England

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Introduction

Overview of Education System

The Department for Education administers education at the national level and sets education standards and regulations. England has three main types of schools: state-funded, independent schools, and nonmaintained (i.e., not state-funded) special schools. State-funded schools are free for students and include local authority–maintained or community schools; voluntary controlled or aided schools; academies and free schools; grammar schools; and schools for students with special education needs. Prior to 2010, most state-funded schools were organized by local authorities; however, the past decade has seen an increase in diversity of school providers. In England, 37 percent of all primary schools and 78 percent of all secondary schools are now academies or free schools.[1] Academies are schools that have converted from local authority control to be funded directly by the government, and a free school can be set up by any suitable proposer as long as certain key requirements are met. These schools operate with more autonomy than schools under local control in areas such as sponsorship, implementation of the national curriculum, and decisions on staffing.

Education in England is divided into four stages: early years, primary, secondary, and further education. Early years education includes provision for all children from birth to age 5. Attendance is voluntary and the government provides some financial support for eligible families. Compulsory schooling begins after the start of the term following a child's fifth birthday and ends at age 16. Most students enter Reception year in primary school in the September following their fourth birthday and move from primary to secondary school at age 11. Many secondary schools offer education until age 18, but students may choose to enter a "sixth form" or further education college, apprenticeship, or traineeship at age 16. While compulsory schooling ends at age 16, continued participation in one of these education routes is required until at least age 18. Exhibit 1 provides an overview of the structure of education stages in England.

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Exhibit 1: Structure of Education Stages in England

	Stage	School/College Structure	ISCED Level
Early Years	Early Years Foundation Stages (ages 0–5)	▪ Maintained nursery schools ▪ Nursery classes in primary schools ▪ Private, independent, and voluntary early years providers ▪ Registered childminders	▪ Level 01: Early childhood education (ages 0–3) ▪ Level 02: Preprimary education (ages 3–5)
Primary	▪ Key Stage 1 (ages 5–7) ▪ Key Stage 2 (ages 7–11)	▪ Infant school (ages 5–7) ▪ Junior school (ages 7–11)	Level 1: Primary education
Secondary	▪ Key Stage 3 (ages 11–14) ▪ Key Stage 4 (ages 14–16)	▪ Secondary school (ages 11–18)	▪ Level 2: Lower secondary education (ages 11–14) ▪ Level 3: Upper secondary education (ages 14–16)
Further Education	Post-16 (ages 16–18)	▪ Sixth form college (ages 16–18) ▪ Further education college (ages 16+; sometimes ages 14+) ▪ Apprenticeship or traineeship (ages 16+)	Level 3: Upper secondary education

Use and Impact of PIRLS

England has taken part in every PIRLS cycle since 2001. The results are published in national reports available on the government's website.[2] The release of each cycle's results typically generates some media coverage focused on England's attainment relative to international performance, as well as on performance trends from previous cycles.[3,4] Summaries of the PIRLS results focusing on aspects that were found to be influential for reading achievement also are publicized online by other organizations.[5] Additionally, information about the relationship between reading achievement and factors such as teacher experience, teacher satisfaction, and hours of professional development (from the PIRLS teacher questionnaires) has been in online publications aimed at teachers and school leaders.[6,7]

Current reading initiatives have, to some extent, evolved in response to international evidence, which showed that standards of reading literacy in England were below those of some other countries, and that students who enjoyed reading from an early age tended to have higher attainment scores in PIRLS.[8] More recently, the improvement in results for the PIRLS 2016 cycle in England has been used as evidence to support changes made to the reading curriculum in 2010, which included a focus on phonics instruction and the introduction of a phonics screening check

for Year 1 students, in addition to relevant support initiatives.[9] The reported impact of reading enjoyment also has been used to inform initiatives encouraging reading for pleasure, including a Reading Framework,[10] the English Hubs program (of which reading for pleasure is a core aim),[11] and support for a Reading Together Day and Summer Reading Challenge organized by nonprofit organizations.

