

7.3

Secondary schools in England

Governance, policy and curriculum

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Introduction

Secondary education in England has passed through distinct phases since the end of the Second World War and in many respects has been transformed. Education has moved from being a peripheral concern of government to being perceived as central to the economic wellbeing of the nation. Equally, there has been an increased emphasis on education as a vehicle for promoting social justice and greater equality of opportunity throughout society. These developments have occurred during a period of enormous social, political, technological and economic change. This unit will examine the origins of state-led education and consider the major reforms of the last 75 years that have in various ways transformed the organisation and ethos of secondary education and that have determined how schools are supported, monitored and made accountable. Over this period of time, not only has the English education system undergone fundamental organisational transformations, but also both the role of the teacher and views of the purpose of education have evolved as a result of government policy and broader changes in society. This account of the English education system will focus on mainstream provision in the state sector covering the 11-18 age range. Understanding this historical context will help you as a beginning teacher to better comprehend the current educational landscape and the ongoing debates that shape your professional environment.

OBJECTIVES

By the end of this unit, you should

- Have an overview of how government policy has affected secondary education in England.
- Be familiar with the key organisational changes that have taken place over the last 75 years in secondary education in England.
- Be familiar with key pieces of legislation and government reports that have impacted on secondary education in England.

The current picture

The English state secondary school system provides for all pupils from the age of 11 to 18. Currently, around 93% of pupils attend state-funded schools while most of the remaining 7% are educated in independent, fee-paying private schools, sometimes known as 'public' schools in England. A small but increasing number of secondary age pupils are electively home educated (EHE): in autumn 2024 there were 111,700 such children of compulsory school age, representing a significant increase from 92,000 in the previous year (DfE, 2024a). The education system in England retains the basic age-based structure established in the late 19th century, which has evolved throughout the 20th and early 21st centuries. It is divided into phases based upon age. Compulsory schooling currently begins at the age of 5 and ends at 16 although, as a result of legislation introduced in September 2013, the law now requires young people continue in education, employment or training until the age of 18. In the state sector, education provision is divided into the non-compulsory Early Years, Foundation Stage (ages 3-5), Primary Education (ages 5-11) and Secondary Education (ages 11-16). These phases are subdivided into 'Key Stages' as shown below:

Nursery

- Foundation Stage (ages 3-4) - non-compulsory

Primary

- Reception (ages 4-5) - compulsory
- Key Stage 1 (ages 5-7) - Years 1-2
- Key Stage 2 (ages 7-11) - Years 3-6

Secondary

- Key Stage 3 (ages 11-14) - Years 7-9
- Key Stage 4 (ages 14-16) - Years 10-11
- Key Stage 5 (ages 16-18) - Years 12-13

Formal, externally marked assessments (SATs) take place at the end of year 6 in primary school. Year nine SATs were discontinued in 2009. External examinations for secondary age pupils, the General Certificate of Education (GCSE), take place at the end of Year 11 and pupils are examined in a range of subjects, sometimes as many as 12, including English and Mathematics. Some schools also offer courses at key stage 4 leading to other qualifications such as BTEC, Cambridge Nationals and Functional Skills Qualifications.

At age 16, young people wishing to continue in full-time academic education may then progress to a Sixth Form (Years 12 and 13) which may be provided within a secondary school, or as a separate Sixth Form college. At this point, many pupils choose three or four subjects to study to the General Certificate of Education Advanced Level (GCE A Level) or equivalent qualifications, often as preparation for Higher Education. Alternatively, some young people prefer to attend a Further Education College (FE College) which, in addition to A levels, often provide a more vocationally or technically orientated curriculum, vocational training or work-based learning. Since 2013, all young people are required to continue in some form of education, employment or training until age 18. This requirement can be met through various pathways beyond Sixth Form or FE colleges, including apprenticeships, traineeships or structured volunteering programmes. You may find it interesting to review the analytics data provided by the Office of Qualifications and Examinations Regulation (Ofqual, 2025), which regulates qualifications, examinations and assessments in England.

