

How does the National Curriculum Affect Secondary Schools?

Most [secondary schools](#) follow the government's National Curriculum, which provides a diverse range of subjects to teach. In the state system, all schools have to teach the National Curriculum but private, academy and free schools do not.

Must All Schools Follow the National Curriculum?

Not every school has to follow the National Curriculum. Private, academy and free schools can opt out altogether and teach their own curriculum of chosen subjects and topics.

How are Secondary School Children Tested?

Children at secondary school are tested at the end of Key Stage 4 – mostly through GCSE (General Certificate of Secondary Education) exams and assessment in various subjects. Their results can have great bearing on their futures.

What are the Secondary School Key Stages and Assessments?

Secondary school education is split into two key stages: KS3 and KS4. Assessment usually takes place at the end of KS4, although in some schools, brighter pupils may take exams in Year 10.

Here is a list of secondary school years, the ages of children and what assessments are made:

- Pupils in Years 7, 8 and 9, between the ages of 11 and 14, are in KS3. They are assessed by their teachers
- Pupils in Years 10 and 11, between the ages of 14 and 16, are in KS4. Some children take GCSEs in year 10 but most take their GCSEs or other national qualifications at the end of Year 11

What is KS5?

Some schools also cater for KS5 – Years 12 and 13 – otherwise known as 'Sixth Form'. However, the majority of schools do not have an attached 'Sixth Form'. Instead, there are Sixth Form colleges and FE (Further Education) colleges catering for the 16-18+ age range, offering A Levels and other courses.

Which Subjects do Secondary Schools Teach?

Subjects within the National Curriculum that secondary schools must teach are:

- English
- Maths
- Science
- History
- Geography
- Modern foreign languages
- Design & technology

- Art & design
- Music
- Physical education
- Citizenship
- Computing

Schools also have to teach RE (religious education) and sex education from Year 7 onwards, but parents have a say in whether or not their children attend these lessons. Sex education covers topics such as reproduction, sexuality and sexual health – some of which are taught in compulsory science lessons, but parents can request that their child is withdrawn from all or part of the lesson.

What are GCSEs?

The General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) was introduced in 1986, in place of O Levels and CSEs. The first exams were held in 1988 and coursework was introduced in 1991. GCSEs are courses of study, usually over two years, ending in exams or by assessment of coursework. Pupils usually take a number of subjects. Each school determines the number of GCSEs its pupils take, which could be 8-12 subjects or more. During summer 2015 there were 5.3 million UK entries for all subjects.

What are Optional Subjects for GCSE?

Whilst there are a number of compulsory GCSE subjects, like English, maths and science, that pupils must learn, they are also able to choose some optional subjects. The options depend on the school, but usually cover a wide range of subjects. Every school must provide at least one course in each of four 'entitlement areas':

- Arts (including art and design, music, dance, drama and media arts)
- Design and technology
- Humanities (history and geography)
- Modern foreign languages

There will usually be some other subjects which students can choose.

Pupils select their GCSE options in Year 9, so encourage your child to choose subjects that interest them and they will enjoy, as well as those needed for any chosen career.

Pupils are tested throughout their school life by various national tests and assessments set by the class teacher. In the form of GCSEs, the national exams are designed to test the work that they have been taught from the National Curriculum at the end of Year 11.

How are GCSEs Graded?

GCSEs used to be graded from A* - G and any grade in this range was considered a pass – though higher grades of A* - C were desirable targets to be met. The summer 2015 GCSE results showed that 7 out of 10 pupil entries had achieved Grades A* - C – a great achievement! However, new reforms have taken place, which mean that results are now graded on a scale from 1 - 9, with 5 and above being a 'good pass'.

What is the EBacc?

The English Baccalaureate, or EBacc, was introduced in 2010, as a guide to measure the achievements of each school and to see how many pupils obtain Grade Cs or higher in English, maths, 2 sciences, a language, and either history or geography. It is planned that all children who started secondary school in September 2015 will complete the EBacc subjects when they do their GCSE exams in 2020.

Which Schools don't Follow the National Curriculum?

Although the majority of secondary schools follow the National Curriculum, there are some for which it is not compulsory. Here's a list of the types of school that are exempt:

- Private schools do not have to follow the National Curriculum
- Academy Schools can also opt out. 2,075 out of 3,381 secondary schools had received 'academy' status by 2016. The 'Academies Act 2010' gave all schools the opportunity to apply to convert to academies, and the government is encouraging all schools to acquire academy status by 2020. This will mean that no schools will have to conform to the National Curriculum by then – unless policies change
- Government funded 'free schools' also do not have to follow the National Curriculum. Free schools can be set up by groups such as parents, teachers, charities, businesses and universities... and can make their own decisions in terms of teacher's pay, term time and what is studied within school. The government plans to open a further 500 free schools within the next 5 years

Both academies and free schools have a lot more flexibility than state schools. They receive funding directly from the government (not via the local council), head teachers have more freedom in how the school is run overall, and they can set their own curriculum.

Whatever the curriculum, you'll want your child to thrive. Many schools teach classes according to pupils' abilities (brightest in one class, less able in another). If your child is struggling – or finds the work too easy – discuss any concerns with the school. Your child might be better off in another class or moved up a year group.