

## The school curriculum – exam factory or education for life?

You have one week to prepare for a discussion on this topic.

In your groups, discuss some, or all, of these points:

- basic reading, writing and numeracy are all that teenagers need to learn
- practical subjects are undervalued in schools
- imaginative and creative subjects don't matter any more
- schools only care about exam results

The Welsh Government has suggested a new 'curriculum for life' for secondary schools.

It will have six 'Areas of Learning and Experience':

- expressive arts
- health and well-being
- humanities (including RE which should remain compulsory to age 16)
- languages, literacy and communication (including Welsh, which should remain compulsory to age 16, and modern foreign languages)
- mathematics and numeracy
- science and technology

It will also include three cross-curricular responsibilities: literacy, numeracy and digital competence.



"My grandparents talk about the interesting things they learned in school such as money and budgeting skills, how to cook and plan meals, making items in woodwork or metalwork, basic first-aid and car maintenance. That sounds much more relevant to me than some of the things I do in school now."

"What is the point of learning about geography, history, science or anything else? Everything you need to know can be found on the internet. Schools should focus on using computers more as there is no point in writing things down when everything you need is there."



"As a learner in Year 11 all I do is prepare for examinations. The emphasis is all on passing maths, English and science."

# Wales still worst in UK in world education tests

Scores of Welsh students in science, reading and maths were below the average of 72 countries and economies taking part in a major study of educational performance. Welsh students also did worse than their counterparts in England, Scotland and Northern Ireland.

The Pisa tests are taken by 15-year-olds every three years. Pisa's full title is Programme for International Student Assessment. Tests are always in maths, reading and science. They are run every three years by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). Singapore outperforms all other participating countries in science. Japan, Estonia, Finland and Canada are the four highest-performing OECD countries

This is the fourth time Wales has done worse than the other UK nations.

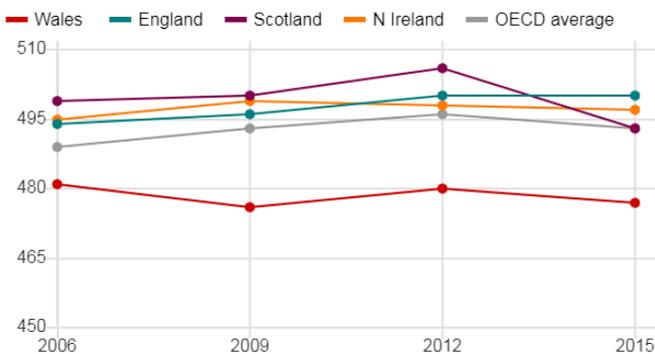
The latest results show:

- In maths, Wales scored 478, below England and Northern Ireland which both scored 493 and Scotland which scored 491
- In reading, Wales once again came last in the UK with 477, England scored 500, Northern Ireland 497 and Scotland 493.

Education Secretary Kirsty Williams said Wales could do better. "We can all agree we are not yet where we want to be," she said.

## Pisa test result averages in reading

Scores of 15-year-old pupils, UK nations

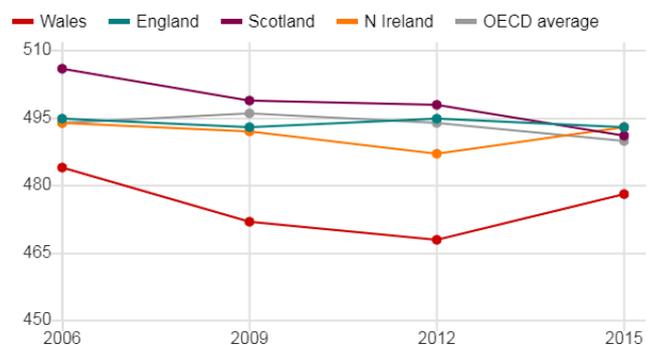


OECD, December 2016

BBC

## Pisa test result averages in maths

Scores of 15-year-old pupils, UK nations



OECD, December 2016

BBC

Wales is represented by the bottom line on both graphs.

## **Korea's School System a Pressure Cooker for Children**

It has been praised by world leaders and delivered top-five results for South Korea in global literacy and numeracy tests, but among Koreans themselves, the education system is controversial.

One of the key aspects of Korean education is The Korean Scholastic Aptitude Test, or KSAT, that streams students for universities.

Intense focus on exam scores creates an irony: knowledge is often ignored in favour of test preparation. One mother says "My son enjoys reading books but I don't want him to read, as he won't pass his tests." Education journalist Sue Kim adds "In Korea you have to know the right answer to every question, but in the US or Europe, the process of getting to the answer is much more important."

The pressure to ace exams and enter prestigious universities, has spawned a multi-billion dollar industry of cram schools that offer children a chance to get ahead; Kim the reporter noted that when her daughter entered elementary school, every single new student could already read. "Parents prepare their children before school, so what is happening is that everyone in the classroom is equally prepared," she said. "They are equally far advanced of the curriculum - and that is happening at every level." British children might be shocked at the hours their Korean counterparts spend in cram schools: Teens commonly leave school and attend the tutoring sessions until midnight.

Scholastic pressures are so great that suicide is the number-one killer of South Koreans under 40 (compared to traffic accidents in other developed nations), while educational cost burdens are so colossal, they are cited as a factor in the declining national birth rate.