Types of secondary school

Secondary schools in England have always been diverse, each with their own distinctive character. They have had more freedom to structure and sequence their own curricula than is found in many European countries. In England, for example, there has been a long tradition of Church of England, Roman Catholic and other faith schools which are mostly state-funded, but which also benefit from funding from various charitable foundations. Faith schools are a significant minority of state-funded secondary schools, but their presence is a distinctive feature of the English school system.

Traditionally, the supply of state-funded education provision was the overall responsibility of Local Education Authorities (LEAs), covering all aspects including buildings, staffing, teacher support and development. LEAs operated within Local Authorities (LAs) which are overseen by elected members and which are therefore politically driven bodies. So, for example, we might talk about an LA being Conservative, Labour or Liberal Democrat controlled. Education policy in a local area, therefore, to some extent reflected a political persuasion.

However, in recent years, the power and responsibilities of LAs in the provision of education have been reduced through fundamental changes to the structure, organisation and funding of state education. In January 2025, 83% of secondary schools were Academies or Free Schools (DfE, 2025), still funded directly by the government but independent of local authority control, run instead by an academy trust.

Free schools have generated debate regarding their cost-effectiveness and educational impact. While supporters argue they provide innovation and choice, critics have raised concerns about their financial efficiency and the diversion of resources from existing schools. Research on their effectiveness shows mixed results, with outcomes varying significantly between individual institutions.

Schools have governing bodies appointed through various mechanisms depending on the school type. In maintained schools, governing bodies typically include elected parent and staff representatives alongside appointed community governors. Academy trusts operate under boards of trustees with delegated local governing bodies.

Now complete Task 7.3.1 to help you understand the diversity within the English education system:



Task 7.3.1 Exploring school organisational variations

The framework outlined above describes the most common organisation of schools in the English education system, but there are exceptions. Some local areas have retained different organisational structures based on age, ability or local historical factors.

- Research the schools in your local area and/or region and how they are organised. Identify different age ranges, selective systems, all-through schools and specialist or alternative provisions.
- Discuss your findings with a colleague, focusing on what factors might explain these organisational differences, the potential advantages and disadvantages of each system and how might these variations affect your career choices and professional development.

Record your findings and reflections in your professional development portfolio.

Setting the scene: education and the state

Before we proceed further into the present context of the English school system, it is perhaps worth taking a glimpse at the past in order to better understand the present. Although it is not possible here to do justice to the complex history of education in England, a very brief historical contextualisation may be useful and encourage the reader to look further into the rich and often inspirational educational heritage upon which our present system is built.

Until the latter part of the 19th century, education provision was patchy, funded by the church, philanthropic societies, voluntary organisations and individuals. Access to schooling for most people was very limited and any education beyond basic reading, writing and numeracy was the exclusive domain of the wealthy. So-called public schools and to some extent, 'grammar schools' that had existed in different forms since medieval times, catered for the privileged few. However, since the late 18th century and notably, the industrial revolution, demands for mass education had been closely associated with campaigns for workers' rights and had also become more of an economic imperative.

This was a vibrant period in the history of education in England which saw the first organised attempt at providing basic education for what was to become the working class. After a century of unparalleled social, political and economic change, the Elementary Education Act of 1870, or Forster Act, as it is known, established the right to education for all children between the ages of 5 and 13. 'Elementary' schools were created, supervised by school boards, funded by government and co-existing, sometimes unhappily, with church and other voluntary schools. This marked the beginning of mass education, where education was no longer a charity but a right, compulsory and overseen by the state.

Over the following century how compulsory education for all was understood developed from 'the 3Rs' (reading, writing and (a)rithmetic) to a broad curriculum framework of subject disciplines and much more besides (see Unit 7.2). Secondary education as a phase developed in the period following the First World War, although only through the pre-existing grammar schools, and was established in statute in the 1944 Education Act (often known as the Butler Act after the Minister responsible for its implementation). The 1944 Act, passed just before the end of the Second World War, heralded a new era in English education. It created the first Ministry of Education, and R. A. Butler became its first Minister.

