



BRIEFING PAPER

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The school curriculum in England

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Summary

What is the national curriculum in England?

Maintained schools in England must teach the national curriculum to pupils aged approximately 5 to 16 years old. The national curriculum is divided into four key stages. It includes different subjects at different stages, but maths, sciences, English, physical education and computing are included at all stages.

Academies and free schools don't have to follow the national curriculum. They must, however, offer a broad and balanced curriculum that covers English, maths, sciences and RE. Primary academies and free schools must also take part in national curriculum assessments, commonly referred to as SATs.

Other curriculum subjects

In addition to the national curriculum, maintained schools in England must also currently offer:

- Relationships education for pupils of primary age, relationships, and sex education (RSE) for pupils of secondary age, and health education for all pupils. These requirements also apply to academies and free schools.
- Religious education (RE) for all registered pupils. Content will depend on the type of school and (usually) the locally agreed syllabus. Academies and free schools are also required to offer RE through clauses in their funding agreements.

These elements, plus the national curriculum, comprise the statutory curriculum for maintained schools. Additionally, secondary schools must offer impartial careers advice to those in school years 9 to 13.

Curriculum during the coronavirus pandemic

During the summer term of 2020, schools in England were closed to most pupils. Where children and young people were learning at home during this time, the Department for Education made clear that schools did not have to offer a full curriculum remotely. Most pupils returned for the September 2020 school term, and the expectation was that the full curriculum would resume. During the spring 2021 lockdown, when schools were again closed to most pupils, the DfE published guidance on remote education, which was clear that schools should offer a "planned and well-sequenced curriculum".

1. Overview: What do schools have to teach?

Box 1: overview of the curriculum in state-funded schools in England

- Maintained schools in England must follow the national curriculum.
- Academies and free schools are subject to slightly different rules. Many follow the national curriculum, but they don't have to.
- Some other subjects – such as RE – are not part of the national curriculum, but schools are required to offer them.
- There are no minimum hours required for any national curriculum or other subject.

1.1 Maintained school curriculum requirements

All maintained schools in England must offer the statutory curriculum as set out in Section 80 of the Education Act 2002, as amended. The statutory curriculum currently includes:

- The national curriculum for pupils aged around 5 to around 16.
- At primary level, a programme of relationships education, and at secondary level, sex and relationships education (SRE) for all registered pupils, providing the parents have not withdrawn their child.
- Health education for all pupils.
- Religious education (RE) for all registered pupils, unless they are withdrawn. Content will depend on the type of school and (usually) the locally agreed syllabus.¹

Maintained schools: local authority schools with varying degrees of autonomy dependent on category.
Academies: state-funded schools independent of the local authority.

¹ In voluntary aided schools with a religious character, the governors determine RE policy. For VA and voluntary controlled schools, parents may request their child is taught RE according to the tenets of the school's designated faith.

National curriculum key stages

The national curriculum in England is arranged into four key stages:

National Curriculum England		
	Age approx	School years
Key stage 1	5 to 7	1 & 2
Key stage 2	7 to 11	3 to 6
Key stage 3	11 to 14	7 to 9
Key stage 4	14 to 16	10 & 11

Section 78 of the 2002 *Act* requires the curriculum at maintained schools to be “balanced and broadly based” and to:

- promote the spiritual, moral, cultural, mental and physical development of pupils at the school and of society; and
- prepare pupils at the school for the opportunities, responsibilities and experiences of later life.

Under Section 42A of the Education Act 1997, as amended, and related regulations,² schools are under a duty to offer impartial careers advice to pupils in school years 8 to 13.

1.2 Early years

The national curriculum doesn’t cover children in the reception year of primary or infant school; they follow the statutory [Early years foundation stage framework](#), or EYFS.

1.3 Curriculum at academies and free schools

Academies and free schools don’t have to teach the national curriculum although many will follow it. Mainstream academies are required to offer a broad and balanced curriculum. This must cover English, maths, science, RE and any other curriculum conditions set out in the academy trust’s funding agreement with the Secretary of State. Section 1.5 below outlines the requirements in relation to relationships and sex education (RSE).

Independent fee-paying schools are also required to offer a broad and balanced curriculum, as prescribed in the Education (Independent School Standards) (England) Regulations 2014, as amended.

1.4 Personal, Social, Health and Economic Education (PSHE)

The Government doesn’t specify the content of PSHE in England, but advises that all state-funded schools should offer it. The PSHE Association has published [guidance on what schools could cover](#).

Academy funding agreements: These are contracts between the Government and academy trusts. They set out rules on how the school should operate.

