

# Organisation of classes in secondary schools

This post provides an overview of how both teachers and students are currently allocated to classes in secondary schools. The structure of Key Stage 3 differs significantly from Key Stage 4, so we focus on Year 8 as a representative example of Key Stage 3, since Year 9 often overlaps the two stages.

Currently, the timing of Key Stage 4 varies across schools:

- A third of secondary schools begin Key Stage 4 at the start of Year 9.
- 6% transition partway through Year 9.
- 8% start towards the end of Year 9.
- The remaining half begin Key Stage 4 at the start of Year 10.

Although GCSE courses are traditionally two years long, they can extend to three years in many schools. This variation has little impact on core subjects, which are taught consistently across Key Stages 3 and 4, but it significantly affects minority subjects, which may receive limited or no teaching in Key Stage 3. Furthermore, 10% of schools offer one-year GCSE courses, typically designed for high-attaining students.

In some schools, a minority of Year 7 students follow an alternative curriculum. These programmes provide additional teaching in English and numeracy to strengthen core skills, enabling students to better access the secondary school curriculum. Often, these sessions are delivered by teachers other than their regular English and maths teachers. Among secondary schools, 16% report running these 'catch-up' or 'nurture' programmes for a full year, while 10% implement them for part of the year.

## Allocation of students to classes

At Key Stage 3, students are typically allocated to classes in one of three ways:

1. Form Class – They are taught a subject with their form group.
2. Mixed Attainment Groups – They are grouped with students of varying attainment levels.
3. Attainment-Based Sets – They are placed in classes organised by attainment level.

In form-based or mixed attainment groupings, the allocation of students to classes is not random. Schools usually strive to ensure these groups are as balanced as possible.

The table below illustrates that approximately half of schools adopt form-class arrangements for all subjects except maths in Year 7. However, the use of form-based groupings declines in Years 8 and 9 and becomes rare by Years 10 and 11 across all subjects.

### In the main subject you teach, which of the following year groups are students taught with their form class?

		Yr 7	Yr 8	Yr 9	Yr 10	Yr 11	Never taught as form
Maths	(N=1,105)	23%	11%	6%	4%	4%	76%
English	(N=1,065)	43%	24%	16%	7%	7%	55%
Science	(N=1,288)	43%	24%	12%	5%	4%	55%
History	(N=485)	52%	38%	28%	2%	2%	44%
Geography	(N=368)	41%	29%	20%	1%	1%	58%
Religious Studies	(N=254)	48%	35%	24%	6%	6%	49%
Foreign Languages	(N=393)	44%	27%	13%	1%	1%	55%
ICT or Computing	(N=158)	53%	45%	37%	13%	13%	43%
Design and Technology	(N=98)	23%	14%	11%	2%	2%	74%
Music	(N=116)	50%	38%	29%			50%
Art	(N=67)	52%	46%	43%	11%	16%	42%
Business	(N=85)	9%	3%	4%	6%	7%	83%
Physical Education	(N=165)	37%	23%	18%	7%	6%	63%
Another subject	(N=398)	35%	30%	19%	10%	9%	59%

Grouping classes based on prior attainment can take various forms. It is common for subjects to share grouping structures, such as grouping being coordinated across the humanities or between maths and science. The prevalence of attainment grouping typically follows these patterns:

- Maths has the highest levels of attainment grouping, increasing from 66% in Year 7 to 87% in Year 11.
- English and science show steady increases in grouping, starting at 37% and 31% respectively in Year 7 and rising to 63% for English and 73% for science by Year 11.
- Humanities and languages, while grouped by attainment in less than half of schools, peak in Year 9 before declining as students transition to optional GCSE subjects.
- Smaller subjects infrequently use attainment grouping.