The Butler Act was one among many pieces of legislation on Education passed in the post-war period, but it was the most significant in that it introduced the notion that education should be provided according to children's age, aptitude and ability in the form of what was called the 'Tripartite System'. Compulsory secondary schooling henceforth existed for all young people up to the age of 15 in three distinctive types of school. A new examination, the '11+' (11 plus) was introduced at the age of 11 in Elementary Schools to determine which pupils should continue their education in a prestigious grammar school. Grammar schools, already well-established, were set to provide an academic education of the sciences, humanities and foreign languages including Greek and Latin. And for those pupils who did not pass the '11+', then the next tranche was selected to go to new 'Technical Schools' where a diluted form of the grammar school curriculum was taught, together with practical, work-orientated skills like woodwork and metalwork for boys, and typing and domestic science for girls. The rest, the majority, went on to new 'Secondary Modern' schools and the curriculum here was much in dispute. At this time, the curriculum in each secondary modern school was the responsibility of each school's Headteacher, and some heads chose to offer a more limited academic curriculum, often cutting out 'difficult' subjects like Foreign Languages or Physics in favour of French Studies and General Science.

Many commentators in the decades that followed levelled criticism at the tripartite system claiming that it perpetuated and even created inequality and division in the education system (Simon, 1991). Grammar school pupils were given the best opportunities of any schoolchildren in the state system. Initially, they studied for the School Certificate and Higher School Certificate, replaced in 1951 by General Certificate of Education examinations at O-level (Ordinary level) and A-level (Advanced level). In contrast, very few pupils at secondary modern schools took public examinations until the introduction of the less academic and less prestigious Certificate of Secondary Education (known as the CSE) in the 1960s.

It was not long before the growing social and political concern over the tripartite system grew to the extent that a series of reports showed that it was wasting a large amount of talent. The selection process with the 11+ examination was seen to be flawed and unfair. The incoming Labour government in 1964 had made reform of the Tripartite System a key manifesto commitment and upon election it set about abolishing, or in reality diluting, the 11+ examination and establishing a more unified non-selective, egalitarian comprehensive secondary education. Although some LEAs were allowed to retain selection, the majority opted for the comprehensive system.

The 1970s saw the expansion of comprehensive education across England and Wales, and at the same time, the quality of education became of more concern to central government. In 1976, Labour Prime Minister, James Callaghan launched 'The Great Debate' on education in a landmark speech at Ruskin College, Oxford, in which he identified "the need to improve relations between industry and education" (Maclure, 1988, p. 169). Importantly, the Ruskin College speech indicated for the first time that education should be linked to the needs of the economy and that educational decisions should not be left only to educators, but that government and other interested parties had a role to play in educational decision-making.

At a time of economic crisis, this marked a watershed in education policy. For two decades comprehensive education was seen as the way forward for advancing social justice and improving education for all.

Now complete Task 7.3.2, which asks you to consider your views.



Task 7.3.2 Examining perspectives on educational selection

Educational selection remains a debated topic in English education policy, with compelling arguments on different sides.

- Research and consider the following perspectives on educational selection: arguments for selective education, comprehensive education and alternative approaches (e.g., setting, streaming, mixed-ability teaching).
- Reflect on the following questions:
 - What does research evidence suggest about the effectiveness of different approaches?
 - How might selection systems affect different groups of pupils (e.g., socio-economic background, special educational needs)?
 - What are the implications for teachers working in selective versus comprehensive systems?

Discuss your views with other beginning teachers. Between you, consider how your understanding of this debate will inform your approach to meeting diverse needs in your own classroom, regardless of the school system you work within.

Record your findings and reflections in your professional portfolio.

The Education Legacy of Margaret Thatcher (1979-1990)

During the 1980s, concerns about variable school quality led the Conservative government to introduce market-based reforms aimed at improving educational standards through increased parental choice and school competition (Ball, 2017). Parents were given greater rights to choose schools for their children, moving away from automatic allocation to local schools. Supporters argued this would drive up standards through competitive pressure, while critics worried about the effects on equity and community cohesion.

To support parental choice, school league tables were established in 1992, measuring performance primarily through GCSE examination results. These tables, combined with increased parental choice, were designed to create a competitive environment where schools would compete for pupils based on their academic performance. However, this system also led to concerns that schools in disadvantaged areas might struggle to attract higher-achieving pupils, potentially creating a cycle of declining performance.