² [The Careers Guidance in Schools Regulations 2013](#), SI 2013/ 709

Further information about legislative provisions enabling PSHE to be made a mandatory subject in England can be found in another Library briefing paper:

- [House of Commons Library briefing paper, Personal, social, health and economic education in schools \(England\)](#)

As noted above, from September 2020, health education became a statutory part of the school curriculum for all state-funded schools in England.

1.5 Relationships, sex and health education in state-funded schools

Since September 2020, state-funded primary-phase schools have been under a new statutory obligation to deliver revised relationships (and health) education. State-funded secondary-phase schools are required to teach revised relationships and sex education (RSE) and health education.

There is statutory guidance on the reformed subjects:

- Department for Education, [Relationships Education, Relationships and Sex Education \(RSE\) and Health Education](#), July 2019.

In light of the Coronavirus pandemic, schools have been given flexibility to delay the start of RSE teaching until the start of the summer 2021 term, where necessary.³

Further information on what is required of schools, and the policy background on RSE, can be found in a linked Library briefing paper:

- House of Commons Library, [Relationships and Sex Education in Schools \(England\)](#).

1.6 Curriculum during the coronavirus pandemic

During the summer term of 2020, schools in England were closed to most pupils. Where children and young people were learning at home during this time, the Department for Education made clear that schools did not have to offer a full curriculum remotely.

Most pupils returned to face-to-face schooling for the September 2020 school term, and the expectation was that the full curriculum would resume. During the spring 2021 lockdown, when schools were again closed to most pupils, the DfE published guidance on remote education, which was clear that schools should offer a “planned and well-sequenced curriculum”.

Since 8 March 2021, primary schools have been open to all pupils, and secondary schools begun a phased return on this date. The DfE has published [guidance for schools on curriculum expectations](#) following wider re-opening. These recognise that schools may need to make

³ Department for Education, [Implementation of relationships education, relationships and sex education and health education 2020 to 2021](#), updated 9 July 2020.

“substantial” curriculum adaptations so that they can address the most significant gaps in pupils’ knowledge.⁴

⁴ Department for Education, [Schools coronavirus \(COVID-19\) operational guidance](#), 26 March 2021.

2. The national curriculum in England

2.1 What subjects are currently included in the national curriculum?

The subjects included in the national curriculum at each key stage are prescribed in Sections 84 and 85 of the Education Act 2002, as amended. The following table shows the subjects included in the national curriculum at primary and secondary level.⁵

National Curriculum subjects				
England				
	KS1	KS2	KS3	KS4
	Age approx. 5-7	Age approx. 7-11	Age approx. 11-14	Age approx. 14-16
Maths	✓	✓	✓	✓
English	✓	✓	✓	✓
Science	✓	✓	✓	✓
History	✓	✓	✓	×
Geography	✓	✓	✓	×
Art and design	✓	✓	✓	×
Physical education	✓	✓	✓	✓
Music	✓	✓	✓	×
(Modern) foreign languages	×	✓	✓	×
Computing	✓	✓	✓	✓
Design and Technology	✓	✓	✓	×
Citizenship education	×	×	✓	✓

2.2 What topics are covered in each national curriculum subject?

Subject content and skills are set out in statutory programmes of study for each subject:

- [National curriculum programmes of study by subject](#)

Although maintained schools must teach the national curriculum, they can organise actual subject teaching as they see fit.

There is no requirement to spend a set amount of time on any one subject.

Programmes of study: statutory documents that outline what must be covered in each subject at each key stage

⁵ Adapted from Department for Education, [National curriculum in England: framework for key stages 1 to 4](#), December 2014.

2.3 Withdrawing children from particular subjects

There is no general right for parents to withdraw children from any parts of the national curriculum.

Parents are able to withdraw their primary-aged children from sex education, if this is provided by the school. At secondary level, parents are able to request that their child be withdrawn from sex education, a request that head teachers should grant in all but exceptional circumstances. This would apply until three terms before turning 16, at which point the young person is able to opt-in to sex education if they choose.

There is no right of withdrawal from relationships education, and nor can parents withdraw children from study of the biological aspects of human growth and reproduction which is part of national curriculum science.

Parents can also withdraw their children from RE.

2.4 The school curriculum in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland

Education is a devolved policy area. Schools in Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales follow different curricula.

