# The School Education in Great Britain

The aim of education in general is to develop to the full the talents of both children and adults for their own benefit and that of society as a whole. It is a large-scale investment in the future.

The educational system of Great Britain has developed for over a hundred years. It is a complicated system with wide variations between one part of the country and another. Three partners are responsible for the education service: central government – the Department of Education and Science (DES), local education authorities (LEAs), and schools themselves. The legal basis for this partnership is supplied by the 1944 Education Act.

The Department of Education and Science is concerned with the formation of national policies for education. It is responsible for the maintenance of minimum national standard of education. In exercising its functions the DES is assisted by Her Majesty’s Inspectorate. The primary functions of the Inspectors are to give professional advice to the Department, local education authorities, schools and colleges, and discuss day-to-day problems with them.

Local education authorities are charged with the provision and day-to-day running of the schools and colleges in their areas and the recruitment and payment of the teachers who work in them. They are responsible for the provision of buildings, materials and equipment. However, the choice of text-books and timetable are usually left to the headmaster. The content and method of teaching is decided by the individual teacher.

The administrative functions of education in each area are in the hands of a Chief Education Officer who is assisted by a deputy and other officials.

Until recently planning and organization were not controlled by central government. Each LEA was free to decide how to organize education in its own area. In 1988, however, the National Curriculum was introduced, which means that there is now greater government control over what is taught in schools. The aim was to provide a more balanced education. The new curriculum places greater emphasis on the more practical aspects of education. Skills are being taught which pupils will need for life and work.

The chief elements of the national Curriculum include a broad and balanced framework of study which emphasizes the practical applications of knowledge. It is based around the core subjects of English, mathematics and science ( biology, chemistry, etc.) as well as a number of other foundation subjects, including geography, history, technology and modern languages.

The education reform of 1988 also gave all secondary as well as larger primary schools responsibilities for managing the major part of their budgets, including costs of staff. Schools received the right to withdraw from local education authority control if they wished.

Together with the National Curriculum, a programme of Records of Achievements was introduced. This programme contains a system of new tests for pupils at the ages of 7, 11, 13 and 16. The aim of these tests is to discover any schools or areas which are not teaching to a high enough standard. But many believe that these tests are unfair because they reflect differences in home rather than in ability.

The great majority of children (about 9 million) attend Britain’s 30,500 state schools. No tuition fees are payable in any of them. A further 600,000 go to 2,500 private schools, often referred to as the “independent sector” where the parents have to pay for their children.

In most primary and secondary state schools boys and girls are taught together. Most independent schools for younger children are also mixed, while the majority of private secondary schools are single-sex.

State schools are almost all day schools, holding classes between Mondays and Fridays. The school year normally begins in early September and continues into the following July. The year is divided into three terms of about 13 weeks each.

Two-thirds of state schools are wholly owned and maintained by LEAs. The remainder are voluntary schools, mostly belonging to the Church of England or the Roman Catholic Church. They are also financed by LEAs.

Every state school has its own governing body (a board of governors), consisting of teachers, parents, local politicians, businessmen and members of the local community. Boards of governors are responsible for their school’s main policies, including the recruitment of the staff.

A great role is played by the Parent Teacher Association (PTA). Practically all parents are automatically members of the PTA and are invited to take part in its many activities. Parental involvement through the PTA and other links between parents and schools is growing . The PTA forms both a special focus for parents and much valued additional resources for the school. Schools place great value on the PTA as a further means of listening to parents and developing the partnership between home and school. A Parent’s Charter published by the Government in 1991 is designed to enable parents to take more informed decisions about their children’s education.

Compulsory education begins at the age of 5 in England, Wales and Scotland, and at the age of 4 in Northern Ireland. All pupils must stay at school until the age of 16. About 9 per cent of pupils in state schools remain at school voluntarily until the age of 18.

Education within the state school system comprises either two tiers (stages) – primary and secondary, or three tiers – first schools, middle schools and upper schools.

Nearly all state secondary schools are comprehensive, they embrace pupils from 11 to 18. The word “comprehensive” expresses the idea that the schools in question take all children in a given area without, selection.