A new inspection framework was introduced in 1992 with the creation of Ofsted (the Office for Standards in Education), implementing a more centralised system of school inspection. Ofsted inspections have evolved over time but remain a key feature of school accountability. The system has generated ongoing debate about its impact on school leadership and staff wellbeing, leading to discussions about potential reforms to inspection methods and reporting.

The National Curriculum, introduced in 1988, represented a significant shift towards centralised curriculum control. The government stated its intention to improve educational quality and ensure consistent standards across schools. Different stakeholders viewed this development differently: some welcomed the increased coherence and support it provided, while others were concerned about reduced professional autonomy and local flexibility. The curriculum has been regularly reviewed and modified by subsequent governments.

These three reforms: market choice, league tables and the National Curriculum, fundamentally transformed the secondary school system in England. Subsequent governments largely maintained these market-based approaches while adapting them to their own priorities, demonstrating the lasting impact of these changes on English education policy.

The Blair Years (1997-2010)

In 1997, Tony Blair led New Labour to power with the slogan 'education, education, education', signalling education as a key government priority. What followed was significant expansion of central government involvement in educational policy and practice, extending into areas previously managed primarily at local or institutional level. Besides substantial increased spending on education, the government implemented extensive legislation aimed at improving standards and increasing central influence in school management, largely continuing and extending market-based approaches established by the previous Conservative government.

Under New Labour, both the social mission of education and the improvement of educational standards were strongly emphasised. Schools faced increasing expectations to improve performance and address broader social challenges. School improvement became a central policy focus, with particular attention given to schools identified as underperforming based on examination results and Ofsted inspections.

The National Curriculum was expanded to include broader social and civic objectives alongside traditional academic subjects. Personal, Social and Health Education (PSHE) and citizenship

education were introduced to develop pupils' engagement with society and democratic processes. The curriculum also addressed contemporary concerns such as healthy eating and environmental awareness.

This expansion was accompanied by emphasis on curriculum 'relevance' to pupils' lives and experiences. This approach generated debate among educators. Critics argued that the curriculum had become overloaded and shifted focus from subject knowledge to broader life skills and attitudes. Supporters contended that education needed to address contemporary social challenges and prepare pupils for modern citizenship.

Social justice became an important focus of educational policy during this period, with researchers such as Geoff Whitty (Whitty et al., 1998) and John Beck (2008) contributing to discussions about education's role in addressing inequality. Over time, this discourse evolved to include broader discussions of social mobility.

The period from 1997 to 2010 marked substantial change in school organisation and management. These developments raised questions about the balance between central direction and professional autonomy, with some educators expressing concerns about increased prescription of teaching methods and school management practices. The introduction of performance management systems and business-style approaches to school leadership represented significant shifts in educational culture.

A key innovation was the introduction of City Academies (later simply 'Academies'), initially targeting underperforming schools in deprived urban areas. This relatively small-scale experiment, developed under the guidance of Lord Adonis, would later become central to subsequent governments' educational strategies (Curtis et al., 2008).

Task 7.3.3 asks you to compare these policy legacies.



Task 7.3.3 Comparing educational policy legacies

What are the distinct features of government policy during the 'Thatcher Years'? How do the 'Blair Years' compare? In the experience that you have gained so far in schools, what features of these two education policies still feature in secondary schools today?

Can you identify where school choice, market mechanisms, curriculum centralisation, school accountability and inspection impact on life in contemporary schools?

Discuss your responses with other beginning teachers, and record your key insights for your professional portfolio.

A new era of change in education post-2010: innovation and experimentation or fragmentation?

In 2010, the newly elected coalition government introduced significant education reforms outlined in the white paper *The Importance of Teaching* (2010). Michael Gove, the Conservative Secretary of State for Education, announced reforms including curriculum revision emphasising knowledge-rich content, changes to GCSE and A Level examinations, and teacher training modifications. The coalition government, like its predecessors, identified education as a key area for policy intervention.