Further information about what must be covered in schools there can be found online:

- [Information about the school curriculum in Scotland from the Scottish Government website.](#)
- [Information about the school curriculum in Wales from the Welsh Government website.](#)
- [Information about the school curriculum in Northern Ireland from the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment.](#)

3. Historical background on national curriculum

The national curriculum was introduced by the Thatcher Government following the passage of the Education Reform Act 1988. A comprehensive account of its early history can be found in the 2009 report of the Children, Schools and Families Select Committee, [National Curriculum](#).⁶

1987 – the Department of Education and Science, led by Kenneth Baker MP, issued a consultation document setting out the rationale for a national curriculum. This identified four broad underlying principles and intentions: establishing an entitlement to a broad and balanced curriculum; improving school accountability; improving curricular coherence; and aiding “public understanding” of schools.

1989 – national curriculum introduced to primary schools, with implementation continuing into the mid-1990s.

1993 – review of the national curriculum by Sir Ron Dearing in response to teachers’ observations that the curriculum was ‘unwieldy’. A revised NC was introduced in 1995 with less prescribed content and changes to testing arrangements.

1996 – introduction of two pilot support projects in numeracy and literacy. These were carried forward – as the National Literacy and National Numeracy Strategies by the incoming Labour Government.

1999 – major review of the curriculum overseen by the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) resulting in the further slimming down of prescribed content, and the introduction of a statement of aims and purposes.

2005 – review of the secondary curriculum, again with the aim of slimming down prescribed content; resulted in more emphasis on cross-curricular themes, skills and personalised learning.

2007 – ‘root and branch’ review of the primary national curriculum announced by the Government, subsequently undertaken by Sir Jim Rose from 2008 and with findings published in April 2009.

3.1 Background to the Coalition Government’s curriculum reforms

The 2010 Government began extensive reform of the national curriculum in England in 2011. A summary of the key milestones in curriculum reform in the early years of the Coalition Government is provided below.

⁶ Children, Schools and Families Select Committee, [National Curriculum, Fourth Report of Session 2008-09](#), 2 April 2009, Vol 1., HCC 344-1

- **November 2010:** 2010 Government publishes its wide-ranging schools White Paper, *The Importance of Teaching*.⁷ This confirmed plans to reform the whole national curriculum, slimming down content and reducing prescription.
- **January 2011:** DfE announces review of national curriculum, setting out its motivations in a press notice.⁸
- **January 2011:** DfE establishes expert panel to inform the curriculum review. This was chaired by Tim Oates, then Director of Assessment Research and Development for Cambridge Assessment.
- **December 2011:** DfE publishes expert panel's final report.⁹
- **December 2011:** Date for first teaching of revised core subjects (English, maths, science, PE) pushed back from September 2013 to September 2014.¹⁰
- **June 2012:** then-Government publishes draft programmes of study for the core subjects of English, maths and science at KS1 and KS2, for discussion.¹¹ An accompanying press release said the new curricula were "more demanding" and reflected practice in other "high-performing jurisdictions".¹²

3.2 Reaction to the June 2012 proposals

The publication of draft programmes of study in June 2012 attracted a mixed response. An article in *The Guardian* reported that Prof Andrew Pollard (a member of the expert panel) had described the proposals as "fatally flawed" in showing insufficient consideration of the needs of learners, and described the programmes of study as "overly prescriptive".¹³ In response, the DfE said that the proposals would not act as a 'rigid straitjacket' for teachers, and that flexibility would remain for schools in how they covered the content.¹⁴

Professor Robin Alexander of Cambridge University, and Director of the Cambridge Primary Review, criticised the Government for what he saw as citing "selectively and tendentiously" from the international evidence and ignoring important contextual and cultural factors, in building the case for reform.¹⁵

A press release from the National Union of Teachers (NUT) said that much of what was proposed was already covered in primary schools but that there was a risk of creating "a task orientated curriculum" which would "simply stultify the learning process and, due to its inherent

⁷ [The Importance of Teaching. The Schools White Paper 2010](#), November 2010, Cm 7980

⁸ DfE press release, [National curriculum review launched](#), 20 January 2011.

⁹ DfE, [The Framework for the National Curriculum. A report by the Expert Panel for the National Curriculum review](#), December 2011

¹⁰ [Schools: National Curriculum Review](#), written ministerial statement by Michael Gove, HC Deb 19 December 2011, c 139 WS

¹¹ The drafts are no longer available online.

¹² DfE press release, [New primary curriculum to bring higher standards in English, maths and science](#), 11 June 2012.