**In the main subject you teach, which of the following year groups are students grouped into classes by general ability, subject ability, or prior attainment?**

		Yr 7	Yr 8	Yr 9	Yr 10	Yr 11	All mixed attainment
Maths	(N=848)	66%	74%	83%	86%	87%	9%
English	(N=872)	37%	43%	49%	62%	63%	29%
Science	(N=982)	31%	41%	57%	71%	73%	23%
History	(N=379)	20%	22%	23%	13%	13%	70%
Geography	(N=272)	28%	29%	31%	16%	15%	65%
Religious Studies	(N=194)	25%	28%	30%	28%	25%	60%
Foreign Languages	(N=291)	28%	37%	41%	28%	26%	47%
ICT or Computing	(N=124)	23%	26%	26%	15%	15%	66%
Design and Technology	(N=85)	18%	18%	19%	10%	10%	78%
Music	(N=126)	24%	25%	24%	11%	11%	71%
Art	(N=60)	19%	18%	17%	22%	24%	74%
Business	(N=70)	10%	10%	13%	22%	25%	76%
Physical Education	(N=113)	43%	52%	53%	34%	26%	43%
Another subject	(N=14)	10%	10%	10%	22%	22%	78%

The criteria for grouping students by prior attainment evolve as they progress through school.

- In Year 7, schools that use attainment-based grouping primarily rely on Key Stage 2 data, along with results from CAT or other standardised assessments.
- By Year 8, school-based assessments and teacher judgements of students' suitability for specific classes play an increasingly significant role in determining class allocation.

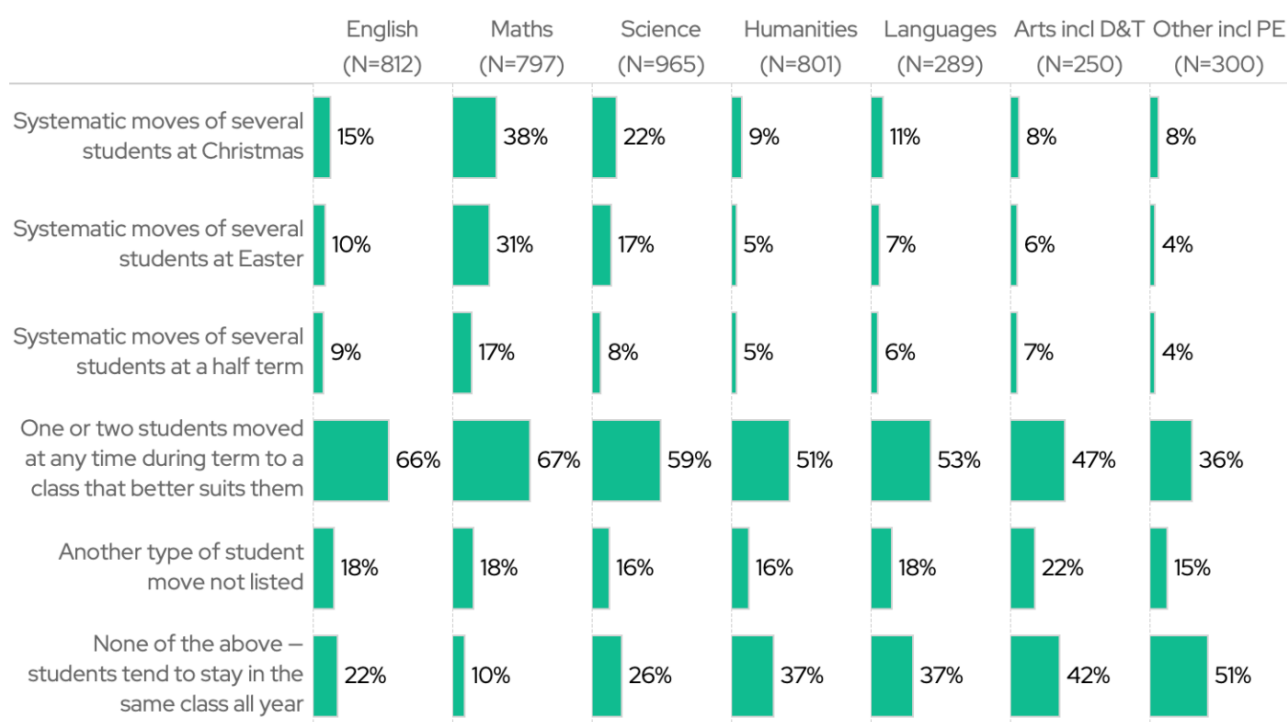
## If attainment grouping takes place, how are students organised into classes at the start of the year?