PIRLS data in combination with variables from the national student database also have been used by researchers in England to understand further the role of phonics instruction in reading development,[12] to explore potential biases in international assessments,[13] and to uncover some key factors impacting reading attainment.[14,15] Researchers also have compared the framework and procedures from PIRLS to the approach of England's national assessment to better understand evolution in the national assessment system.[16] Initiatives to increase the use of PIRLS data as a resource to improve classroom practice also have emerged. In 2017, a project called PIRLS for Teachers had academics work with teachers in England to provide guidance for interpreting data from PIRLS to help improve pedagogy in the classroom.[17]

The Language/Reading Curriculum in Primary Grades

The national curriculum was introduced in England in 2014 and sets out general requirements for the language and reading curriculum in primary grades.[18] Overall, the curriculum focuses less on specific content and more on essential subject knowledge and skills while giving teachers freedom to decide how to teach. The reading curriculum is integrated in the English Programmes of Study for Key Stages 1 and 2, which are part of the national curriculum and set general requirements for teachers and teaching.[19] Additionally, a nonstatutory Reading Framework has been available since July 2021 that provides guidance for schools, teachers, and initial teacher education programs to support the teaching of reading to students in the early grades and older students who have not yet mastered the foundations of reading.[20] The language and reading curriculum places strong emphasis on phonic knowledge, vocabulary development, grammar, punctuation and spelling, handwriting, and spoken English. Another important aspect of the curriculum is its encouragement of reading for pleasure.[21] The overarching aims for English in the national curriculum are to ensure that all students are able to:

- Read easily, fluently, and with good understanding
- Develop the habit of reading widely and often, for both pleasure and information
- Acquire a wide vocabulary, an understanding of grammar, and knowledge of linguistic conventions for reading, writing, and spoken language
- Appreciate England's rich and varied literary heritage
- Write clearly, accurately, and coherently, adapting language and style for a range of contexts, purposes, and audiences
- Use discussion in order to learn; elaborate and clearly explain understanding and ideas

- Be competent in the art of speaking and listening, making formal presentations, demonstrating to others, and participating in debate

Exhibit 2 summarizes the knowledge and skills in reading that students are expected to attain by the end of Key Stages 1 and 2.

Exhibit 2: Summary of National Curriculum for Reading in Primary School Years

Dimension	Key Stage 1 (Years 1–2)*	Key Stage 2 (Years 3–6)
Word Reading	▪ Apply phonic knowledge and skills as the route to decode words until automatic decoding has become embedded and reading is fluent ▪ Respond speedily with the correct sound to graphemes ▪ Read accurately by blending sounds in words of two or more syllables with familiar and unfamiliar Grapheme-Phoneme Correspondence (GPC) ▪ Read words with contractions and understand that the apostrophe represents the omitted letter(s) ▪ Read words containing common suffixes ▪ Read most words quickly and accurately, without overt sounding and blending, when they have been frequently encountered ▪ Read aloud books closely matched to their improving phonic knowledge, sounding out unfamiliar words accurately, automatically, and without undue hesitation ▪ Reread these books to build up fluency and confidence in word reading	▪ Read further exception words, noting the unusual correspondences between spelling and sound, and where these occur in the word ▪ Apply growing knowledge of root words, prefixes, and suffixes (morphology and etymology), both to read aloud and to understand the meaning of new words
Reading Comprehension	▪ Develop pleasure in reading, motivation to read, vocabulary, and understanding ▪ Understand both the books that they can already read accurately and fluently and those that they listen to ▪ Participate in discussions about books, poems, and other works that are read to them and those that they can read for themselves	▪ Develop and maintain positive attitudes to reading and understanding of what they read ▪ Be able to discuss and evaluate how authors use language, including figurative language, considering the impact on the reader ▪ Distinguish between statements of fact and opinion ▪ Retrieve, record, and present information from nonfiction ▪ Participate in discussions about books that are read to them and those they can read for themselves, building on their own and others' ideas and challenging views courteously ▪ Explain and discuss their understanding of what they have read, including through formal presentations and debates

