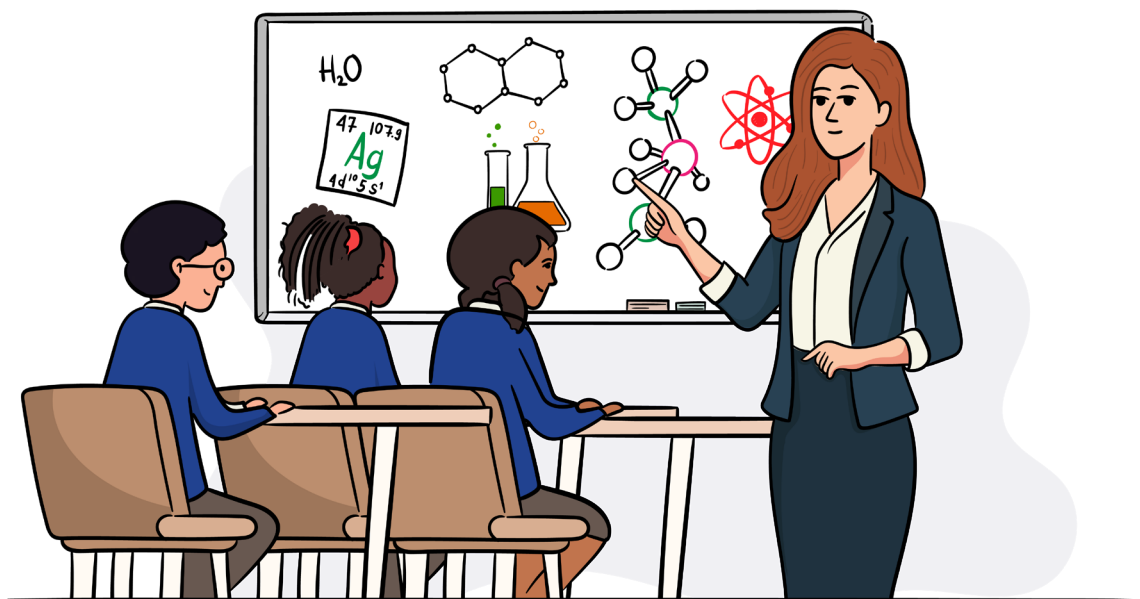


# About the Welsh Education System Secondary Schools

Guidance for parents of children who use  
English as an Additional Language (EAL)



## What does this guidance cover?

This guidance provides information about the Welsh education system. It is designed to help you find a school place for your child in Wales and know what to expect for your child's schooling.

There are different types of schools in Wales. Most schools are free. These are known as *state schools*. But other schools, known as *fee-paying, independent, or private schools*, charge fees.

This guidance tells you about Welsh state schools, where you don't pay fees. There are different types of state secondary schools (also sometimes called "high schools"):

- *Community schools* are run by the local council.
- *Community special schools* deliver special education for children with additional learning needs.
- *Voluntary-controlled* and *voluntary-aided schools* are run by organisations, for example the Roman Catholic Church, or the Church in Wales.
- *Foundation schools* are run by a charity.
- *Maintained nursery schools* are for children who are too young to start school.
- *Faith schools* are associated with a particular religion.

In some schools the children learn in Welsh; in other schools they learn mainly in English, with some Welsh.

You can also choose to teach your child at home, either full-or part-time. This is called *home education* (or *elective home education* or *home schooling*). You can find out more here: [https://bit.ly/Handbook\\_for\\_home\\_educators](https://bit.ly/Handbook_for_home_educators).



The following table provides some basic information about the places of learning that children in Wales attend up to the age of 16.

**Table 1. Basic information about places of learning in Wales to age 16**

Place of learning	Information
Nursery	Not compulsory (your child does not need to attend) Child's age: from 0 The government provides funding for at least ten hours per week at ages 3–4
Primary school: Reception	Not compulsory (your child does not need to attend) Child's age: 4–5
Primary school: Years 1–6	Compulsory (your child has to attend) Child's age: 5–11 years The school day usually starts around 9am and ends around 3pm Children go to school on weekdays only (Monday to Friday)
Secondary school: Years 7–11	Compulsory Child's age: 11–16 years School days and times are the same as primary schools



## 1. How can I find a school place for my child?

Contact your local council (also called the *local authority*, or *LA*). If your child is 5 to 16 years old, your local council must find them a school place in the area where you live. If your child is in a primary school in Wales, the school will help you with your child's move to secondary school.