The reforms aimed to 'increase freedom and autonomy for all schools' (DfE, 2010, p. 11) primarily through expanding Academy schools and introducing Free Schools. The Academy Bill passed in

July 2010 encouraged all primary and secondary schools to convert to academy status, receiving funding directly from the Education Funding Agency rather than LAs. The programme was presented as increasing school autonomy, though schools remained subject to accountability measures including Ofsted inspections and performance league tables. The original benefits promised to converting schools included direct access to capital funding, though this diminished as more schools converted. LAs have sometimes had to provide support for academy expansion in areas with school place shortages or to assist undersubscribed schools.

Curriculum reforms introduced more content-heavy GCSE and A Level courses, replacing continuous assessment with end-of-course examinations. These changes led some schools to begin the options process earlier to accommodate increased content demands. The English Baccalaureate (EBacc) and Progress 8 measures influenced curriculum choices, with some educators expressing concerns about reduced time for creative and practical subjects.

Academy conversion accelerated significantly following government encouragement. According to government statistics (DfE, 2025), over 83% of secondary schools have obtained academy status, with many organised as Multi-Academy Trusts (MATs). Academies operate with greater autonomy in staffing, pay and conditions, governance and financial management. They can modify term lengths and school days, establish partnerships and operate outside local authority control, though they remain accountable to Ofsted and the Department for Education.

Sponsors of academy trusts come from diverse backgrounds including successful schools, businesses, universities, charities and faith organisations. These sponsors are held accountable for school performance and typically implement rigorous accountability procedures focused on pupil attainment and examination results (see Machin and Vernoit, 2011; Husbands and Gilbert, 2013).

The transition from a primarily local authority-maintained system to a largely academy-based system has generated significant debate. Critics, including Miller (2011) and the Anti-Academies Alliance, have raised concerns about privatisation, 'short-termism', reduced democratic oversight and resource implications for maintained schools. Supporters, such as Astle and Ryan (2008), argue that academies promote educational innovation and provide liberation from excessive bureaucracy.

Free Schools, introduced in 2010, represent a further extension of the autonomy principle. The Department for Education created opportunities for parents, teachers, religious groups and other interested parties to establish new state-funded schools independent of local authority control. Like academies, they receive state funding and undergo Ofsted inspection. The first 24 free schools opened in September 2011, growing to 557 by December 2020. By August 2023, the DfE reported that there were now over 650 free schools in England, educating more than 350,000 pupils (DfE, 2023).

Free schools have generated debate about their effectiveness, value for money and impact on existing provision. Even a decade after their introduction, assessment of their success remained contested (Millar, 2021). Critics like Benn (2011) have questioned their contribution to educational equity and system coherence, while supporters argue they provide opportunities for innovation and respond to local educational needs. Toby Young, founder of the West London Free School, defended them as providing educational choice for middle-class families within the state sector (Young, 2011).

These structural changes occurred alongside challenges in teacher recruitment and retention, particularly in subjects like mathematics, science, modern languages and English. Real-term salary declines and modified entry requirements contributed to workforce pressures. The Covid-19 pandemic created additional challenges, disrupting educational delivery and affecting teacher and pupil wellbeing. However, it also accelerated digital learning adoption and reminded educators of the value of teacher-led assessment when external examinations were cancelled.

Policy developments continued under subsequent governments. Michael Gove's tenure saw the cancellation of Labour's Building Schools for the Future programme, expansion of the academies programme and restructuring of vocational qualifications alongside GCSEs and A Levels. The previous Conservative administration proposed that all schools join MATs by 2030, with recommended minimum sizes of 7,000 pupils. T Levels were introduced as vocational alternatives to A Levels, building on earlier reviews of vocational education provision (Wolf, 2011), though early implementation faced challenges including high dropout rates, attributed partly to their knowledge-heavy content and limited practical components.

Research evidence on the overall impact of these reforms presents a complex picture. The Education Policy Institute (2024) reported that attainment gaps between disadvantaged and advantaged pupils have persisted, with disadvantaged pupils remaining approximately 19 months behind their peers by GCSE level. This suggests that structural reforms alone have not addressed underlying educational inequalities.