* The first year of primary school (Reception year) forms part of the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS), and the program for reading in the early years is set out in the EYFS Statutory Framework.[22]

The reading curriculum does not prescribe the use of specific instructional materials. Rather, teachers usually decide which materials to use in consultation with the school's head teacher and subject coordinators. Teachers are encouraged to be creative and to use flexibility in consideration of their students' needs and capabilities when choosing instructional materials. Textbooks and instructional materials developed by commercial publishers do not require government approval. However, the Department for Education provides a validated list of products to help schools and teachers make informed choices about the materials they use for phonics instruction, specifically focused on Systematic Synthetic Phonics (SSP) instruction.[23] The language of instruction for reading is English. In the 2020–2021 academic year, 80.3 percent of students in England were recorded as having English as their first language.[24] For students recorded as having English as an additional language, teachers are asked to account for those students' needs and aim to provide the support and opportunities required to help develop their English to meet the expectations of the curriculum.

There are no requirements related to the use of technology for language or reading instruction specifically; however, the computing curriculum places a moderate emphasis on using search technologies effectively, mentioning this explicitly at Key Stage 2. Additionally, as part of the computing curriculum, students are taught to appreciate how search results are selected and ranked, and how to be discerning in evaluating digital content. While the Department for Education recognizes that technology enables schools to take advantage of new opportunities and learn what works in instruction, it is up to school leaders to decide how and where to implement technology in the classroom. In 2019, a national strategy to help education providers use technology to benefit educational spaces was released.[25] Schools take different approaches to using technology in the classroom. For example, some have embedded it into everything they do, with every student having their own device and the curriculum delivered using blended learning techniques.

More broadly, the implementation of the national curriculum content is approached flexibly in England and schools are given freedom as to how they achieve the goals and standards outlined in the curriculum. However, all maintained (i.e., state-funded) schools are required to have taught the relevant program of study by the end of each key stage and students are expected to know, apply, and understand the matters, skills, and processes specified in the relevant programs. The Department for Education offers several accountability measures and drivers to support curriculum implementation and continued school improvement, particularly for schools that do not meet expected standards.[26] These include inspection of schools by the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted) for state-funded schools, while independent schools are inspected by the Independent School Inspectorate or Ofsted. Additionally, programs supporting the implementation of the curriculum as well as information providing supporting evidence for the government's approach are available to all schools.[27]

Professional Development Requirements and Programs

The Department for Education in England recognizes the importance of ongoing professional development (OPD) for effective teaching practice. The requirements for OPD for practicing teachers are set out in a document developed by school leaders, teachers, academics, and education experts.[28] This guidance outlines five standards for effective teacher professional development. Although nonstatutory, it is considered a professional duty for teachers to participate in OPD, and state-maintained schools are expected to offer opportunities for all staff to participate in professional development and training regularly. The guidance recommends that the approach to OPD in schools should be defined according to their own needs and may take place both within and outside of working hours. Five days are set aside each school year to support nonteaching activities and OPD, including in-service training. OPD covers a variety of topics, including subject specific content, and is offered by a variety of providers including the schools themselves, academy chains, local authorities, and subject organizations.

A recent review of the national teacher education and development system led to reforms for professional development across all phases of a teacher's career.[29] These reforms are focused on four career phases: initial teacher education (i.e., preservice); early career teachers (i.e., new entries); specialists; and leadership (i.e., experienced teachers and/or school leaders). The reforms to the development approach for early career teachers include the extension of the induction period to two school years and an entitlement of two years of structured support and training.[30] Training opportunities, mentoring, and support from expert colleagues are key elements of this entitlement for early career teachers. The reforms for experienced teachers and school leaders are included in an updated suite of National Professional Qualifications (NPQs). NPQs are voluntary qualifications designed to support the professional development of existing expertise in schools through training programs as well as expert support and mentorship.[31]

Monitoring Student Progress in Reading

Monitoring student progress in reading is carried out by teachers in the classroom as well as through national assessments (e.g., national tests and statutory teacher assessments). Schools and teachers are given the freedom to decide their own approach to classroom-based assessments, though guidance is provided by the Department for Education.

