



Primary curriculum survey

October 2024



Contents

Section 1	Summary and conclusions	1
Section 2	Introduction	2
Section 3	Methodology	3
Section 4	Hours taught	4
Section 5	Has the curriculum narrowed?	6

Section 1:

Summary and conclusions

This briefing outlines new analysis by the National Education Union of a survey of primary school teachers that asked them how much curriculum time is devoted to each subject offered in their setting. The analysis below shows that:

- Primary teaching hours are dominated by English and maths. Out of 20 and a half teaching hours reported weekly on average, 12 hours were taken up by English or maths, or 58 per cent of the total hours taught.
- This is above recommendations made by the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority in 2002.
- This figure was higher in year 6, the year in which students sit SATs tests, than in other groups – 14 extra minutes of English per week and 20 extra minutes of maths compared to the average across all year groups, reflecting the additional focus that SATs demands teachers put on these two subjects in order to achieve the best results for the school.
- Respondents say that some subjects are studied for less than an hour a week on average at primary school. In some cases, this is because foundation subjects may be alternated with each other on a half termly basis.
- This means that some pupils receiving, on average, almost 12 hours of English and maths lessons a week, can go weeks or even half a term at a time without learning any history at all.
- Time devoted to science falls well short of QCA recommendations and correlates with a decline in England's PISA scores for science in the 20 years since those recommendations were published.

- The pressure of the demands of English and maths on other curriculum subjects is particularly stark in schools with the most disadvantaged intakes. The most disadvantaged 20 per cent of schools dedicate one hour 33 minutes a week on average to PE. This is 15 minutes a week less than schools with the lowest levels of disadvantage.

The data is published as the government conducts a review of curriculum and assessment and forms part of the NEU's written evidence to the review. In its submission, the NEU has made the following calls:

- The curriculum is currently not, and must become, broad, diverse, inclusive and fit for the future in order for young people to thrive.
- The content mandated for each subject must become, then continue to remain, manageable and enable students to enjoy and consolidate their learning.
- Assessment methods are not diverse enough to develop the breadth of skills required nor to properly allow students to show what they can do – in many instances using just one mode, the formal written test.
- Results of tests are misused for school accountability, leading to damaging, perverse consequences to curriculum breadth and student and staff wellbeing.
- Professionals must be at the heart of curriculum and assessment reforms. No significant change to curriculum and assessment can be made without meaningful, consistent engagement with the profession.

Section 2:

Introduction

The government's independent review of curriculum and assessment (CAR) has reinvigorated a national conversation about the purpose of education. As a descriptor of the range of knowledge, skills and capabilities students should aspire to learn, the curriculum can be seen to outline the purpose and direction of our education system. Reform to the curriculum must be guided by a set of objectives and should contribute to the breaking down of barriers experienced by some students in accessing certain subjects.

This research suggests that Government policy has an impact on where schools allocate teaching resources, and highlights gaps in our current curriculum that the CAR must address. It also suggests that while the curriculum is set by central government, its implementation varies across the country and the educational experience children receive is impacted by a variety of factors.

The CAR presents an opportunity to afford all pupils a rich education at a time when the sector faces many challenges. The government's ambition that barriers to opportunity should not exist for any students is a noble one, as is the aim that all children can thrive at school and beyond.

Educational progress encompasses many elements and cannot be summarised in test scores or Ofsted ratings alone. Polling by Parentkind¹, for example, suggests that 88 per cent of parents are of the same opinion. They note that four key areas of priority for parents in terms of educational outcomes are: "developing skills that are useful outside of school", "supporting pupils' personal development", "preparing pupils to become responsible citizens" and "introducing [and having access to] a broad range of subjects".

In primary schools, leaders have faced ever growing pressures on budgets and are constrained by the demands of central government policy. Children currently sit statutory assessments in four out of their seven years in primary school. Because these tests are used for accountability, they are high stakes for schools and play far too important a role in school life, meaning certain subjects are prioritised over others. Recent research suggests that SATs alone mean that a significant proportion of school time is spent on exam preparation.

Curriculum reform is a crucial lever in ensuring educational opportunities and experiences are the best they can be. At the same time, schools face constraints and incentives placed on them by funding levels, government policy, and contextual factors. This analysis seeks to shed light on the disparities that exist and suggest solutions to ensure all children receive a rich and rounded education.

Section 3:

Methodology

This short survey of 1698 NEU primary teacher members on curriculum content was conducted between 15 and 24 October 2024.

We asked teachers:

Please could you tell us the amount of time your class will spend on different subjects this week? (in hours and minutes)

- a. Please include time spent even if you are not teaching your class – PPA time or you work part-time.
- b. Where a lesson is topic based and covers more than one subject, please split the time between the subjects. For example, if your class spent one hour on a creative writing activity imagining they were a Roman soldier stationed on Hadrian's Wall – allocate 30 minutes to English and 30 minutes to history.
- c. Please include reading, handwriting and SPAG within the total for English.

