

Secondary schools



In England, children must continue in full-time education until they are 16 - though now a majority stay on after that.

The "modernisation of the comprehensive system" has been one of the key themes of the government's campaign to raise standards in education.

In state-sector secondary schools there has been increasing diversification, with the emergence of "beacon schools", "specialist schools" and the setting up of action zones in areas of educational underachievement.

By February 2001 there were 536 specialist schools in England out of a total of 3,500 schools - offering advanced teaching in languages, technology, sports and arts - with a further 72 given the go-ahead.

To qualify, they must raise £50,000 in sponsorship, prepare four-year plans with targets in teaching and learning in the specialist subject area, and involve other schools and the wider community.

New specialisms added to the initiative in 2001 were business and enterprise, science, and engineering.

The government intends that almost half of all secondary schools should specialise by 2006.

There has been particular attention paid to under-performing schools, with groups of primary and secondary schools being brought together with business and community partners in education action zones. These are given extra funding and support to pioneer ways of making improvements.

Schools which are seen to be beyond recovery have been closed and given a "fresh start", in which a new institution is opened on the site of the failing school - usually with a new name, headteacher and staff.

The new emphasis is on raising standards for 11 to 14 year olds, with the literacy and numeracy strategies that have been used in primary schools being extended to the lower secondary years.

The government's targets are that, by 2004, 75% of 14 year olds will be expected to reach Level 5 - the level expected for their age - in English, maths, and information and communication technology (ICT). The figure for science is 70%.

By 2007, ministers want to see 85% of pupils achieving Level 5 in English, maths and ICT, and 80% in science.

Selection

A large majority of the three million secondary school pupils in England attend non-selective comprehensives, but there are a number of ongoing disputes concerning selection.

There are 164 grammar schools in England, taking pupils who have passed an 11-plus exam. But in response to calls for the abolition of these remaining grammars, the government introduced regulations for local ballots of parents that will determine whether schools remain selective.

So far there has been only one ballot, early in 2000 - when parents in Ripon voted to keep their grammar school.

A ballot can be triggered only when there are enough names of parents gathered in a petition, with the threshold number calculated by a complicated (and disputed) formula laid down by the government.

Schools that have "partial selection" - where a proportion of pupils are admitted on the grounds of ability -

Secondary schools in England

3,500 schools
3,000,000 pupils
87% pupils attend comprehensive schools
1,000 specialist schools by 2004
788 independent schools
A-level reforms introduced September 2000
Revised curriculum introduced from September 2000

have also been the subject of disputes. These are settled by the school admissions watchdog - the Office of the Schools Adjudicator - which itself has been the subject of legal challenges.

New categories

For mainstream state secondary schools a revised framework was introduced in September 1999. In a reform that removed the "opted-out" grant-maintained sector, the government introduced four new categories of school.

Community schools - the largest category of mainstream comprehensives, largely under the control of the local education authority.

Foundation schools - exercising a greater degree of independence, the governing body is the 'employer' and sets admissions policies.

Voluntary-aided schools - such as church schools, in which the governing body sets admissions policies and in which the charitable foundation which 'owns' the school makes a financial contribution to its running.

Voluntary-controlled schools - these are owned by charitable foundations, but the local authority employs staff and sets admissions policies.

In 2000 the government came up with another scheme to revive flagging schools: City academies.

They are being established with "substantial" capital investment from business or voluntary, religious or private foundations. The state pays the running costs.

They have the right to operate their own curriculum, and freedom to "reinvent" the school day and pay their teachers more.

The government said they would be distinguishable from the Conservatives' 15 "city technology colleges" - though created under the same legislation - by a wider range of sponsors.

Private

In addition to state schools, there are around 790 fee-paying independent secondary schools, which are not required to follow the national curriculum, but which must register with the Department for Education and which are subject to inspections for the purposes of registration.

Pupils in state and independent schools are required to stay at school until the age of 16 - with the starting age of secondary school usually at the age of 11.

Where local authorities operate a "middle school" system, pupils begin secondary school at the age of 12 or 13.

Taken from: http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/education/uk_systems/115872.stm

Primary schools



Primary education in England begins at age five. Local education authorities must provide all children with a school place no later than the start of the term after their fifth birthday.

The precise age at which schools take children varies from one area to another, but it is common for children to go to school at the start of the term in which they will become five.

A growing trend is for schools to admit new pupils at just one point in the year, which often sees them take children who will be five within the coming school year - September to August; under this system, summer-born children start school in the autumn, not long after their fourth birthdays.

Structure

Primary schools consist mainly of infant schools for children aged five to seven, junior schools for those aged seven to 11, and combined junior and infant schools for both age groups.

First schools in some parts of England cater for ages five to 10 as the first stage of a three-tier system: First, middle and secondary. Middle schools cover different age ranges between eight and 14 and usually lead on to comprehensive upper schools.

Class sizes

The government says research evidence suggests that smaller infant classes enable teachers to spend more time identifying each child's individual needs and difficulties, and offering the help they need to master the basics.

The average class sizes of five, six and seven year olds suggest that the government is on target to fulfil its promise of classes of 30 or below.

But some parents have complained that reducing class sizes has worsened the problem of trying to get places for their children in popular, over-subscribed schools.

Average infant class sizes, 2001

Year 1:	26.1
Year 2:	25.9
Year 3:	27.8

Test targets

The government has also set targets for levels of literacy and numeracy, on the grounds that a child who does not learn to read well and handle numbers early on runs the risk of falling further behind in all subjects.

So, in England, by 2002: On average 80% of 11 year olds should be reaching the standard expected for their age in English and 75% in maths.

In 2000, the equivalent figures were 75% (English) and 72% (maths).

There are also wide variations between local education authorities across England.

Since September 1998, all primary schools in England have been strongly recommended - it is not mandatory - to devote at least an hour each day to literacy, with a similar daily numeracy session from September 1999.

Taken from: http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/education/93484.stm