## **Creative subjects being squeezed**

Across Wales, secondary pupils are finding themselves with fewer and fewer subject options, and teachers in the arts are feeling the pressure.

The government's emphasis on judging secondary schools on outcomes in the core subjects of English, maths and science has taken the brunt of the blame. There has been a decline in creative subjects with 9% drop in GCSE entries for drama this year, along with a 7% fall in music and 4% in art and design. But that isn't the whole story. Some of the biggest drops have been in vocational subjects – entries to leisure and tourism fell by 30% this year and hospitality by 22%.

Many headteachers are frustrated with the lack of options their schools are able to offer. Jason Roberts, a headteacher in Swansea says that his school would love to offer engineering and a wider range of media-related subjects – but it simply can't because of the emphasis placed on more traditional academic subjects. Roberts says the new, more narrowly academic curriculum doesn't make sense for all of his pupils.

"If you've got English, maths and science that's fantastic, but does every single plumber, every single car mechanic, every single doctor, solicitor, barrister need to have history, geography or a modern language? I would probably say not," says Roberts.

## **Academic subjects 'essential for a strong education system'**

Meilyr Rowlands, Estyn's chief inspector of schools for Wales, said he supported the shift back towards traditional academic subjects at GCSE, as these offered the best chance of progress to higher-level study.

"The worst thing that can happen to a working-class child is they don't get the full education to 16 that leaves them with options that could take them to university or vocational education," said Mr Rowlands.

Mr Rowlands said that "knowledge is power", which is especially important for students from disadvantaged backgrounds. In making English, maths and science the foundation of secondary school education, these youngsters can realise their dreams and do just as well as their peers from comparatively wealthy families.

The problem presently, is that poorer pupils are often encouraged to take what he called "less demanding qualifications", meaning that, in effect, the power that comes with knowledge – courtesy of core subjects – is taken away from them. This perpetuates the divide in attainment levels between poor and rich.

"If we are to deliver a fairer, more socially mobile society, we must secure the highest standards of academic achievement for all young people, and especially those from the least advantaged backgrounds."

## **What's changing in Wales?**

A new curriculum is being developed for settings and schools in Wales. A final version will be available in January 2020, and will be used throughout Wales by 2022. The whole approach to developing young people aged 3 to 16 will change. Now more than ever, young people need to be adaptable to change, capable of learning new skills throughout life and equipped to cope with new life scenarios. Advances in technology and globalisation have transformed the way we live and work. These changes have profound implications for what, and how, children and young people need to learn. After all, tablets and smart phones didn't even exist when the last curriculum was introduced in 1993.

Schools and teachers need more flexibility to respond to this environment, using a new curriculum which will promote high achievement and engage the interest of all children and young people to help them reach their potential. The new curriculum will bring this about by making learning more experience-based, the assessment of progress more developmental, and by giving teachers the flexibility to deliver in more creative ways that suit the learners they teach.

The new curriculum will have more emphasis on equipping young people for life. It will build their ability to learn new skills and apply their subject knowledge more positively and creatively. As the world changes, they will be more able to adapt positively.

### **The purpose of the new curriculum is to support our children and young people to be:**

- ambitious, capable learners, ready to learn throughout their lives
- enterprising, creative contributors, ready to play a full part in life and work
- ethical, informed citizens of Wales and the world
- healthy, confident individuals, ready to lead fulfilling lives as valued members of society.

### **It will have six 'Areas of Learning and Experience (AoLE).**

- Expressive arts.
- Health and well-being.
- Humanities (including RE which should remain compulsory to age 16).
- Languages, literacy and communication (including Welsh, which should remain compulsory to age 16, and modern foreign languages).
- Mathematics and numeracy.
- Science and technology.

It will also include three cross-curricular responsibilities: literacy, numeracy and digital competence.

## **Wales' new curriculum 'does not have enough of what actually matters', say school leaders**

The new curriculum in Wales favours skills over knowledge. Pupils will not be taught "enough of what actually matters" under Wales' planned new school curriculum and teachers have "lost faith" in the way the radical changes are being developed. These stark warnings come from leading schools organisations asked for their views on the curriculum being developed that will be the biggest change in education in Wales. In Wales, it would see traditional subjects scrapped and replaced by six "areas of learning and experience". The consultation has revealed that senior people in education in Wales have major concerns about the proposals being developed.

In too many cases, not enough of what actually matters has been included in the Areas of Learning and Experience (AoLEs). Too many statements are generic, poorly defined and weak on knowledge and skills development. As a result, it is likely that pupils' knowledge, understanding and skills development will be left to chance, i.e. relying heavily on the knowledge and experience of individual teachers as opposed to an entitlement defined by the curriculum.

The new Welsh curriculum could be disastrous. And there's two main reasons for that: One is the absence of academic rigour - it really is a dumbing down of the curriculum. The major worry perhaps is even deeper than that, which is that it will widen inequality. The old academic knowledge - the best that has been thought and said by human beings - will still be given to the children of the well-educated middle class by their parents. But the other children - who can't get it from their parents - are completely dependent on schools for it. And if they're not getting the best that has been thought and said from schools, they will get it from nowhere, and that will make inequality of learning and of culture wider than it has ever been.