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The Education System in the English-Speaking World

El sistema educativo en el ámbito anglosajón.

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Material de elaboración propia a partir de las fuentes oficiales que se citan al final del tema. No es un temario oficial ni sustituye a la normativa publicada.

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1. INTRODUCTION

In 1848 the American reformer Horace Mann, writing his last report as secretary of the Massachusetts Board of Education, called education "the great equalizer of the conditions of men". The sentence is useful for this topic because it states the ideal that nearly every English-speaking country has claimed to pursue: a school for every child, whatever the family's wealth. The history of these systems is largely the story of how far each country has managed to turn that ideal into practice, and of the very different institutional shapes it has taken on the way.

The phrase "the English-speaking world" covers many countries, so selection is essential. I will concentrate on the United Kingdom, Ireland and the United States, with a brief reference to Canada. Firstly, I will trace the historical roots of state education in England and Wales and describe the English system as it works today. Secondly, I will turn to the other three education systems of the United Kingdom, those of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, which are devolved and differ from England in important ways. Thirdly, I will examine the Irish system. Fourthly, I will study the United States, a federal country in which schooling is mainly a state and local matter. After a short comparison, I will consider the pedagogical and didactic implications of the topic for the Secondary English classroom, and I will close with a conclusion.

Before moving on, I would like to mention the sources consulted. For the history of English and British schooling I have used Derek Gillard's online history Education in the UK: a history (formerly Education in England: a history). For the United States I have relied on Diane Ravitch's The Death and Life of the Great American School System (Basic Books, 2010) and on David Tyack and Larry Cuban's Tinkering toward Utopia: A Century of Public School Reform (Harvard University Press, 1995). For current facts and figures I have relied on official sources: GOV.UK and legislation.gov.uk, Education Scotland, Hwb for Wales, the Irish Department of Education and Youth and the Central Applications Office, and the US National Center for Education Statistics and National Archives. All the data in this topic are given as of November 2026. As for the legal framework of the Spanish classroom, I will refer to the Organic Law 3/2020 (LOMLOE), which amends the Organic Law 2/2006 on Education, to Royal Decrees 217/2022 and 243/2022, and to the Extremaduran Decrees 110/2022 and 109/2022.