			CAT or other standardised test scores	Key Stage 2 information	School-administered subject tests	Overall performance across all main subjects	Teachers' view of suitability for a class	Using other information not listed above	Remain in same class as previous year
Year 7	English	(N=316)	44%	76%	20%	5%	16%	15%	
	Maths	(N=567)	34%	75%	44%	2%	12%	9%	
	Science	(N=290)	49%	68%	19%	7%	10%	13%	
	Humanities	(N=175)	50%	68%	11%	7%	8%	18%	
	Languages	(N=69)	38%	72%	13%	10%	12%	25%	
	Arts incl D&T	(N=54)	46%	65%	6%	11%	7%	22%	
	Other incl PE	(N=77)	25%	47%	19%	5%	22%	23%	
Year 8	English	(N=377)	28%	37%	56%	13%	54%	10%	13%
	Maths	(N=642)	15%	23%	90%	5%	51%	5%	11%
	Science	(N=428)	26%	24%	71%	17%	38%	7%	10%
	Humanities	(N=204)	37%	36%	41%	28%	33%	11%	21%
	Languages	(N=103)	20%	23%	54%	21%	47%	8%	19%
	Arts incl D&T	(N=57)	32%	30%	25%	32%	23%	14%	28%
	Other incl PE	(N=99)	19%	18%	27%	17%	45%	11%	19%
Year 10	English	(N=539)	29%	32%	66%	11%	65%	15%	7%
	Maths	(N=738)	14%	16%	91%	5%	60%	8%	11%
	Science	(N=711)	18%	16%	82%	11%	53%	11%	5%
	Humanities	(N=134)	22%	22%	41%	21%	37%	31%	4%
	Languages	(N=80)	14%	10%	70%	11%	56%	18%	11%
	Arts incl D&T	(N=26)	12%	4%	23%	4%	23%	54%	8%
	Other incl PE	(N=61)	21%	10%	25%	18%	48%	25%	15%

## Within year reallocations of students

Reallocation of students between classes is a common practice, particularly in core subjects such as English, maths, and science, where attainment grouping is widely used. In most cases, this involves moving a small number of students who are clearly not appropriately placed. However, some schools implement a more systematic reallocation of classes at set points during the year, typically at Christmas and/or Easter. This practice is particularly prevalent in maths but occurs in some schools across all subjects.

## For the main subject you teach, do students typically move between classes mid-year for any of the following reasons?



During Key Stage 4, class allocations can undergo significant changes if students are required to drop one or more GCSE subjects due to poor performance. According to teachers:

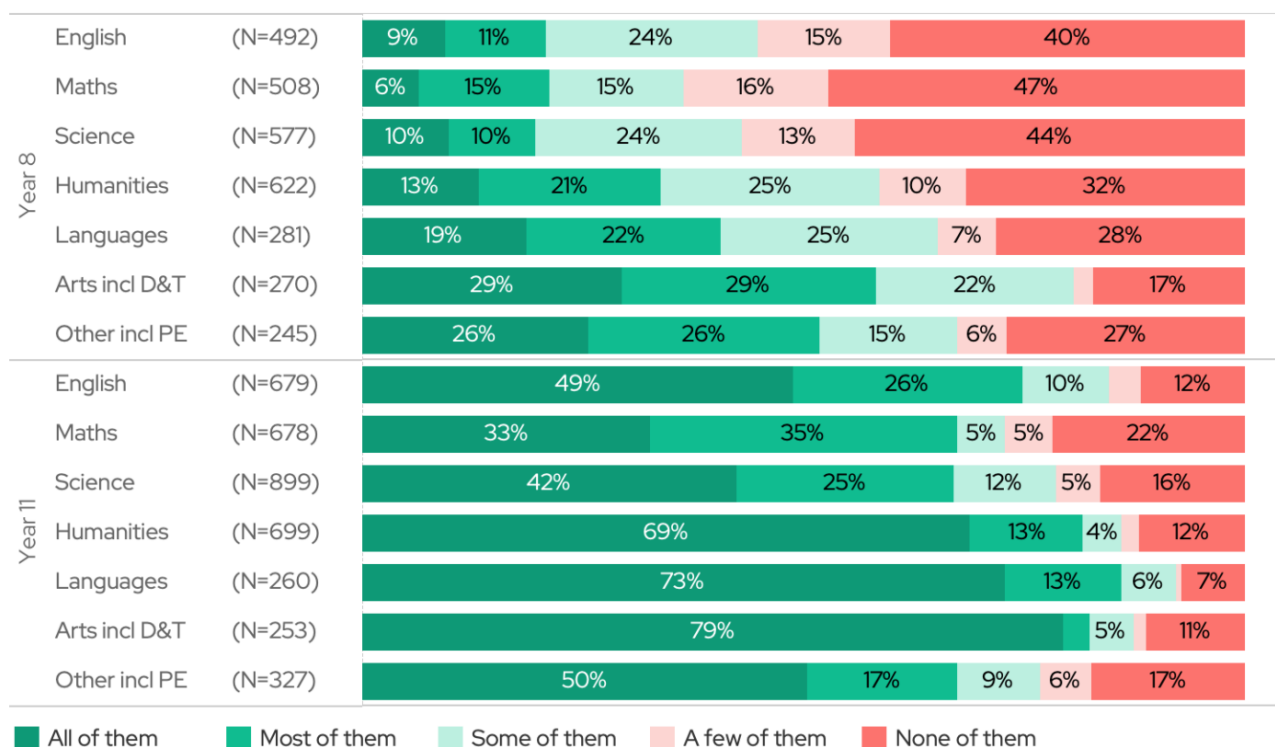
- 23% report that this occurs in their school regularly.
- An additional 34% say it happens, but only rarely.

