to be afraid of unexpected oral examinations in

front of the whole class as in the CR; most of the testing takes place in the form of quizzes, essays and other projects. When students are juniors, they take the SAT test (Scholastic Aptitude Test). This four-hour test quizzes students on their language, writing, math and critical thinking skills, among other things. The scores on this national test determine whether you succeed when applying to the university of your choice. The completion of high school is celebrated with a graduation ceremony in which students dress in long **gowns** in colors of their alma mater, receive their diplomas and **toss** their funny flat hats – called mortarboards – in the air. At the end of every school year students attend a dance, called the prom, which is an opportunity to dress up and have a good time.

There are more than 2,000 **universities** and **colleges** ranging from private elite institutions such as Yale or Harvard, known as 'Ivy League schools', to state universities or local community colleges. There you can earn your Bachelor's and then Master's degree.

A Bachelor's degree is designed to take four years, but some students take longer. This is also sometimes called your undergraduate degree. After that students continue with their education for about another two years to earn their graduate, or Master's degree. If they really like studying, they can keep going and earn their PhD or doctorate. They can then put Dr in front of their name; but it doesn't mean they are a medical doctor!

### GREAT BRITAIN

British children begin their schooling quite early; very small children aged three and four are sent to **nursery school** or a **playgroup**. All the fun ends at the age of five when they have to start attending primary school which can be either state-funded or private. Both types of school have to follow a prescribed national curriculum. **Primary school** is

divided into two cycles: **infant schools** where children acquire basic skills like writing, reading and maths. At seven they go on to **junior school** with more complex subjects such as history, geography and science.

The transfer to **secondary school** takes place at the age of 11. Here, pupils also have

Republic, exams are marked in letters, usually from A (very good) to E (bad). U means fail.

If pupils don't want an academic education after GCSEs, they can choose a vocational one. There are **apprenticeships**, where young people learn a trade as they work. There are also vocational courses, where

which you have to pay back once you start earning a certain amount of money.

## THE CZECH REPUBLIC

Likewise, the Czech education system operates on three levels: **primary, secondary and tertiary**.

At the age of six Czech children have to enter **nine-year elementary school**. Most schools are financed by the state. However, there are also private schools where you pay for tuition. By law, the school-leaving age is 15. For those willing to continue, there are many secondary education alternatives.

The traditional **secondary school (grammar school)** prepares students for university and lasts four years or longer if the students have **enrolled** earlier from elementary school. The studies may be focused more on humanities as well as science. All the secondary studies finish with a final school-leaving exam in the fourth year, which comprises four subjects, two compulsory: Czech and a foreign language and two **electives**.

Apart from grammar schools, students may attend **secondary business schools** or agriculture schools. For the talented, there are conservatories where you can study music or acting. Another option is **secondary vocational schools**, which train young people for jobs of bakers, mechanics, bricklayers or waiters.

In order to study at university, students have to pass demanding **entrance exams**. Education at universities is free of charge in the Czech Republic. The most popular subjects include humanities, law or medicine studied at Charles University in Prague or Masaryk University in Brno. The universities offer three-year-bachelor programmes as well as five-year-master programmes which finish with a final state exam and a **thesis defense**.

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to follow a national curriculum, including a foreign language and a broader range of subjects, taught by different teachers. They take GCSEs (General Certificate of Secondary Education) that consists of eight or nine exams in maths, English, a foreign language, a science and a humanities subject. Sometimes bright pupils can enter more than nine GCSEs. At the age of sixteen, pupils are free to leave school. If they carry on with their education, they study for two more years in an institution called a **sixth form college**. Usually, they take four subjects in the first year, which ends with an exam. If they pass, they have AS-Levels in these subjects and can go on to study three of them at A-Level (Advanced GCSEs). Unlike in the Czech

pupils go to school and take exams in practical subjects such as mechanics or painting and decorating.

After the age of eighteen, most pupils find jobs or go to university. There are a lot of universities in the UK offering bachelor's degrees for either three or four years. After receiving their degree, a person is a graduate and can **pursue** a master's degree in science or arts. Most people in the UK have to fund part of their university education. This is similar to the US. Universities **are subsidised** by the government, but can't survive on the money they get, so they charge **tuition fees**. If you come from a poor background you may be excused all or part of your tuition fees. You can also apply for a loan from the government,

## VOCABULARY

**schooling** – školní vzdělávání  
**compulsory** [kəm'pʌls(ə)rɪ] – povinný  
**curriculum** [kə'rikjʊləm] – učební plán, kurikulum  
**charge** [tʃɑ:dʒ] – školné  
**vocational** [və(ʊ)'keɪʃ(ə)n(ə)l] – odborný  
**gown** [gaʊn] – talár  
**to toss** – házet  
**apprenticeship** [ə'prɛntɪsɪp] – učňovský obor  
**to pursue sth** [pə'sju:z] – usilovat o  
**are subsidised** ['sʌbsɪdaɪzd] – jsou dotované  
**tuition fee** [tju:'ɪʃ(ə)n] – školné  
**primary** ['praɪm(ə)rɪ] – základní

**secondary** ['sek(ə)nd(ə)rɪ] – střední  
**tertiary** ['tɜ:ʃ(ə)rɪ] – vysokoškolské, terciární  
**to enrol** – přihlásit se  
**elective** [ɪ'lektɪv] – volitelný předmět  
**entrance exam** ['ɛntr(ə)ns ɪg'zæm] – přijímací zkouška  
**thesis defense** ['θɪ:sɪs dɪ'fens] – obhajoba diplomové práce

## GLOSSARY

**critical thinking skills** – learning to analyze, synthesize and evaluate ideas  
**alma mater** – a school or university which you attended

**undergraduate** – Bachelor's level of education, also a student preparing towards that level

**Ivy League schools** – a group of eight high-quality universities in the US (Harvard, Princeton etc.)

## BRE X AME

**child care** (BrE) x **day care** (AmE)  
**nursery school** (BrE) x **kindergarten** (AmE)  
**primary school** (BrE) x **grade school** (AmE)  
**secondary school** (BrE) x **high school** (AmE)  
**year** (BrE) x **grade** (applies only to elementary school and high school) (AmE)  
**university** (BrE) x **college** (AmE)

**college in Britain** – refers to a specialized further education institution, teacher's training college or to the sixth-form college – a state educational institution for students over 16  
**marks** (BrE) x **grades** (AmE)  
**maths** (BrE) x **math** (AmE)

## LANGUAGE POINT

Don't forget that some words change pronunciation when they are shifted from a noun to a verb, i.e. noun **a graduate** ['grædʒʊət] vs. verb **to graduate** ['grædʒʊert] or noun **an estimate** ['estɪmət] vs. verb **to estimate** ['estɪmət].