Teaching today

Teaching in recent years has changed fundamentally in a variety of ways, and links to the past seem more tenuous. Becoming a teacher, and learning to teach, has also changed considerably. In the 1970s and 1980s, most secondary school teachers qualified to teach after completing a Post Graduate Certificate in Education (PGCE). This qualification was university-based and, besides a short period of 'teaching practice' in a school, was largely an academically orientated study of the so-called foundation disciplines, that is the philosophy, sociology, psychology and history of education together with 'method' courses that considered the specific didactics of subject disciplines. In the wake of the Education Reform Act and the introduction of the National Curriculum the government of the day turned its attention to reforming teacher education. In 1994, an entirely new system of initial teacher training was introduced in England. The 'partnership model' as it became known, shifted the emphasis from university-based teacher education to a more practical initiation into teaching whereby two-thirds of the one-year course was spent in two different schools which worked in a contractual collaboration with Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). Qualified Teacher Status was obtained at the end of the year by achieving all the competences laid down by government (through the now defunct Teacher Training Agency).

Over the intervening years, the role of higher education in the education of teachers has evolved significantly as government policy emphasised the practical aspects of teaching as a craft that can be learned through working alongside experienced teachers. This led to expansion of 'school-led' initial teacher training programmes such as 'School Direct', teaching apprenticeships and SCITT (School Centred Initial Teacher Training) courses. However, many SCITTs maintain partnerships with HEIs to provide academic components, creating diverse collaborative models that combine practical school-based training with university expertise.

In 2020, a new 'Core Content Framework' was introduced for all initial teacher training programmes, which fed into the new 'Early Career Framework' supporting all new teachers during their first two years of qualified teaching. As of January 2024, these frameworks were consolidated into the 'Initial Teacher Training and Early Career Framework' or ITTECF (DfE, 2024b), providing integrated support from training through early career development.

Between 2020 and 2021, the government conducted a comprehensive 'ITT market review' which made recommendations for significant changes to how ITT programmes would be designed and

structured. This review led to reforms aimed at improving the quality and consistency of teacher training across different providers and routes into teaching.

The current landscape of initial teacher education reflects this evolution, with multiple pathways available including university-led PGCEs, School Direct programmes, SCITTs and various partnership models. This diversity aims to meet different needs while maintaining quality standards across all routes into the profession.

Recent developments and ongoing debates

Following the 2024 election, the Labour government outlined various policy directions, including proposals for teacher recruitment, school funding modifications and inspection system reforms. These policy directions reflect longstanding Labour priorities outlined before the election, including emphasis on preparing young people for both employment and broader life skills (Starmer, 2021). Key areas of focus included plans to recruit additional teachers, modify private school VAT arrangements, expand access to arts and sports education, introduce free breakfast clubs in primary schools (see Allott, 2024) and reform Ofsted inspections by replacing single-word judgments with report card systems. However, the implementation timeline and specific details of these proposals have continued to develop. The relationship between manifesto commitments and actual policy implementation often involves significant adaptation as governments encounter practical and financial constraints.

The cumulative effect of frequent policy changes over recent decades has raised questions about system stability and the teaching profession's capacity to adapt continuously. While reforms have aimed to increase school autonomy, accountability measures continue to influence practice significantly. The tension between granting schools freedom and maintaining system oversight remains unresolved.

Current educational debates continue to focus on balancing school autonomy with system coherence, addressing persistent inequalities and defining education's purposes in contemporary society. Some commentators argue that excessive focus on instrumental outcomes may neglect education's broader cultural and intellectual purposes, while others emphasise the importance of preparing young people for economic participation. These ongoing policy discussions reflect deeper questions about education's role in society. Despite the frequency of reform cycles, the fundamental purpose of education to develop knowledge, understanding and intellectual curiosity remains constant. For you as a beginning teacher, understanding this policy context helps illuminate the environment in which you will work, while recognising that effective teaching ultimately depends on subject expertise, pedagogical skill and commitment to pupil learning.