## Allocation of teachers to classes

The allocation of teachers to classes is a complex process requiring numerous compromises. Schools aim to assign the most suitable teachers to specific classes, prioritising subject specialism and relevant experience. Additionally, they generally try to avoid 'split classes,' where two teachers share responsibility for teaching a single class. Despite these efforts, in 2023/24, 36% of teachers reported having at least one split class they considered suboptimal for both themselves and their students.

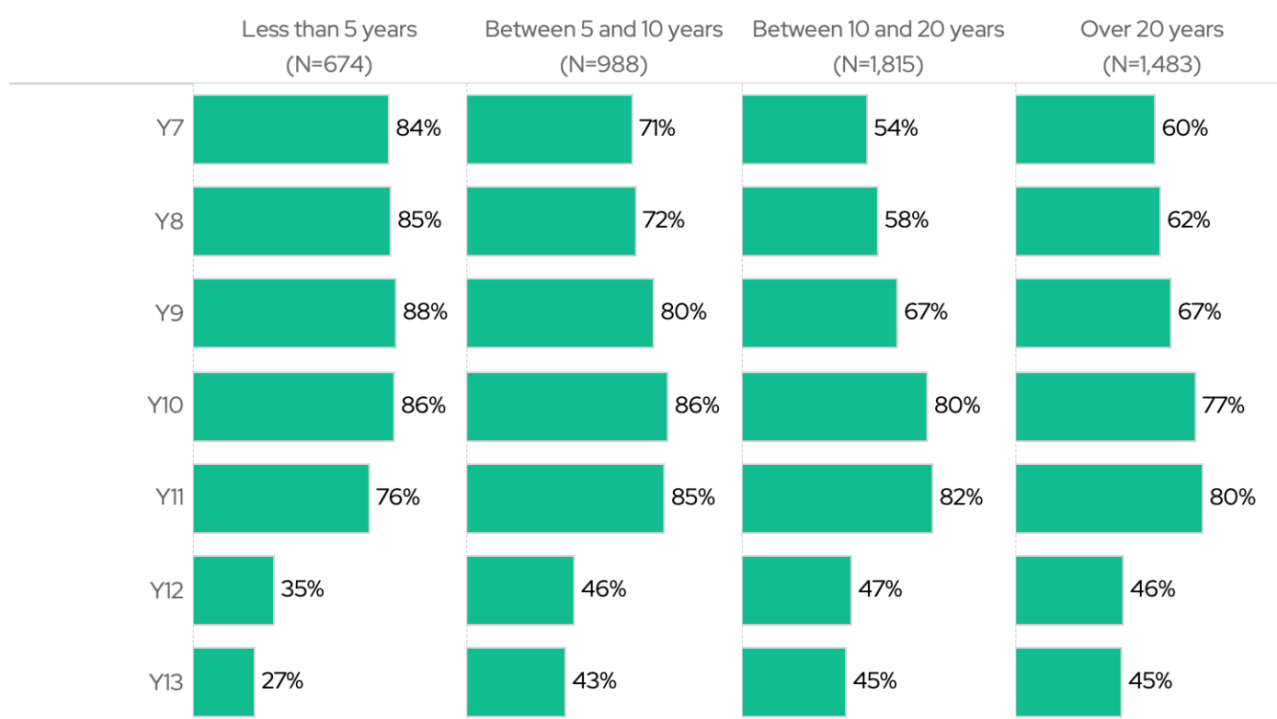
Maintaining continuity of teachers is a key priority for Key Stage 4. As shown in the chart below, the majority of teachers in Year 11 also taught most or all of the same students in Year 10. However, this practice is uncommon in Key Stage 3, where students typically have the same teacher only by chance or in smaller subjects with limited staff.