¹³ ["Michael Gove's curriculum attacked by expert who advised him"](#), *The Guardian (online)*, 12 June 2012.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Alexander, R., ["Neither national nor a curriculum?"](#) in *Forum*, Volume 54, Number 3, 2012.

inflexibility, make it impossible for many children to achieve in the time and space they need".¹⁶

The Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL) and the National Association of Head Teachers (NAHT) gave more mixed responses. ASCL welcomed the emphasis on English, maths and languages at primary level but criticised the Government for not 'seizing the opportunity' to slim down the curriculum and for failing to make clear at this stage what the proposals in respect of the secondary curriculum were likely to be.¹⁷ NAHT welcomed what it saw as a 'leaner' science curriculum, positive aspects of the English curriculum, assurances of no further statutory testing (SATs) and a concentration on *what* should be taught, as opposed to *how*. The union, however, thought that schools would need 'time and support' to deliver the curriculum's 'more demanding' programmes and judged that much of the content was in fact not new.¹⁸

Other commentators welcomed the changes. An article in *The Times* of 13 June 2012 argued that Gove had been 'unfairly derided' for the new primary school curriculum, which in fact should be praised for its level of ambition.¹⁹ Similarly, in an article for the *Financial Times*, commentator Stephen Robinson hailed the reforms for putting "proper content ...back into the curriculum".²⁰

3.3 Further consultation on programmes of study: February and July 2013

Subsequently, the then Government ran a number of additional consultations on further revised programmes of study.

On 7 February 2013, the DfE published further draft programmes of study, this time for formal consultation, in a draft National Curriculum Framework Document. The documents can be viewed on the DfE [website](#). For the first time, draft programmes of study for foundation subjects such as history, geography and music were released, as were the long-awaited secondary programmes, apart from maths, science and English at KS4.

Again, the proposals proved highly controversial and generated strong feeling among commentators – particularly with respect to the proposed subject content. On 20 March 2013, *The Independent* published a highly critical letter signed by a large number of academics about the curriculum proposals.²¹ The letter's authors criticised what they saw as the new curriculum's "endless lists of spellings, facts and rules" and "mountain[s] of data" which would not develop young

¹⁶ NUT, Primary curriculum – press release, 11 June 2012

¹⁷ See ASCL press release, [Primary curriculum only half the picture](#), 11 June 2012

¹⁸ NAHT website article, 'Curriculum proposals must now be tested by the professionals, says NAHT', 11 June 2012.

¹⁹ "[Be ambitious: spell 'conscience', learn Keats](#)", *The Times* (online – subscription required), 13 June 2012.

²⁰ "[Gove's back-to-basics drive is just what education needs](#)", *Financial Times* (online – subscription required), 16 June 2012.

²¹ Letter from Prof. Michael Bassegy and 99 others, "[Gove will bury pupils in facts and rules](#)", *The Independent* (online), 20 March 2013

children's understanding and expected "too much too young". Michael Gove responded to his critics in a strongly worded article for the *Daily Mail* on 23 March 2013.²² A subsequent DfE report on consultation responses gave a summary of feedback received.²³

3.4 July 2013 – second formal consultation

In July 2013, the Government made further changes to the programmes of study, and launched an additional consultation. Changes made from the earlier documents included:

- More emphasis in primary English on spoken language skills and further content on vocabulary development.
- Revisions to design and technology programmes in response to concerns that it lacked aspiration and was insufficiently flexible.
- Removal of previous limitation on the languages that could be offered at KS2 – schools would now have free choice.
- Revision of the history programmes in response to concerns that earlier drafts were too prescriptive. This revision slimmed down the overall content and included additional content on world history while retaining a core focus on "teaching the history of Britain and its relationship with the world in a clear chronological framework."²⁴

3.5 First final curriculum documents published in September 2013

On 11 September 2013, the Government published summary findings of the consultation on the revised programmes of study and attainment targets.²⁵ Alongside this, it released the finalised national curriculum documents and programmes of study for introduction from September 2014. A Written Statement of 12 September 2013 gave further details.²⁶ Programmes of study for English, maths and science at KS4 were published later, on 2 December 2014, and were subject to a separate consultation.

3.6 Reform to GCSEs, AS and A Levels

Alongside reforms to the national curriculum, the 2010 Government embarked on reform of GCSEs, AS and A level qualifications. Full background on these changes is available in a separate Library briefing paper:

- [House of Commons Library briefing paper, GCSE, AS and A Level reform.](#)

²² Article by Michael Gove, "[I refuse to surrender to the Marxist teachers hell-bent on destroying our schools: Education Secretary berates 'the new enemies of promise' for opposing his plans.](#)", *Daily Mail (Online)*, 23 March 2013.

²³ DfE, [Reform of the national curriculum in England/ Report of the consultation conducted February – April 2013](#), July 2013

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p6

²⁵ DfE, [Reforming the national curriculum in England. Summary report of the July to August 2013 consultation on the new programmes of study and attainment targets from September 2014](#), 11 September 2013.

²⁶ [Education Reform \(Schools\)](#), Written Ministerial Statement, HC Deb 12 September 2013: c54WS

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