We gave respondents a list of subjects:

English; mathematics; science; art & design; computing; design technology; foreign languages; geography; history; music; physical education; PHSE.

The survey was sent out to all English state school primary teachers in the NEU membership who are in permanent employment. We discounted responses from teachers in nursery classes, reception and those who taught across multiple year groups to focus on responses covering the key stage 1 and 2 curricula and to give clarity on the year group covered. We only included members for whom we had full characteristics for both them and their schools. We further excluded those who gave outlying responses to the question on hours. The median number of total hours reported by members across all subjects combined was 20.5. We excluded responses where the total hours were below the tenth percentile (14.75 hours) or above

the 90th percentile (25 hours). After this data cleaning process, the responses from 1698 teachers were used for the figures in this report. These were then reweighted in line with national figures for gender, region, phase, age, school governance and the level of deprivation in schools as measured by the proportion of pupils eligible for free school meals. Responses were also divided by the year group, from year 1 to year 6.

Section 4

Hours taught

Primary teaching hours are dominated by English and maths. Out of 20 and a half hours weekly on average that were accounted for by members, 12 hours were taken up by English or maths, or 58 per cent of the total hours taught (Figure 1).

This figure was higher in Year 6 than in other groups – 14 extra minutes of English per week and 20 extra minutes of maths compared to the average across all year groups, reflecting the additional focus that SATs demands teachers put on these two subjects in order to achieve the best results for the school. Despite this, as a percentage of time spent,

English and maths are not significantly higher in Year 6. Members reported and categorised more learning hours overall for the older pupils, perhaps due to lessons becoming more structured and differentiated from one another as they move further through primary school.

Some of the amounts of time recorded make little sense on a practical level. For example, an average of 27 minutes a week on design technology would barely provide enough time to set up the lesson, get resources out and clear away afterwards, let alone for pupils to actually create something. This may reflect

Please could you tell us the amount of time your class will spend on different subjects this week?

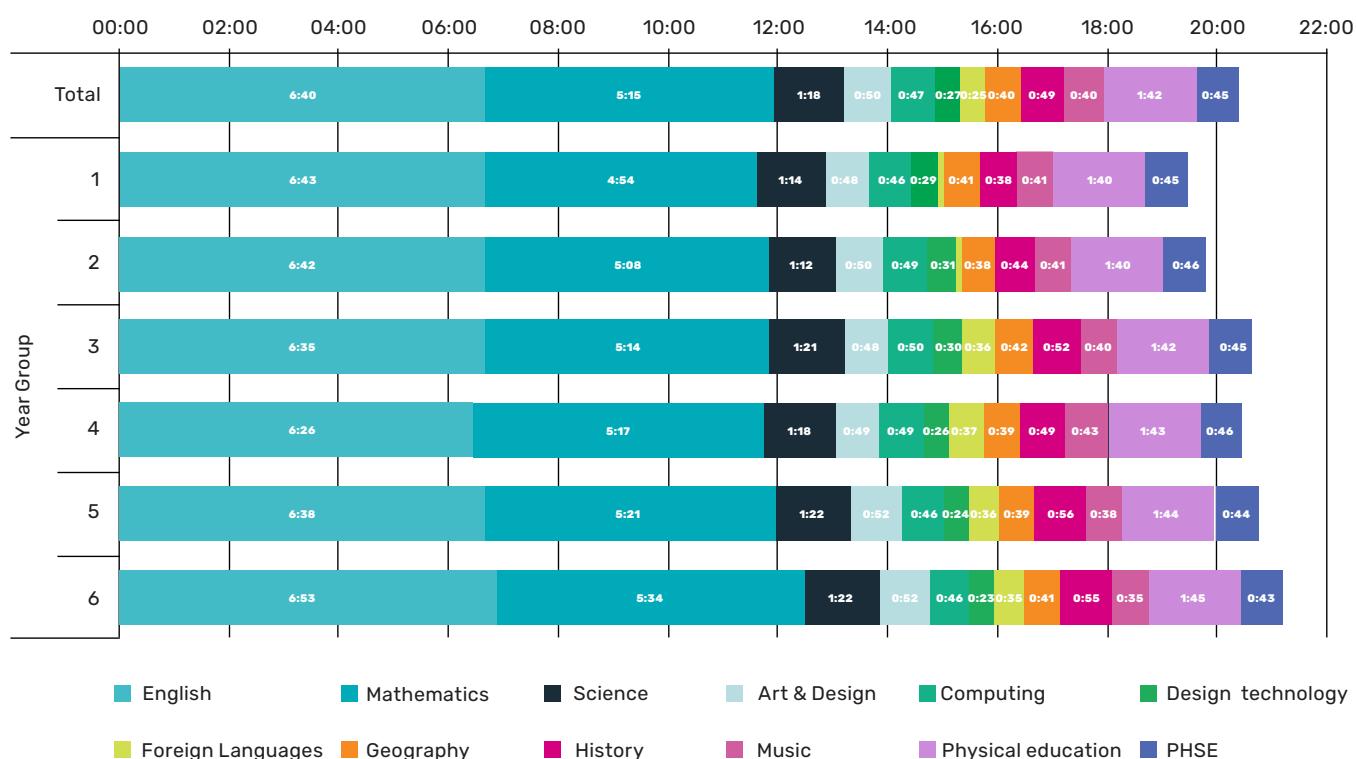


Figure 1

schools block scheduling design technology on an alternate basis with art, either on a weekly or half-termly basis. We know from members both within this survey and elsewhere that this approach is regularly used, as it is in some schools with alternating history and geography.