## Proportion of students taught by the same teacher last year



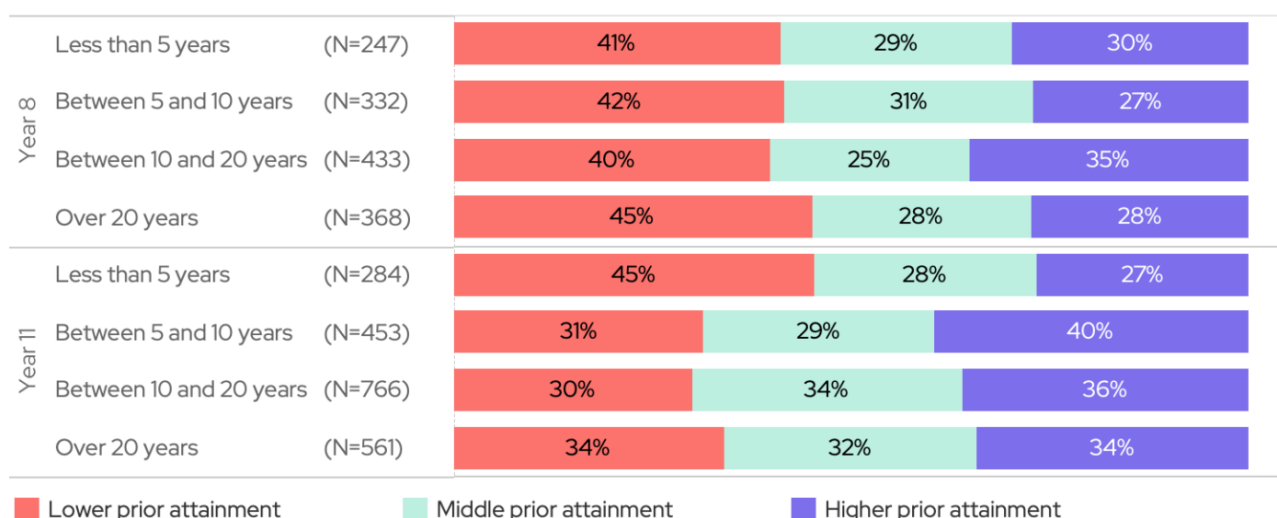
In subject departments with inexperienced teachers, these staff members are disproportionately assigned to Key Stage 3 classes. This is likely done to prioritise teaching quality and ensure a stronger experience for students in GCSE classes.

## Which of these year groups are you teaching this year? (Please exclude form time in your response)



When inexperienced teachers are assigned to GCSE classes, the chart below indicates that they are more likely to be allocated to lower-attaining sets rather than higher-attaining ones.

## Class prior attainment by teacher experience in attainment-grouped classes



Subject shortages in key areas such as maths and science often result in teachers being asked to teach subjects they did not study beyond age 16 or for which they were not trained.

According to survey responses, 16% of teachers report lacking A-level or degree-level experience in the subjects they teach for most or all of their timetable.