You can find more information about school admissions here: [https://bit.ly/School\\_admissions\\_and\\_appeals](https://bit.ly/School_admissions_and_appeals).

### Here are some ideas to help you decide which school is best for your child:

- Look at the school's website.
- Read the most recent inspection report, from the government: [https://bit.ly/Latest\\_inspection\\_reports](https://bit.ly/Latest_inspection_reports).
- Check how well the school is doing: [https://bit.ly/My\\_local\\_school](https://bit.ly/My_local_school).

- Arrange to visit the school or attend an open evening. Open evenings will be advertised on the school's website.
- Talk to other parents about what they think of the school.
- Find out which schools let learners do a GCSE exam in their home language. There is more information about this in [Section 7](#).

#### When you know which schools you like, here are the next steps:

- Fill in the online application form on your local authority's website. The form will ask you which school you would like your child to attend. You can choose more than one school.
- The form will ask you for your address and postcode so that your child can be placed in a school near to where you live. This is called the *catchment area*.
- Each local authority has its own School Admissions Team. You can ask the School Admissions Team for help, because the application process can be complicated. Find out how to contact them on your local authority's website.
- Ask the council if they can tell you about other people, community groups, and interpreters who can help you.

## 2. What age will my child start secondary school?

In Wales, children start secondary school in the September after they turn 11-years old. Secondary school begins in Year 7 and ends in Year 11.

Young people can leave school on the last Friday in June if they will be 16 by the end of August. Then they must be in education, training, or an apprenticeship until they turn 18.

## 3. How do I find out the school term and holiday dates?

The school year always starts in September and usually ends in July. It is usually divided into three terms of approximately 13 weeks.

School term and holiday dates can be different in different places in Wales and can be different from dates in England. Speak to your child's school to find out the dates or check on this website: [https://bit.ly/School\\_term\\_and\\_holiday\\_dates](https://bit.ly/School_term_and_holiday_dates). You can put in your postcode to find the correct dates for your area.

School holidays are usually from the end of December to the beginning of January (Christmas and New Year); March/April (depending on when Easter falls); and August. Most schools also have a half-term holiday. This is a week's holiday in the middle of each term. Each school will publish its own school calendar with all holidays marked on it.

Many schools have five INSET (**IN Service Training**) days every year. These are days when teachers attend training and meetings, and learners do not have to go to school. INSET days

are spread across the year, not all together in one week. They can be on different dates in different schools, and will be marked on the school calendar each year.

#### 4. What can I expect from school?

Look at the school's website to find information and news about the school. Most schools also publish their own school prospectus or welcome booklet for new parents.

School websites may have a translation function, or you can ask the school for help translating the information if you need to.

##### What will my child get at school?

- Transition days: Year 6 learners may have the opportunity to spend one or two days in their new secondary school to see what it will be like.
- A place in a class (known as a *form*) of about 30 children. The children are usually of the same age. Each form usually has their own form tutor.
- A welcoming period (also known as a *settling-in period*) to help your child make a good start to life in their new school. This might include special arrangements if your child has recently arrived in the country or the area, or is starting school at a different time in the year (not in September).
- A regular timetable of lessons. Each lesson will be taught by a subject specialist.
- Fair and equal treatment, with a focus on the inclusion of all children.
- Work to complete at home (*homework*), linked to what they have learnt at school.

If you are not sure about the way the school works, for example about homework, look at the school's website or speak to the staff.

##### What else will my child do at school?

Your child will be able to take part in extra-curricular activities, school trips, and other events. These might include:

- Assemblies and opportunities for collective worship.
- Extra-curricular activities and clubs, like sport, music, and drama. These are not compulsory and might be at lunch time or after school has finished. There might be a small charge for some clubs.
- School trips, to places that are linked to things they're learning about. There is usually a payment for these trips, but schools are often able to help with this for families who need it. School trips are carefully organised by teachers so that children are always safe. Some trips are optional, but some are a compulsory part of a GCSE course to support their learning. For example, for GCSE geography, learners will need to visit a place (e.g. a coastal area).



