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ENGLISH EDUCATION

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# IN CLASS FROM AGE FOUR

## THE ENGLISH SCHOOL SYSTEM

**The English school system is very different from most European systems. Children start school earlier, take different exams and get different qualifications. It is constantly changing, but here's a quick introduction to the basics.**

Paul Farrington-Douglas (UK)

### School Age

Children start school early in England. Most start at four years old, and education is compulsory from age five until the age of 18. The English system makes a difference between *schooling* and *education*, though: all children have to stay in school until they are 16, but after that education can also take the form of job training, for example.

Education is divided by age: in general, **primary schools** are for children aged 4–11 and **secondary schools** are for children from 11–18. The last two years of secondary school (16–18) are known as **the sixth form** for historical reasons. Many schools combine both primary and secondary education, so you can stay for 13 years at the same school.

### The National Curriculum

The subjects you study and what you should learn at state schools are written down by the government in a **national curriculum**. The national curriculum is often controversial. It changes every year, sometimes quite dramatically. Occasionally, political ideology plays a part, especially in choosing what people should learn about in subjects like English literature and history. For example, there's a big debate at the moment about how children should learn about the British Empire, the slave trade and so on.

### Tests and Exams

All children in state schools have to take national tests at age 11, called **SATs**. These are supposed to just check the progress of the children, not to affect (= have influence on) their future. But since they affect a school's reputation, kids come under a lot of pressure to do well.

Until about the age of 14, all children in a school learn the same subjects. Then they choose their subjects for **GCSEs**, which are two-year exam courses. All children must do certain important subjects (English, maths and science) and there are some other rules – everyone has to take a modern foreign language, for example. Children can also choose extra subjects. Most kids take around 10 or 11 GCSEs. The exam period is pretty intense: it's not unusual to have around 25–30 hours of written exams at the end!

After the age of 16, you can stay at your school in the sixth form to take **A levels**,

## TYPES OF SCHOOL

There are many types of school, both state-funded (= paid for by the government) and private.

### COMPREHENSIVES

are the main kind of state-funded school. These are open to anyone: there is no entrance exam, though you do have to live near the school. They vary in quality a lot.

### GRAMMAR SCHOOLS

are state-funded schools that can choose their pupils based on the kids' abilities. When you are 11, you can take an exam that can get you into a grammar school. These schools used to be the main path to university for kids who didn't go to private schools. However, people felt it was unfair that children's futures could be fixed from as young as the age of 11, so the government stopped creating new grammar schools. Only 163 now remain in England, of around 3,500 state-funded secondary schools.

### ACADEMIES

are a new type of school, formed less than 20 years ago. They are paid for by the government but are run by independent organisations, like businesses. Most academies are similar to comprehensives and replaced schools that already existed, often because the old school failed to provide a good enough education. A few follow alternative education approaches, such as Montessori, or offer a religious approach (mostly Christian, but also Islamic, Sikh and so on).

### PRIVATE OR INDEPENDENT SCHOOLS

don't get money from the state. The very oldest and most expensive private schools are known as **public schools** because they were the first schools open to anyone (or at least, anyone rich!). The most famous public schools, such as Eton, where princes William and Harry studied, cost tens of thousands of pounds per year and are full of the children of the rich and powerful.



**It's not unusual to have around 25–30 hours of written exams during the exam period!**

which are also two-year courses, but are more in-depth and involve more independent study. They are mostly seen as preparation for **university**. Most people take three subjects, but some take two, four or even five. People apply to university while studying for A levels, and the grades they achieve affect which university will accept them.

At both GCSE and A level, you get a qualification certificate and a grade for each subject. These aren't given by the school but by national organisations called exam boards, which do all the exam marking. Until 2020, GCSE grades ran from A\*

(“A star”) to G, but now they are graded from 9–1, with a 9 as the highest mark. A levels are graded A\*–E. Feeling confused? Don't worry about it. So is everyone in England.

### Colleges

If you don't want to stay at your school in the sixth form, you can leave and go to a **college**. In British English, unlike American English, college is not a synonym for university. Colleges offer a wide range of both A levels and vocational (= practical, job-based) courses. If you want to study anything from cookery or hairdressing to electrical engineering or plumbing, college is where you start. Some people do go from college to university, but the main aim of a college is to prepare you for work.

If you don't even want to go to college, you can just do two years of **job training** to complete your education. Over 85% of 17 and 18-year-olds, though, go to sixth form or college.



## EDUCATION IN ENGLAND

- AGE 4–11** primary school
- AGE 11** SATs (national tests)
- AGE 11–18** secondary school
- AGE 14–16** GCSEs (two-year exam courses)
- AGE 16–18** sixth form, A levels (two-year exam courses) / college / job training



## CULTURE POINT

It's not the “British” education system. Since the 1990s, Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales have had their own parliaments, with powers in some areas but not others. Education is one of the areas where they do have power, and each of these countries has a different education system.

## DISCUSS

- What similarities are there between the English school system and the school system in your country? What is different?
- Which things about the English school system do you like / dislike? Why?