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## Primary Education

In Ireland, formal education is compulsory from the age of 6 to age 16 or until students have completed three years of post-primary education, whichever is the later. In practice, the majority of children begin primary schooling at age 4 (56%) and all children are in primary school by age 5. The first two years of primary school (infant classes) are classified as early childhood education. Pupils normally attend primary school for 8 years and then transfer to a school of their choice for post primary education.

Primary schools are organised as a separate level of compulsory education and pupils normally transfer to the post-primary sector at age 12.

The Irish primary education sector comprises state-funded primary schools, special schools and private primary schools. In 2016/17 there were 3,115 mainstream state-funded primary schools. These are mainly religious denominational schools, but they also include multi-denominational schools and Gaelscoileanna (Irish medium schools). Because of their historical development, most primary schools are state-aided parish schools, the State recognising their denominational character.

In addition, there are 135 primary schools that are special schools. In special schools, education continues up to completion of upper secondary education. These schools are treated as primary schools, however.

The State pays the bulk of the building and running costs of all State-funded primary schools. However, the State grant is supplemented by fundraising at local level and by voluntary contributions from parents. State aided primary schools may not charge fees.

There are an additional 27 private primary schools, which do not get any State funding. They broadly offer a similar type of education to primary schools, and cater for 3727 students, 0.7% of overall primary enrolment. The State has no role in these, other than ensuring that children receive a "certain minimum education" required by the Constitution.

Enrolment in 2016/17 was 558,314 in State funded primary schools including 8114 in special schools, and 4836 in special classes. Policy is that children with special needs should be integrated into a mainstream setting to the maximum extent feasible. An additional 3727 pupils were in private primary schools.

There is no intermediate/regional education structure for primary schools. Most primary schools are co-educational (88%).

State-funded primary schools are classified as "private" to the extent that they are not owned by the State, but by religious denominations or community interests. However, they may not charge fees.

The owners/Patrons of the Catholic and Church of Ireland schools are typically the diocesan trustees, whilst other denominational schools normally have a board of trustees nominated by the church authorities. Multi-denominational schools are usually under the patronage of a limited company or board of trustees called Educate Together. Gaelscoileanna (all-Irish schools) may either be denominational and come under the same patronage as Catholic schools or have their own limited company. The school's ethos is decided by the owners and the operating rules are largely set by the Department of Education and Skills within a legislative framework set out in the [Education Act 1998](#) [1].

Each school is managed by a school board of management whose functions are set out in [Education Act 1998](#) [1]. The board of management consists of Patron, school staff, parent and community representatives.

The vast majority of schools are all-through schools (88%) catering for pupils from infant classes to sixth class. The remainder are divided into Junior (infant to 2<sup>nd</sup> class) and Senior schools (3<sup>rd</sup> to 6<sup>th</sup> class).

Primary schools operate an eight-year programme, consisting of two kindergarten years (Junior and Senior Infants), followed by classes 1-6. The current official primary curriculum documents of the Department of Education and Skills were developed by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment and published in 1999 [Primary Curriculum](#) [2].

The three general aims of primary education, as outlined in the Primary Curriculum (1999), are to:

- Enable the child to live a full life as a child and to realise his or her potential as a unique individual;
- Enable the child to develop as a social being through living and cooperating with others and so contribute to the good of society;
- Prepare the child for further education and life long learning.

State-funded schools must comply with relevant legislation and circulars. The Education Act 1998 sets out broad objectives and principles underpinning the education system and provides for the rights of children and others to education. On publication, [circulars](#) [3] are forwarded to schools and are also posted on the Department's website.

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[1]

<https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=1&cad=rja&p;uact=8&ved=0ahUKEwiSsM6Nj-rQAhUElcAKHWbrCZ4QFggbMAA&url=http://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/1998/act/51/enacted/en/html&usg=AFQjCNft-pi03da8P2NvC49zfBdRtpwYjg>

[2]

[http://www.ncca.ie/en/Curriculum\\_and\\_Assessment/Early\\_Childhood\\_and\\_Primary\\_Education/Primary-Education/Primary\\_School\\_Curriculum/Primary\\_School\\_Curriculum.html](http://www.ncca.ie/en/Curriculum_and_Assessment/Early_Childhood_and_Primary_Education/Primary-Education/Primary_School_Curriculum/Primary_School_Curriculum.html)

[3] <https://www.education.ie/en/Circulars-and-Forms/>