The Standards and Testing Agency (STA) develops and delivers national assessments, which are regulated by the Office of Qualifications and Examinations Regulation (Ofqual). Students are assessed against national standards in English at the end of each key stage. National assessments at the end of Key Stage 1 are statutory teacher assessments informed by tests; at the end of Key Stage 2, the national assessment in reading is an externally developed test that is scored by trained markers, and the national assessment in writing is a statutory teacher assessment. In both cases, they cover national curriculum content and skills. The results of the national assessments are made

publicly available at the level of local authorities (Key Stages 1 and 2) and of schools (Key Stage 2 only) for accountability purposes and to help parents make informed decisions regarding their child's education.

STA also manages the administration of a statutory phonics screening check during Key Stage 1, which is taken in the year the student reaches the age of 6 (Year 1 for most students).[32] This screening check is delivered in a one-on-one setting by a familiar teacher and aims to identify whether a student has learned phonic decoding to an appropriate standard, as well as to initiate support for those who have not reached this standard. The results are made publicly available at the local authority level.

Special Reading Initiatives

A major drive to improve the standards of reading in schools and reduce the attainment gap between disadvantaged students and their peers was launched by the government in 2010.[33] This initiative includes funding to support disadvantaged children in early years settings, as well as funding to support disadvantaged students of all abilities at school. Strategies to improve reading standards in primary schools include the promotion of SSP instruction and the introduction of the phonics screening check in 2012, which helps teachers identify students who need extra help with reading. As part of this initiative, the government has funded projects to enhance the teaching of phonics. These have included a matched funding scheme for phonics resources and training from 2011 to 2013, phonics "roadshows" from 2016 to 2018, and phonics partnerships from 2015 to 2019. Addressing the attainment gap was a primary focus of these partnerships, which encouraged schools with proven expertise to help improve the quality of phonics instruction in less successful schools.[34] In 2015, the government also outlined a plan for building a reading program to raise standards of literacy in schools through continued focus on SSP instruction, as well as an enhanced focus on developing mature readers.[35] This plan included support for primary schools to set up book clubs and promote library membership for students in Key Stage 2, as well as funding for initiatives that encourage reading for pleasure and learning poetry. Other initiatives focused on addressing the attainment gap include the English Hubs program, launched in 2018, and the Reading Framework document, published in July 2021. The English Hubs program is a school-to-school support program that aims to support students making the slowest progress in reading. The core aims of this program include quality phonics instruction, early language development, and the promotion of reading for pleasure. The Reading Framework aims to support the teaching of early reading; it provides guidance to teach phonics effectively as well as strategies to identify children at risk of reading failure early on and organized provision to support the students identified.[36] A funding initiative for the purchase of validated SSP programs also was launched in 2021, with eligibility criteria that include the school having an above average proportion of disadvantaged students.[37]

There are no national interventions specifically for students with reading difficulties, but schools are encouraged to select approaches that best address student needs, and in 2014, extensive reforms were made to strengthen the special education needs and disability (SEND) system. These reforms aimed to improve early identification and intervention for students with SEND, including those with specific and other literacy difficulties. In addition, several specialist reading initiatives run by nonprofit organizations, charities, and foundations are implemented across England. For example, the Fischer Family Trust organization works with schools to provide tutoring to individual students who struggle in reading, specifically those who come from disadvantaged backgrounds.[38] Read On. Get On., launched in 2014, is a campaign led by the National Literacy Trust that aims to raise literacy levels across the country with a focus on encouraging families to read at home together.[39] A variety of other such initiatives exist at both national and community levels.

