

What is the Secondary School Curriculum?

The vast majority of secondary schools follow the [National Curriculum](#), the programme of study set by the Government. However, academies and free schools are free to choose their own curriculums. Despite this, in reality most do not.

How do secondary schools choose which subjects they teach or which topics they should cover? Are they free to pick whatever they want or are there laws which limit their options? Well, some can choose their own subjects but most secondary schools follow the National Curriculum.

What is the National Curriculum?

The National Curriculum is a programme of study, set by the Government, which says what children of different age groups should be taught and what level they should reach.

The National Curriculum often changes. Most of its current format was introduced in 2014, although some small changes were made a year later.

The National Curriculum applies to all children in local authority-maintained schools. So, from the age of 5 until they are 16, most children's learning follows the guidelines set by the Government. This article will look at how the National Curriculum affects children in secondary schools.

The National Curriculum was first introduced in 1988. It applied to all state schools in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, with Scotland choosing its own curriculum. Since then, education has become a matter for devolved government and the National Curriculum now only applies to English schools.

Why do we need the National Curriculum?

The purpose of the National Curriculum is to standardise education throughout the country. It ensures that children of the same age are taught the same things, regardless of which state-school they attend. This helps when families move between towns. If all schools cover the same topics, then a change between them should not affect a child's education.

Apart from subjects taught and topics covered, the National Curriculum also sets out how children should be tested and the standards they should achieve. This helps to compare schools - if they are all teaching the same things and testing in the same way, how their students' perform can be easily assessed.

Must Every Child's Education Follow the National Curriculum?

Although the majority of secondary schools follow the National Curriculum, there are some which do not. All local authority-maintained schools have to teach the National Curriculum. However, private, academy and free schools are all free to teach their own curriculum of chosen subjects and topics.

Private or independent schools receive no government funding and so are exempt from the National Curriculum. Government funded free schools and academies also don't have to follow the National Curriculum.

In addition, if you choose to educate your child at home you don't have to follow the National Curriculum. However, you would be wise to do so. The material it covers will help, especially when it comes to the all-important GCSE exams.

The secondary school curriculum is the programme of study set by the Government.

What are Key Stages?

The National Curriculum is divided into four key stages (KS1 to KS4). Key Stages 1 and 2 are taught in primary schools. In secondary schools Key Stage 3 is taught to children in Years 7, 8 and 9 and Key Stage 4 to pupils in Years 10 and 11. At the end of every key stage pupils are tested and assessed to see how well they are doing and whether they have reached the desired standard.

Which Subjects are Taught in Secondary Schools?

The National Curriculum sets out which subjects secondary school pupils are taught. There are 3 'core' subjects which must be taught in both Key Stage 3 and Key Stage 4 - maths, science and English. There are a further 9 'foundation' subjects which must be taught in KS3:

- History
- Geography
- Modern foreign languages
- Art and design
- Music
- Design and technology
- Physical education (which must include swimming)
- Computing (often called information and communication technology or ICT)
- Citizenship

Religious education is also a subject on the National Curriculum and all state maintained schools have to teach it. Lessons should cover a range of religions, not just one. However, if parents don't wish their child to be taught about religious beliefs different to their own, they can choose to exclude their children from these lessons.

All secondary pupils in local authority-maintained schools must also be taught sex and relationship education. However, if parents don't wish their children to have these lessons they can withdraw them from the classes.

In KS4 the curriculum is less defined. The 3 core subjects of maths, science and English must be taken by all pupils, along with computing and PE. However, all other subjects are optional.

What are 'Entitlement Areas'?

Schools must provide access to a minimum of one course in each of 4 'entitlement areas' for KS4 pupils. They must also make it possible for pupils to take one course in all 4 of these if they wish to do so. The 4 entitlement areas are:

- The arts (art and design, music, dance, drama and media arts)
- Design and technology (electronics, food technology, graphics, resistant materials, systems and control, textiles and product design)
- The humanities (geography and history)
- Modern foreign languages (French, German, Spanish etc.)

Optional subjects for KS4 vary between schools. Some subjects may be restricted and others (particular languages for example) may not be offered at all.

How are Secondary School Children Assessed?

How pupils do in KS3 will affect what subjects they choose for KS4's GCSEs. However, there are no national tests taken in KS3. Instead, children's coursework is assessed and taken into consideration along with, in some cases, in-school tests.

Schools have a duty to keep parents informed about how their child is doing. There should be regular parents' evenings and school report cards so you always know how well your child is performing.

At the end of KS4 the most important assessment of secondary education takes place – GCSEs.

What are GCSEs?

GCSEs are 2-year courses of study taken during years 10 and 11 (KS4). At the end of the course students are graded in exams and by assessment of their coursework. They were brought in as a replacement for O Levels and CSEs in 1986, and the first GCSE exams were taken in 1988.

How many GCSEs do Children Have to Take?

Pupils usually take a number of subjects at GCSE level. Each school determines the number of GCSEs its pupils can take, which could be as many as 12 or as few as 7. Aside from the obligatory maths, science and English, students select their remaining GCSE options in Year 9. What they choose will have bearings on their future so encourage your child to pick subjects needed for any chosen career as well as ones that interest them.

How are GCSEs Graded?

In the past GCSE students were given marks between A* (the highest) and G (the lowest). Scores below a G were marked as U for 'ungraded'. However, things have recently changed. Grades now range from 9 (highest) to 1 (lowest). Here's how the new grades compare to the old:

- Grade 9 – The top mark is even higher than the old A*
- Grade 8 – Below an A* but above an A
- Grade 7 – Slightly below an A but only just
- Grade 6 – Slightly better than a B
- Grade 5 – Below a B but above a C. Also called a 'strong pass'
- Grade 4 – Equivalent of a C. Also called a 'standard pass'
- Grade 3 – Below a D but above an E

- Grade 2 – Between an E and an F
- Grade 1 – Between an F and a G
- Ungraded - The lowest mark possible. As in the old system, a U denotes a fail.

Why has GCSE Grading Changed?

The new grading system was introduced to differentiate between the very highest performing children. Along with the change in marking, some of the questions have changed too and are now a little more challenging. The aim is to find the very brightest pupils. In 2017 only 3% of students managed to score the much sought-after Grade 9.

Which GCSE Subjects Include Coursework in Exam Results?

GCSE exams are very important but, in many subjects, students' coursework is assessed as part of their GCSE results. In practical subjects, like art, design and technology or music, 60% of a student's GCSE will be marked on coursework. 40% of the English Literature result is also based on work done in class or at home.

How Important are GCSEs?

For many college courses, grades of 4 or above are required, so good GCSE results are vital for anyone wishing to go to university in future.

At the end of KS4 the most important assessment of secondary education takes place – GCSEs.

There's a lot to the National Curriculum - subjects studied, topics covered, tests taken and expected standards. But, armed with the information in this guide, you now know what it entails. That should help you to help your child through the trials and tribulations of secondary school.