- School productions, including drama performances and music concerts.
- Social and fundraising events, such as sports days, summer and Christmas fairs, discos, and quizzes.
- Events and sessions for learners in Year 11, with advice and guidance about transitioning to post-16 education. Please see more information in [Section 9](#).

There are often opportunities for parents to become more involved in their child's school, such as volunteering to help at events or on school trips. Parents can also serve on the school's board of governors, supporting the leadership team to ensure the school is as effective as it can be. Ask your school for more information about this, or any of the activities mentioned above.

### How will I know what is happening at school?

Your child's school will communicate regularly with you so that you know what is happening.

Schools communicate with families in different ways:

- *School website:* Schools will share information on their website. Check the school calendar to find important dates like holidays, INSET (teacher training) days, and parents' evenings.
- *Digital communication:* Schools might send you information by text message or ask you to join a group-messaging system like WhatsApp. Some schools also post information on social media, such as a school Facebook page or Twitter/X account.
- *Online systems:* Some schools use online systems and platforms; for example, ClassDojo or Go4Schools. You can usually use these on either a computer or a smartphone app, and most have a translation function. Schools might use this system to communicate with parents about events, homework, and behaviour, or to share what students have been learning. Many schools also use these online systems to take payments, such as for school trips.
- *Emails and letters:* Many schools use emails and letters to communicate with parents. Letters are often sent home with the students instead of through the post. Make sure you tell the school if you do not have access to emails.
- *Parents' evenings:* You will be invited to speak to your child's teachers at parents' evenings. These happen at least once a year. You will speak with a different teacher for each subject, and find out about your child's progress. If you need to, you can bring someone with you who can interpret what the teachers say, or ask the school whether they can arrange an interpreter for you.
- *Reports:* Schools provide parents with a written report at the end of every school year. This will tell you how your child has progressed in each subject. Ask the school whether they can help with getting the report translated for you.



- *Meetings and information evenings:* Schools will use meetings to share important information, for example choosing which subjects to study at GCSE. You will have the chance to ask questions either during or at the end of the meeting.
- *Direct communication:* You can contact the school by phone or email or arrange for a meeting with the teacher if this is appropriate.

## 5. What will school expect from me?

As a parent, you will be expected to:

- Send your child to school every day, unless they are ill, or have an appointment, or it is a religious holiday. If you need help with the cost of sending your child to school, there is information about free school transport here: [https://bit.ly/Help\\_with\\_home\\_to\\_school\\_transport](https://bit.ly/Help_with_home_to_school_transport) and here: [https://bit.ly/Home\\_to\\_school\\_transport](https://bit.ly/Home_to_school_transport).
- Make sure your child gets to school on time.
- Contact the school to tell them if your child will not be coming in that day and why. Tell the school in advance if you can.
- Take your children on holiday in the school holidays only. If you decide to take your children on holiday during term time, you may have to pay a fine. Speak to the school to find out more or look at this website: [https://bit.ly/School\\_attendance\\_and\\_absence](https://bit.ly/School_attendance_and_absence) and this website: [https://bit.ly/Penalty\\_notices\\_for\\_regular\\_non-attendance\\_at\\_school](https://bit.ly/Penalty_notices_for_regular_non-attendance_at_school).
- Tell the school about any important events or circumstances for your child or family. They will try their best to support you. Look at this website for more information about taking time off school for religious festivals: [https://bit.ly/School\\_attendance\\_and\\_religious\\_festivals\\_guidance](https://bit.ly/School_attendance_and_religious_festivals_guidance).
- Tell the school about your child's medical conditions and give them your contact details so they can contact you easily.
- Fill in consent forms to say that your child can go on school trips, or have photographs taken, for example.



## 6. Who is who in school?

Look at the school prospectus or website to see information about the teachers and other members of staff. Some schools also have photographs of staff on their website or displayed in the school reception area.