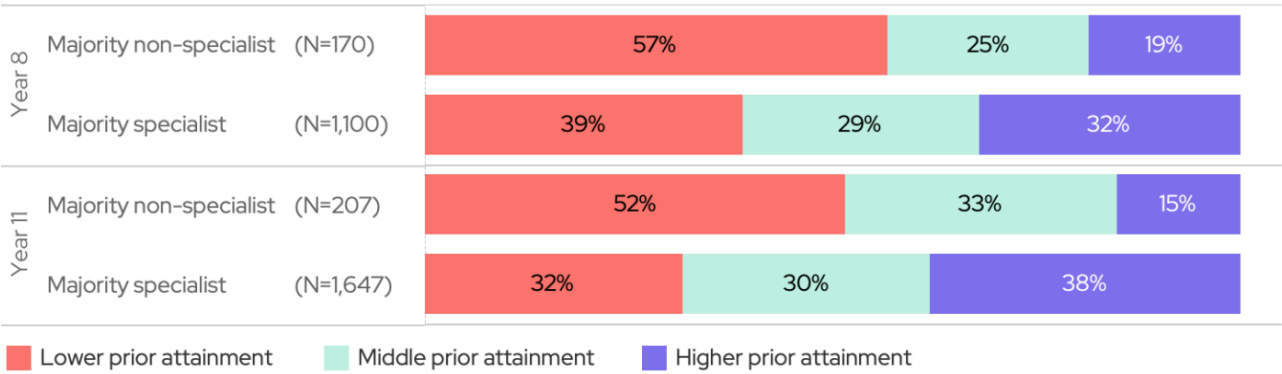
As shown in the table below, non-specialist teaching is most common in Years 7 and 8 and occurs across most subjects. Notable exceptions include languages, music, and physical education, where the specialised skills required make it particularly challenging for non-specialists to deliver lessons effectively.

**In the main subject you teach, is a non-specialist teacher teaching any of the following year groups this year?**

		Year 7	Year 8	Year 9	Year 10	Year 11	Year 12	Year 13	None - all taught by subject specialists
Maths	(N=764)	49%	42%	35%	25%	20%	5%	3%	43%
English	(N=742)	47%	39%	30%	15%	12%	3%	3%	47%
Science	(N=960)	40%	36%	30%	22%	17%	4%	4%	47%
History	(N=368)	42%	37%	24%	12%	10%	4%	3%	47%
Geography	(N=275)	54%	43%	31%	11%	5%	1%	1%	37%
Religious Studies	(N=194)	61%	52%	36%	29%	20%	3%	3%	30%
Foreign Languages	(N=272)	22%	18%	14%	8%	6%	1%	1%	76%
ICT or Computing	(N=126)	44%	42%	34%	19%	19%	10%	9%	43%
Design and Technology	(N=82)	43%	36%	32%	19%	19%		5%	51%
Music	(N=100)	15%	12%	6%	4%	1%	1%	1%	83%
Art	(N=56)	47%	41%	34%	21%	19%	8%	8%	52%
Business	(N=68)	11%	10%	14%	15%	12%	10%	6%	66%
Physical Education	(N=97)	30%	25%	19%	18%	18%	4%	3%	62%
Another subject	(N=265)	25%	24%	23%	27%	24%	25%	21%	52%

Among the 16% of teachers who report spending the majority of their time teaching outside their specialism, those assigned to classes grouped by prior attainment are disproportionately allocated to lower-attaining groups rather than higher-attaining ones.

**Class prior attainment by teacher specialism in attainment-grouped classes**





## Instability in teacher allocations

Teacher allocations often change during the school year for two primary reasons:

1. Staff Changes Due to Absence

If a teacher leaves or takes extended sick leave, classes are frequently reallocated, with examination classes prioritised for stability. In March 2024, 33% of teachers reported that at least one of their classes had been reallocated during the year. Additionally, 20% indicated they had been required to change one of the subjects they were teaching.

2. Trainee Teacher Placements

Trainee teachers often take over classes for extended periods, particularly in the spring and early summer terms. In 2023, during the period from 10th January to 10th February, 16% of secondary teachers reported that a trainee had taken over one of their classes.

(This post can be referenced as: Allen, R. (2025, January 6). Organisation of classes in secondary schools. Teacher Tapp blogpost.

<https://teachertapp.com/uk/articles/assessments-in-schools-today/>)

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