The relationship between educational policy, political ideology and classroom practice remains complex, with implications for how you as a teacher will understand your professional role within a continuously evolving system. Reforms come and go, education systems develop and shift in different directions and the pendulum in terms of professional demands and priorities swings back and forth all too often, but it is the power of knowledge and ideas that moves education forward. As Young (2008) argues, access to powerful knowledge remains fundamental to educational equity and social mobility. The enduring essence and fundamental *raison d'être* of teachers committed to their profession is their passion for their subject; a belief in the capacity of knowledge to inspire and delight; and in seeing young people allowed to develop and grow intellectually, and discover that learning, for its own sake, is fun.

See your final task, Task 7.3.4 where we ask you to consider how to improve teaching and learning.



Task 7.3.4 Developing innovative educational practices

When Bridget Phillipson was Shadow Secretary of State for Education, she asked the Fabian Education Group to come up with, 'innovative ideas for best teaching practice which could be easily enacted – and would cost little to implement'.

Your final task: get into a small group of peers and share your ideas about practices that could enhance schools and the teaching profession. What challenges have you already observed in schools on your ITE programme? What examples of effective practice have you witnessed that could be scaled up? How might technology, community partnerships or different organisational approaches address current issues?

Store this in your professional portfolio and revisit periodically to see how your perspective changes over time. Consider how your developing understanding of educational policy and classroom practice influences your thinking about innovation and improvement.

SUMMARY AND KEY POINTS

The English education system has undergone fundamental changes since the Second World War, evolving from a peripheral concern to being central to government policy and economic strategy. Here are the key points to remember:

- The education system was transformed by three major Conservative reforms: the National Curriculum (1988), school league tables (1992) and the Ofsted inspection framework (1992).
- New Labour (1997-2010) continued market-based reforms while increasing central government control and emphasising social objectives.
- Since 2010, academisation has dramatically changed school governance, with over 83% of secondary schools now operating as academies or free schools.
- Current challenges include teacher recruitment and retention, ongoing curriculum reforms, post-Covid-19 recovery and persistent educational inequalities.
- Initial teacher education in England has evolved to include diverse pathways, with increased emphasis on school-based training alongside continued university partnerships.
- Recent policy developments continue to focus on balancing school autonomy with system accountability, while debates persist about education's broader purposes.

Understanding these developments provides essential context for current educational practices and helps you as a beginning teacher to navigate the complex relationship between policy, politics and classroom practice in contemporary secondary education.



ONLINE RESOURCES

For bonus digital resources designed to enhance your learning, head to [routledgelearning.com/learningtoteach](https://www.routledgelearning.com/learningtoteach).



Further resources

Department for Education (2025) *Types of School*. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/types-of-school> (Viewed: 31 July 2025).

This comprehensive government resource provides up-to-date information about the different types of schools operating in England, including academies, free schools, maintained schools and independent schools. The site offers clear explanations of governance structures, funding arrangements and the key characteristics that distinguish each school type. This is particularly valuable for beginning teachers as it helps you understand the diverse educational landscape you may encounter during your career. The resource includes practical information about how different school types operate, their accountability arrangements and what this means for teachers and pupils. As school structures continue to evolve, this official source provides the most current and authoritative information about England's complex school system.

Gillard, D. (2025) *Education in England: A History*. Available at: www.educationengland.org.uk/history (Viewed: 31 July 2025).

This website provides an account of the history of education in England from early times to the present day. The site includes important contextual background with profiles of key educational figures and politicians, together with online access to primary sources including education documents, articles and legislation. For beginning teachers, this resource is particularly valuable for understanding the historical development of policies and practices discussed in this unit. The timeline feature allows you to trace specific developments chronologically, while the document archive provides access to original policy papers and reports that shaped the current system.

Simon, B., (1991) *Education and the Social Order 1940-1990*. London: Lawrence & Wishart.

Brian Simon was one of Britain's foremost historians of education, and this scholarly work provides detailed analysis of educational developments over the second half of the 20th century. The book offers critical insights into the political and social forces that shaped post-war education policy, including the comprehensive reform movement and early market-based initiatives. While some references are now dated, Simon's analysis of policy motivations and social context remains highly relevant for understanding the foundations of contemporary debates. This is essential reading for anyone seeking to understand the historical roots of current educational structures and the ideological tensions that continue to influence policy development.

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