Ask the school which staff members will be working with your child. These may include:

- *Senior leaders* – e.g. the head teacher and deputy head teacher;
- *Office staff* – e.g. the school receptionist;
- *Teaching staff* – e.g. year leaders, form tutors, and subject teachers;
- *Pastoral staff* – e.g. attendance officers, teaching assistants, or learning mentors;
- *Specialist staff*:
  - Schools may have an EAL Co-ordinator or EAL Lead Teacher who can help you understand what support your child may need.
  - All schools must have an Additional Learning Needs Co-ordinator (ALNCo), who provides support for children with special educational needs and disabilities.
  - All school also have a Designated Safeguarding Lead (DSL), who makes sure that all the learners in the school are safe and well.



## 7. What will your child learn at school and what tests will they have?

### Curriculum

A “curriculum” is a plan for what children will learn in school. It is set out by the government, and all state schools use it to plan what and how they will teach in each lesson.

There is a new curriculum in Wales, which will be used in all schools by 2026. This curriculum is designed to provide a “continuum of learning” from ages 3 to 16. The part of the curriculum that focuses on children up to the age of 8 is called “foundation learning”. This also includes older learners who have additional needs.

You can find more information about the new curriculum, available in 19 languages, here: [https://bit.ly/A\\_new\\_curriculum\\_in\\_Wales](https://bit.ly/A_new_curriculum_in_Wales).

The new Welsh curriculum has four main aims. These aims are called “the four purposes”. They are the starting point for what children will learn in school.

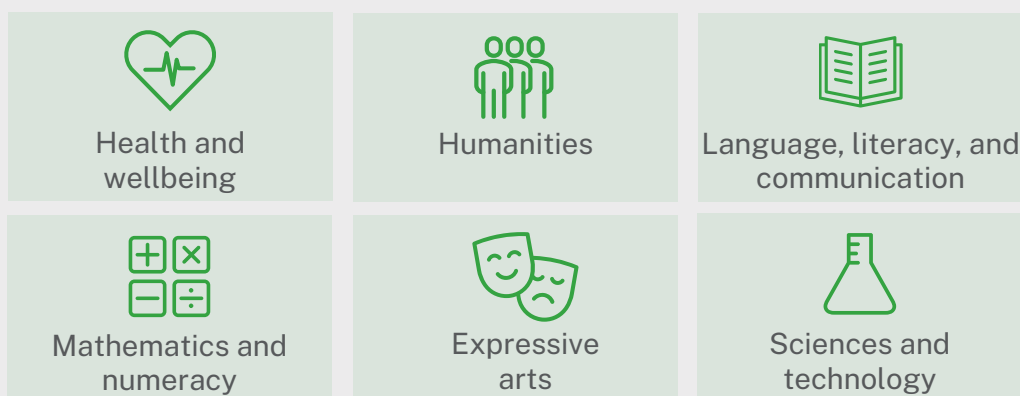


The four purposes help all learners to become:

- Ambitious and capable learners;
- Enterprising and creative learners;
- Ethical and informed learners;
- Healthy and confident learners.

Your child's school will help you to understand how they plan to do this.

The new Welsh curriculum has six Areas of Learning and Experience (AoLE). These are:



All your child's learning will be linked to these Areas of Learning and Experience.

Each Area of Learning and Experience has a set of descriptions called "statements of what matters". These tell teachers what is important for children to learn in each area.

### Assessment

In Years 7, 8, and 9, children are required by law to take personalised assessments in literacy and numeracy. These are online tests, taken on a computer.

In the May and June of Years 10 and 11, most learners take national GCSE exams. "GCSE" stands for "General Certificate of Secondary Education". Some schools also offer BTEC certificate courses. "BTEC" stands for "Business and Technology Education Council".

In all years, teachers will also assess your child's learning informally, through their classwork and homework. This is called *formative assessment*.

Each statement of what matters (see the "Curriculum" section above) has a set of descriptions called "progression steps". The progression steps are linked to a child's age. They help teachers make their formative assessment, to find out how each child's learning develops as they grow.

Teachers can also set tasks and informal assessments to make sure that each child is learning well.

The following table shows you what to expect for your child, at each level of secondary school. Look at the year group your child will be in. Then you will see what they will learn and what tests they will have.