**NURSERY EDUCATION.** Education for the under-fives, mainly from 3 to 5, is not compulsory and can be provided in **nursery schools** and **nursery classes** attached to primary schools. Although they are called schools, they give little formal education. The children spend most of their time in some sort of play activity, as far as possible of an educational kind. In any case, there are not enough of them to take all children of that age group. A large proportion of children at this beginning stage is in the private sector where fees are payable. Many children attend **pre-school playgroups**, mostly organized by parents, where children can go for a morning or afternoon a couple of times a week.

**PRIMARY EDUCATION.** The primary school usually takes children from 5 to 11. Over half of the primary schools take the complete age group from 5 to 11. The remaining schools take the pupils aged 5 to 7 – **infant schools**, and 8 to 11 – **junior schools**. However, some LEAs have introduced **first school**, taking children aged 5 to 8, 9 to 10. The first school is followed by the **middle school** which embraces children from 8 to 14. Next comes the **upper school** (the third tier) which keeps middle school leavers until the age of 18. This three-stage system (first, middle and upper) is becoming more and more popular in a growing number of areas. The usual age for transfer from primary to secondary school is 11.

**SECONDARY EDUCATION.** Secondary education is compulsory up to the age of 16, and pupils may stay on at school voluntarily until they are 18. Secondary schools are much larger than primary schools and most children (over 80 per cent) go to comprehensive schools.

There are three categories of comprehensive schools:

1. schools which take pupils from 11 to 18,
2. schools which embrace middle school leavers from 12, 13or 14 to 18, and
3. schools which take the age group from 11 to 16.

The pupils in the latter group, wishing to continue their education beyond the age of 16 (to be able to enter university) may transfer to the sixth form of an 11-18 school, to a **sixth-form** college or to a tertiary college which provide complete courses of secondary education. The tertiary college offers also part-time vocational courses.

Comprehensive schools admit children of all abilities and provide a wide range of secondary education for all or most of the children in a district.

In some areas children moving from state primary to secondary education are still selected for certain types of school according to their current level of academic attainment. There are **grammar** and **secondary modern schools**, to which children are allowed at the age of 11 on the basis of their abilities. Grammar schools provide a mainly academic education for the 11 to 18 age group. Secondary modern schools offer a more general education with a practical bias up to the minimum school-leaving age of 16.

Some local education authorities run **technical schools** (11 – 18). They provide a general academic education, but place particular emphasis on technical subjects. However, as a result of comprehensive reorganization the number of grammar and secondary modern schools fell radically by the beginning of the 1990s.

There are **special schools** adapted for the physically and mentally handicapped children. The compulsory period of schooling here is from 5 to 16. A number of handicapped pupils begin younger and stay on longer. Special schools and their classes are more generously staffed than ordinary schools and provide, where possible. Physiotherapy, speech therapy and other forms of treatment. Special schools are normally maintained by state, but a large proportion of special boarding schools are private and fee-charging.

About 5 per cent of Britain’s children attend **independent** or **private schools** outside the free state sector. Some parents choose to pay for private education in spite of the existence of free state education. These schools charge between 300 pounds a term for day nursery pupils and 3,500 pounds a term for senior boarding-school pupils.

All independent schools have to register with the Department of Education and Science and are subject to inspection be Her Majesty’s Inspecrorate, which is absolutely independent. About 2,300 private schools provide primary and secdondary education.

Around 550 most privileged and expensive schools are commonly known as **public schools**.

The principal examinations taken by secondary school pupils at the age of 16 are those leading to the General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE). It aims to assess pupils’ ability to apply their knowledge to solving practical problems. It is the minimum school leaving age, the level which does not allow school-leavers to enter university but to start work or do some vocational training.

The chief examinations at the age of 18 are leading to the General Certificate of Education Advanced level (GCE A-level). It enables sixth-formers to widen their subject areas and move to higher education. The systems of examinations are co-ordinated and supervisedby the Secondary Examination Council.

Admission to universities is carried out by examinationor selection (interview). Applicants for places in nearly all the universities are sent initially to the Universities and Colleges Admission Service (UCAS). In the application an applicant can list up to five universities or colleges in order to preference. Applications must be sent to the UCAS in the autumn term of the academic year preceding that in which the applicant hopes to be admitted. The UCAS sends a copy to aech of the universities or colleges named. Each univesity selects its own students.

The overall pupil-teacher ratio in state primary and secondary schools is about 18 to 1, on of the most favourable in the world.