Less time is spent on PE in schools with the most disadvantaged pupils (as measured by rate of eligibility for free school meals). The most disadvantaged 20 per cent of schools dedicate one hour 33 minutes a week on average to PE. This is 15 minutes a week less than schools with the lowest levels of disadvantage (Table 1).

Reported weekly hours spent on PE in primary schools by disadvantage quintile

Least	Low	Average	High	Highest
1:48	1:49	1:44	1:41	1:33

Table 1

For this survey we only listed foundation subjects in the national curriculum, but members responded to the open question to point out considerable time is also spent on RE each week, particularly in faith schools. Other activities, such as regular assemblies or theme days are also not listed here.

Section 5

Has the curriculum narrowed?

In 2002, the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) suggested sensible amounts of time to devote to subjects to ensure a broad and balanced curriculum.²

KEY STAGE 1 Starting points			
	Hours:minutes for subjects recommended to be taught each week	Total hours over one year of 36 weeks	Percentage* of a 21-hour teaching week
English	5:00 - 7:30	180 - 270	24% - 36%
Mathematics	3:45	135	18%
Science	(1:30 if taught weekly)	54	7%
D&T	(0:50 if taught weekly)	30	4%
ICT	(0:50 if taught weekly)	30	4%
History	(0:50 if taught weekly)	30	4%
Geography	(0:50 if taught weekly)	30	4%
Art and Design	(0:50 if taught weekly)	30	4%
Music	(0:50 if taught weekly)	30	4%
PE	1:15	45	6%
RE	1:00	36	5%
Totals	17:30 - 20:00	630 - 720	84% - 96%

KEY STAGE 2 Starting points			
	Hours:minutes for subjects recommended to be taught each week	Total hours over one year of 36 weeks	Percentage* of a 21-hour teaching week
English	5:00 - 7:30	180 - 270	21% - 32%
Mathematics	4:10 - 5:00	150 - 180	18% - 21%
Science	(2:00 if taught weekly)	72	9%
D&T	(0:55 if taught weekly)	33	4%
ICT	(0:55 if taught weekly)	33	4%
History	(0:55 if taught weekly)	33	4%
Geography	(0:55 if taught weekly)	33	4%
Art and Design	(0:55 if taught weekly)	33	4%
Music	(0:55 if taught weekly)	33	4%
PE	1:15	45	5%
RE	1:15	45	5%
Totals	19:10 - 22:30	690 - 810	82% - 96%

When you compare the results from our survey with the QCA recommendations, which were based on studies of existing practice, the average amount of time devoted to English, maths and PE is higher, while the amount of time devoted to science, D&T, geography and music is noticeably lower. This likely means that many schools are teaching less of these subjects now than they were 20 years ago, and as a result, many students do not have access to a sufficiently broad or well-balanced curriculum. Though a core subject, the time allotted to science has fallen from the recommendation of 2 hours a week to just 1 hour and 20 minutes. This correlates with a steady decline in England's PISA scores for science³, tabulated below.

2006	2009	2012	2015	2018	2022
516	515	516	512	507	503

Figure 2

The NEU is not the only organisation concerned about the lack of focus on subjects other than maths and English. Ofsted reported their concerns about geography: "Inspectors found that almost half of the schools inspected did not teach the breadth of

knowledge set out in the national curriculum, particularly in key stage 2."⁴ A Fabian Society report revealed that two thirds of primary school teachers in England say there is less arts education now than in 2010, and half said the quality has declined.⁵ In addition, The Cultural Learning Alliance say increased accountability measures focus on a narrow range of subject areas, and funding pressures have led to a systematic downgrading or exclusion of arts subjects and experiences.⁶

¹ Parentkind: <https://www.parentkind.org.uk/research-and-policy/parent-research/parent-voice-reports/parent-voice-report-2021>

² QCA, Designing and timetabling the primary curriculum, 2002, page 34 <https://devonshirehill.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/Art-and-Design-Curriculum-Policy-Guidance-Document-A.pdf>

³ DfE, PISA 2022: National Report for England, December 2023 https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/656dc3321104cf0013fa742f/PISA_2022_England_National_Report.pdf

⁴ Ofsted, Research review series: geography, 17 June 2021 <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/research-review-series-geography/research-review-series-geography>

⁵ Fabian Society, Primary colours: The decline of arts education in primary schools and how it can be reversed, 11 January 2019 <https://fabians.org.uk/publication/primary-colours/>

⁶ <https://www.culturallearningalliance.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/The-Arts-in-Schools-full-report-2023.pdf>