Table 2. Learning and assessment in Welsh secondary schools

Year group	Age range	Areas of Learning and Experience (AoLE)	Assessment	Progression step
Year 7	11–12 years old	<b>Expressive arts:</b> This includes music, art, performing arts, and digital media	Formative assessment of progress in all Areas of Learning and Experience  <b>Personalised assessments (required by law):</b>  Literacy and numeracy skills tests in each year from Year 7 to Year 9	Progression Step 4
Year 8	12–13 years old	<b>Health and wellbeing:</b> This includes learning about healthy eating, physical education (PE) and relationship and sexuality education (RSE). RSE has been compulsory in Wales since 2022		
Year 9	13–14 years old	<b>Humanities:</b> This includes history; geography; and religion, values, and ethics (RVE)  <b>Language, literacy, and communication:</b> This includes English and Welsh, and sometimes one other language  <b>Mathematics and numeracy</b>  <b>Science and technology:</b> This includes science, information technology, digital technology, and design technology		

Year 10	14–15 years old	<p>Compulsory subjects:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• English language and literature</li> <li>• Mathematics and numeracy</li> </ul>	<p>Continuous assessment of progress in all areas of learning</p>	<p>Progression Step 5</p>
Year 11	15–16 years old	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Science</li> <li>• Welsh language and literature</li> <li>• Physical education</li> <li>• Religion values and ethics (RVE)</li> <li>• Relationships and sexuality education (RSE)</li> <li>• The Welsh Baccalaureate Award – an extra qualification that all learners do, to gain extra skills and knowledge for work and life after school</li> </ul> <p>Optional subjects: Each school will offer their own choice of optional subjects. These may include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Modern foreign languages (French, German, and Spanish)</li> <li>• Science</li> <li>• History</li> <li>• Geography</li> <li>• Digital technology</li> <li>• Business studies</li> <li>• Food technology</li> <li>• Textiles/photography/art</li> <li>• Physical education (PE)</li> <li>• Religious studies</li> <li>• Music</li> <li>• Performing arts</li> <li>• Health and social care</li> <li>• Life skills</li> </ul>	<p>Practice exams (called “mock exams” or just “mocks”) to prepare students for their final exams</p> <p>May/June of Year 11: GCSE and equivalent (e.g. BTEC) exams</p>	

At the end of Year 9 your child will choose three or four optional subjects to continue studying in Years 10 and 11. This might include optional GCSE subjects (e.g. PE, geography, or design and technology) or BTEC subjects (e.g. business enterprise or health and social care). They will study these subjects alongside the compulsory subjects (see the table above).

### Will my child do exams in every subject?

Usually, learners take national exams (GCSEs) for some subjects during Year 10 and most subjects in Year 11. They will not take an exam in every subject they study. Learners will be examined in English, mathematics, science, their optional subjects, and usually Welsh.

In Wales, GCSEs are graded A\*–G. A\* is the highest grade. Some GCSEs have a non-exam assessment, which is part of the final grade.

Welsh is compulsory and most learners will be entered for the Welsh GCSE exam. However, some learners may be entered for a new skills-based award given by an awarding body called Agored Cymru. Agored Cymru is an education and training provider in Wales.

Religion, values, and ethics (RVE) and physical education (PE) are compulsory to learn, even if pupils do not choose them as a GCSE option. However, if they have not chosen them as options, learners will not have to take exams in these subjects.

Some schools also arrange for learners to sit a GCSE in their home language, if this is available. Arabic, Bengali, Cantonese, Gujarati, Greek, Italian, Mandarin, Polish, and Russian are some of the languages available at GCSE. Ask your school if this is something you want your child to do.

Talk to your child about their interests and their plans for their careers. It is important to choose subjects that interest them and that will be useful for their future. Talk to your school about your child's options and about what support will be available.

## 8. What will my child need?

### A full school uniform

Most secondary schools in Wales expect children to wear a school uniform. Your child's school will give you a list of what they need to wear and tell you where you can buy it. Learners will also need clothing for physical education (PE) lessons. This may include sportswear with the school's logo.

