

## School systems

### Teacher's notes

Put students in pairs. Give student A the information sheet about the American school system, and student B the information sheet about the British school system.

Both students explain the key points from their sheets, and point out the similarities and differences between these systems and the Swedish school system. This exercise can be made easier by getting the students to write down their key points before explaining, or letting them look at each other's information sheets while listening. You could also provide a similar information sheet on the Swedish school system if necessary.

## Information sheet A:

### The American school system

Read the information below. Imagine you are going to meet some American teenagers who attend high school in the USA. You have to prepare a short talk comparing their school system to the one in Sweden. Write a few main points and prepare to give your talk.

#### Primary school

American children start school at the age of five. The first year at school is called 'kindergarten'. The second year at school is considered the first year of primary school and is referred to as 'first grade'. Primary school usually consists of five years of education, known as 'first through fifth grades'.

#### Secondary school

Secondary school most commonly consists of a total of seven years, referred to as 'sixth through twelfth grades'. The ninth through twelfth grades are usually referred to as 'high school'. The four years of high school have the following names: freshman, sophomore, junior and senior. When students complete the twelfth grade, they are awarded a certificate called the 'high school diploma'. In the American education system, students must have obtained a high school diploma before they can be admitted into college or university. Subjects are graded from A to E or F (fail). The grades give the student a GPA (grade point average).

#### US high schools and high school diplomas

The US high school system is unlike those in many other countries. Individual states have a great deal of control over what is taught in American high schools, as well as what students have to know to be able to graduate with a US high school diploma. Therefore, the courses and subjects offered at US high schools can vary depending on where the high school is located. A student's schedule usually consists of subjects that are required by the state and local educational laws, as well as a number of 'electives' – special interest courses chosen by the student.

The quality of education and range of subjects offered also varies depending on whether the high school is public or private. Public high schools in the USA are operated by the government and are financed by public funds. These high schools are free to all students, including those who come from other countries. The quality of education can vary greatly between different public high schools, primarily because of the differences in the amount of funding that different schools receive. Private high schools in the USA are operated and funded privately. These high schools are not controlled by any government agency, but their students must still meet the minimum graduation requirements set by the state. And of course, students who attend private high schools must pay tuition fees. Private high schools are popular in the USA because they offer options that are not normally available at public high schools. These may include advanced math and science courses, a wider selection of foreign languages, and better art, music and athletic programs.

In the USA, extracurricular activities are both popular and important. Students can take part in a wide range of activities such as drama, debating, chess, sports, pep clubs for cheerleaders, or working on the school newspaper. These activities are not only fun, but can also help when students apply for higher education or jobs after school.

At the end of high school there is a ceremony called 'graduation'. Students wear caps and gowns when they receive their diploma. The prom, which is held at most high schools in the spring, is another big event – especially for the seniors. Four girls from the senior class are often selected for the 'prom court', and during the dance, the girl with the most votes is crowned 'prom queen'. Some schools also have the same system for the boys, in which case a king and queen of the prom are chosen.

Since higher education in the USA is very expensive, it is important to get good grades to be able to get a grant or scholarship that pays for part of the tuition fees.

## Information sheet B:

### The British school system

Read the information below. Imagine you are going to meet some British teenagers who attend upper secondary school in the UK. You have to prepare a short talk comparing their school system to the one in Sweden. Write a few main points and prepare to give your talk.

*Note: It is important to remember that the school system in England is different from those in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. The information given here is based mainly on the English school system.*

#### State schools

Most secondary schools in Britain are known as 'comprehensive schools'. These are state schools which accept all types of students. Some students might go to state-owned 'grammar schools' instead, but these only take in students who pass an examination when they are 11 years old. There are also private schools which do not receive any money from the state. The levels of the British school system are as follows:

- Pre-school/Nursery school: for children under the age of 5
- Primary: ages 5–11
- Secondary: ages 11–16, ending with the GCSE (General Certificate of Secondary Education) examinations
- Sixth form/Further education: ages 16–18, usually ending with A-level (Advanced Level) examinations

Since 1988 schools have been required to follow the National Curriculum, which is made up of twelve subjects. The curriculum tells schools which subjects the pupils must learn and when they should take assessment tests. The core subjects – English, Mathematics and Science – are compulsory for all students aged 5 to 16. There are then several other subjects which are compulsory at different times:

- Art & Design
- Citizenship
- Design & Technology
- Geography
- History
- Information & Communication Technology (ICT)
- Modern Foreign Languages
- Music
- Physical Education

The National Curriculum has four 'key stages' that cover one to four years of school. Each stage has a test, and at the fourth key stage – which comes at the end of secondary school – students do their GCSE exams. Schools are also inspected regularly.

At the age of 16 you are allowed to leave school, but those who stay on usually go on to take A-levels (Advanced Level exams), AS-levels (Advanced Subsidiary Level exams) or NVQs (National Vocational Qualifications). Those who take A- and AS-levels tend to study traditional subjects, and they usually need two or three A-levels to go to university. Those who pass their A-levels get a grade from A to E.

## **Private schools**

Private, or independent, schools used to be referred to as ‘public schools’, and confusingly, many people still use this term. Here is an overview of the typical school levels in the private sector:

- Pre-preparatory school: ages 3–7
- Preparatory school: ages 7–11/13
- Senior school: ages 11/13–18+

Independent schools do not have to follow the National Curriculum, but many of them choose to do so. The schools are very different when it comes to age range, size and atmosphere. Some are single-sex and some are mixed, some have a boarding option and some do not. A lot of independent British schools live up to the traditional image of an impressive building in beautiful country surroundings, but many others – often those with no boarding option – are located centrally in cities and towns.