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# Primary Education in Northern Ireland

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## Historical origins

A national system of elementary schools was established in Ireland in the 1830s. Although planned as a non-denominational system, by the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century most schools reflected denominational interests. This remained largely true after partition in 1921/2. County schools were owned by local authorities, but almost all the teachers and pupils were Protestant. Voluntary schools were owned by the Catholic Church. Most pupils stayed in elementary school until age 14 years.



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## Education Act 1947

The selective system of grammar and secondary schools was established in 1947. A new type of primary education, for pupils aged 5 to 11 years, was established at the same time. At the end of their primary education pupils could opt to take selection tests, the results of which were used to identify those who were believed to be best suited to the academic curriculum of grammar schools.



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## **Education Reform Order 1989**

The current system is largely shaped by the 1989 Education Reform Order. This gave greater priority to parental choice, encouraged competition between schools and created the statutory curriculum.

Primary schools now have more responsibility for their own budgets and administration. At the same time they face more accountability in comparison with the past.



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## **School types**

Currently there are four main types of primary schools in receipt of public funds: controlled schools which are closely linked to the Education and Library Boards; maintained schools which are linked to the Catholic Church; integrated schools which specifically cater for pupils from all religions; and a small number of Irish Medium schools.

Some Irish Medium and Independent Christian schools do not receive public funds.



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## **Primary curriculum**

The primary curriculum is meant to contribute to the spiritual, moral, cultural, intellectual and physical development of children. The primary school years are divided into two key stages:

Key stage 1: Years 1 to 4 (ages 4-8 years)

Key Stage 2: Years 5 to 7 (ages 9 to 11 years)



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## Primary curriculum

The statutory curriculum is comprised of specific subjects and a number of cross-curricular themes. Programmes of study are produced for each subject so that teachers know what they should teach. Attainment targets establish what children should have learned and end of Key Stage attainment testing checks these targets.

The Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) has the responsibility to provide information and guidance on the statutory curriculum.





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## Curriculum review

The curriculum has been under review for a number of years. Many have criticized the primary curriculum for containing too much content and being too divided into separate subjects. In addition, many worry about the distortion of the curriculum caused by preparation for the 11+ transfer tests.

The review process has taken these concerns into account and suggested new ways forward.





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## Curriculum review proposals

The current proposals are to split Key Stage 1 into a Foundation Stage and a shorter Key Stage 1. In the Foundation Stage the focus would be on development, rather than formal learning.

More generally, the different subjects would be grouped into areas of study and there would be greater use of formative assessment to guide teaching and learning. After consultation these proposals received widespread support.



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## 11+ debate

Following research on the effects of the selective system the Burns Report (2001) recommended, among other things, the abolition of the 11+ tests and academic selection, and the greater use of formative assessment in primary school. Following consultation the Costello Report (2004) concluded that academic selection at age 11 years was wrong in principle. In consequence the Minister of Education announced that the last 11+ tests would take place no later than 2008.



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## **School and pupil numbers**

In 2002/3 there were 897 grant-aided primary schools, 20 prep departments in grammar schools and 100 nursery schools. A total of almost nine thousand teachers worked in the schools. The enrolment in pre-school and primary education was over 180 thousand children.

Since 1997 there has been a rapid expansion in pre-school provision, largely based on the belief that this improves later educational performance.



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## The effects of poverty

A recent report from Save the Children claimed that a third of children lived in households where the only income was from benefits, that 40% of households had well-below average incomes and the 50% of children in Northern Ireland lived in poverty or at risk of poverty.

Poverty has a significant impact on children's diet and health, and can significantly reduce educational chances. Tackling the consequences of poverty remains a significant challenge for schools in Northern Ireland.



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## **Some useful websites**

Department of Education

[www.deni.gov.uk](http://www.deni.gov.uk)

Council for the Curriculum Examinations and Assessment

[www.ccea.org.uk](http://www.ccea.org.uk)

Northern Ireland Online

<http://www.onlineni.net>