If you have financial difficulties, ask your school if they can help you. You may qualify for funds through the School Essentials Grant. This includes families that are seeking asylum. You can find details here: [https://bit.ly/school\\_essentials\\_grant](https://bit.ly/school_essentials_grant).



## Equipment for learning

Ask your school about the equipment your child will need for learning. The following equipment is commonly needed:

- A planner – most schools provide a book each year to help learners organise their school days and homework;
- A pencil case with pens and other stationery (ask your school for a full list);
- A scientific calculator and other maths equipment;
- A bag or rucksack to carry equipment to and from school.



## Meals at school

Ask your school what the children do for lunch. It could be:

- A school meal – sometimes called a school lunch or school dinner. Ask your school what money your child needs to buy lunch at school. Many schools have a cashless payment system. If your family receives certain benefits, your child may be eligible for free school meals (FSM). You may also be able to receive a School Essentials Grant for help with school costs, including meals. Ask your school for more information, or look here: [https://bit.ly/Free\\_school\\_meals](https://bit.ly/Free_school_meals).
- A packed lunch – that you make at home and your child takes to school.
- A home dinner – where the children go home for lunch. Ask your child's school whether this is an option.



## Travel to school

Support with travel may be available for your child if they live more than three miles away from their catchment school (the catchment school is usually the nearest school to where you live).

Find out if your child is entitled to a free bus pass here: [https://bit.ly/Talking\\_about\\_school\\_transport](https://bit.ly/Talking_about_school_transport).

Some children who cannot walk to school because of a mobility problem or an additional learning need may be given free transport to school. This is often in a taxi. Look for information about this on your council website.

## Mobile phones

Ask your school about their mobile phone policy. Some schools do not allow mobiles and may confiscate them if learners try to use them in school.

## 9. What extra support is there for learners who need it?

- *Pastoral support:* All schools have a team of people who will help children who have any problems; for example, with friendships, mental health issues, or feeling worried. Tell the form tutor or year leader if your child has any problems or worries.
- *Safeguarding:* All schools have a Designated Safeguarding Lead who will support your child if there are any serious concerns about their safety in or out of school.
- *English-language support:* Most schools will provide support with English-language development where this is needed. This will normally take place in the classroom with other learners.
- *Learning support:* All schools will provide extra support with learning when it is needed. Tell the school if you think your child needs support with their learning. The Additional Learning Needs Co-ordinator (ALNCo) will meet with your child to assess their needs. They will tell you if your child needs support, and you may be asked to go into school to talk about how the school can help your child. There are new arrangements in Wales that set out how children with additional learning needs will be supported. This document will give you more information: [https://bit.ly/Additional\\_learning\\_needs](https://bit.ly/Additional_learning_needs).
- *External agencies:* Schools work closely with other professionals such as doctors, refugee agencies, and educational specialists to support children who need extra help. The school will tell you about any extra support your child needs.
- *The Pupil Development Grant:* All schools receive extra funding to support learners who are economically disadvantaged. This money is used to help learners do well at school and be fully involved in school life.
- *Financial support:* Schools can help with some costs; for example, school uniform, school trips, equipment, etc. Tell the school if you need help with any expenses. You can also apply to your local authority for a School Essentials Grant. Find more information here: [https://bit.ly/Get\\_help\\_with\\_school\\_costs](https://bit.ly/Get_help_with_school_costs).
- *Careers advice and further education:* All schools have a careers adviser who will help your child start thinking about what they want to do when they leave school. They will help your child to:
  - Choose which subjects to study at GCSE; Find information about colleges and courses for after Year 11. Young people are expected to be in education or training until they are 18. You can find more information here: [https://bit.ly/Apprenticeships\\_14-19\\_education\\_and\\_training\\_for\\_work](https://bit.ly/Apprenticeships_14-19_education_and_training_for_work).

You can find guidance about supporting your child to make career choices here: [https://bit.ly/Parents\\_Careers\\_Wales](https://bit.ly/Parents_Careers_Wales).

## 10. How can I help my child to learn?

Find out how to help your child to learn here: [www.bell-foundation.org.uk/helping-children-learn/](http://www.bell-foundation.org.uk/helping-children-learn/) (available in 22 languages).