Response to COVID-19 Pandemic

Teaching and Learning During the COVID-19 Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic caused two nationwide school closures in England. The first round of school closures began in March 2020 and lasted until September 2020 for most students. In primary schools, the staggered reentry of certain year groups began in June but did not continue, and only certain grades (Reception year, Year 1, and Year 6) returned to in-person learning in the months before schools reopened for all students in September 2020. The second round of school closures occurred at the end of 2020 and lasted approximately two months. Schools closed for the December 2020 winter break, and students did not return for in-person learning until the beginning of March 2021.[a] These closures affected most students with some exceptions, including requiring schools to continue to offer reduced access to in-person learning for children of critical workers and children identified as vulnerable.[40] Independent schools were expected to follow the same guidance as state-funded schools throughout the pandemic.

Schools have been encouraged to provide opportunities for remote learning throughout the pandemic and remote education provision was required for state-funded students in cases where they tested positive for COVID-19 or presented with COVID-19 symptoms and were well enough to learn from home.[41] In these cases, schools were expected to offer 3 to 5 hours of remote education per school day, which included regular feedback and checking in with students.[42] Livestreaming was the preferred method for providing remote education; however, the benefit from alternative sources was recognized and online video lessons (e.g., Oak National Academy lessons) could be provided in lieu of school-led content.[43]

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[a] Students returned for one day on the first day of term in January 2021, but the closure resumed after that single day.

In order to support teachers in using technology for effective remote education, training programs and online resources were available for teachers and school leaders.[44] Additionally, as part of a large investment to support access to remote education and social care services, the government increased the number of resources available for students and schools by providing laptops, tablets, 4G wireless routers for students without internet access, and funding to support access to internet services for disadvantaged students.

For students with special education needs and disabilities, teachers are considered best placed to know how these students' needs can be met most effectively to ensure they continue to make progress if they are not learning in person. The requirement for schools to make their best effort to provide special needs education as required by law has continued throughout the COVID-19 pandemic.

Impact of the Pandemic on Student Learning

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on learning has been evaluated by several organizations. The Department for Education collaborated with Renaissance Learning and the Educational Policy Institute to understand students' progress during the 2020–2021 academic year.[45] Their findings revealed that for students in primary school, reading progress was approximately two months behind the expected levels when students returned to the classroom in autumn 2020. By the end of the 2021 summer term, some degree of recovery was seen, with students reported to be, on average, around 0.9 months behind in reading. RS Assessment and SchoolDash also conducted a study to assess the impact of education disruption on primary school students' progress.[46] The study investigated progress in reading and mathematics as well as grammar, punctuation, and spelling. The findings of this study have shown that in terms of English, students' progress in grammar, punctuation, and spelling has been more impacted than their progress in reading. Ofsted also has produced a series of reports on the impact of the pandemic across its sectors. Data from school visits and other activities were used to present an evaluation of the impact of the pandemic on several areas such as absenteeism, well-being, and curriculum implementation.[47] In their evaluations, reading commonly was identified by primary school leaders as an area where students had suffered considerable learning loss.

Policy and Practice Changes

The COVID-19 pandemic has prompted several policy and practice changes in England, particularly regarding procedures related to standardized assessments and examinations. Several assessments and examinations were canceled in the 2019–2020 academic year and again in the 2020–2021 academic year, including school leaving examinations. Some of the changes that affected the monitoring of reading in primary schools included the suspension of the English grammar, punctuation, and spelling test for Key Stage 2 students. However, at present, these pandemic-related policy changes have not been adopted for the longer term.

Impact of the Pandemic on PIRLS 2021

The COVID-19 pandemic affected data collection procedures for PIRLS 2021 in the areas of recruitment, test administration, training for administration, and training of scorers. The initial test administration time frame was postponed in England by 12 months to reduce the burden on schools. Pandemic-related pressures such as staff shortages/absences as well as an increased workload related to "catch-up" requirements following school closures affected recruitment to some extent; however, recruitment rates were not affected substantially. In terms of test administration, the option for schools to administer the test themselves was introduced, meaning schools were able to decide between an internal or external test administrator. After a successful trial during the field test stage, training for test administration and for the scoring of constructed response items was conducted remotely. The training also included guidance regarding COVID-19-related requirements for test administration.

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