Choosing Subjects in ICSE and ISC: A Guide for Parents (Grades 9–11)

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ICSE families often hear that the board is "tougher" or "broader" than CBSE, and that ISC streams are fixed. The first is a matter of opinion. The second isn't true: CISCE's own regulations set no Science, Commerce or Arts boxes for Grade 11.

This guide covers the rules that actually shape your child's options, checked against CISCE's 2027 and 2028 regulations in November 2026.

The rules only tell you what is allowed. Which combination is right depends on a different question: who is your child, and what keeps them curious?

ICSE Grades 9–10: how the subjects work

Every ICSE student takes at least six subjects (ICSE 2027 Regulations).

Group	What it holds	How many
Group I	English, a second language, and History, Civics and Geography	All compulsory
Group II	Mathematics, Science, Economics, Commercial Studies, a modern foreign or classical language, Environmental Science	Two or three
Group III	Skill subjects such as Computer Applications, Art, Physical Education, Robotics and AI, and vocational options	One or two

- **Maths and Science are expected, not compulsory.** CISCE says students will "normally" take both, and if a school allows another combination, the head must explain the implications to the family.
- **This choice doesn't limit Grade 11 at an ISC school.** For admission to ISC Grade 11, "all combinations of subjects will be accepted".
- **To pass, a student needs at least five subjects, including English.** Many colleges and schools quote a "best five" percentage, always counting English, so English marks matter more than families expect (explainer).
- **Subjects can't be changed after 15 September** of the year a child is registered in Grade 9.

ISC Grades 11–12: how the subjects work

Every ISC student takes English (or Modern English) plus four or five electives, so five or six subjects in all (ISC 2028 Regulations, Chapter II). The electives come from one list of 35

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subjects, from History and Psychology to Physics, Accountancy, Legal Studies and Artificial Intelligence. There are no streams in the regulations.

What parents often don't know:

- **Streams are a school's timetable, not a CISCE rule.** A school can only offer subjects it has teachers for, so ask which combinations it can actually run.
- **Five pairs can never be taken together:** English with Modern English; Physics with Engineering Science; the two Geometrical Drawing subjects; Mathematics with Applied Mathematics; Robotics with Artificial Intelligence.
- **Passing now needs five subjects, including English.** From ISC 2027 the bar rose from four to five, at 35% each (EducationWorld). A sixth subject is a cushion.
- **Subjects are fixed early.** They can't be changed after 15 September of Grade 11, and a subject can't be taken in Grade 12 unless it was studied in Grade 11.
- **The school is responsible for the fit.** CISCE says the head of school is responsible for making sure the chosen subjects meet university or professional course requirements. Ask them to confirm it in writing for the courses your child is aiming at.
- **Each subject is graded separately**, from 1 (highest) to 9 (fail). There's no overall ISC percentage; colleges and exam bodies calculate their own.

ISC Maths, and switching boards after Grade 10

Since 2025, ISC offers two Maths subjects, and a student may take only one.

	Mathematics (860)	Applied Mathematics (885)
CISCE says it's for	Mathematics, Physics, Chemistry, Engineering, Architecture and related fields	Humanities, Commerce, Economics, Biosciences, Social Sciences and related fields
Engineering entrance (JEE)	Yes	Don't count on it: the exam rules ask for Mathematics and do not say Applied Mathematics qualifies

If engineering or architecture is even a possibility, choose Mathematics. Note that CISCE lists Biosciences under Applied Mathematics, which suits a child heading towards biology who still wants some maths. If a university abroad is possible, ask it before choosing Applied Mathematics. Edinburgh and Warwick don't accept CBSE Applied Mathematics for some maths-heavy courses, and their India pages don't yet say how they treat ISC's.

Moving boards after Grade 10:

- **ICSE to ISC** is straightforward: a pass in five subjects including English is enough, whatever the Grade 9–10 combination. If your child dropped Science or Maths in ICSE but wants them in Grade 11, check the school's own entry requirements first.
- **CBSE or another board to ISC** needs a pass in English and four other subjects, and CISCE decides eligibility case by case. The school can admit provisionally while it checks, but the last date for regularising Grade 11 admission is **31 August**, so send the Grade 10 marks early.
- **ICSE to CBSE** follows CBSE's rules for Grade 11. Our CBSE guide covers them.
- **ICSE to IB or Cambridge** has its own rules on recognition and exam timing in India. Our IB guide and our Cambridge guide cover them.

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Entrance exams and CUET: the same rules for ISC

National exams don't care which board a child is from. They care which subjects are on the Grade 12 marksheet.

Route	Grade 12 subjects needed	Marks condition
JEE Main (B.E./B.Tech)	Physics and Mathematics, plus one of Chemistry, Biology, Biotechnology or a technical vocational subject	None to sit the exam
NITs, IIITs and other central institutes	As for JEE Main	75% in Grade 12 (65% SC/ST), or the board's top 20 percentile
JEE Advanced and IITs	Physics, Chemistry and Mathematics	75% (65% SC/ST/PwD) or top 20 percentile, to take an IIT seat
NEET (MBBS, BDS)	Physics, Chemistry, Biology/Biotechnology and English	50% in PCB (40% OBC/SC/ST)

- **Engineering Science is not Physics.** ISC doesn't allow both together, and engineering entrance asks for Physics.
- **Biology as a sixth subject** keeps both medicine and engineering open, at the cost of a heavier two years.
- **CUET counts Grade 12 subjects.** Delhi University expects CUET papers in subjects studied in Grade 12, and Economics (Hons) and B.Com (Hons) there need a Maths paper, Mathematics or Applied Mathematics.

These rules come from the 2026 and 2027 exam cycles (JEE Main, JEE Advanced, NEET, DU and CUET). They are reissued every year, so check the current bulletin before Grade 11 choices are final.

Five mistakes we see every year

1. **Dropping Maths or Science in ICSE without a reason.** CISCE allows it, but it narrows Grade 11 choices at most schools. If you do, ask the school to explain the implications, as the regulations require.
2. **Treating English as a formality.** It is compulsory in both ICSE and ISC, it is always counted, and it is one of the five subjects a child must pass.
3. **Assuming the school's streams are CISCE's rules.** Ask which cross-combinations the timetable can run before deciding something isn't possible.
4. **Choosing Applied Mathematics without checking the target courses.** It suits commerce, economics and the biosciences. It doesn't suit engineering.
5. **Leaving it until after 15 September.** That is CISCE's deadline for changing subjects, in both Grade 9 and Grade 11.

Talking it through at home

Parents worry about security. Teenagers worry about being judged, or letting you down. When a child senses a verdict coming, they go quiet or agree to whatever ends the conversation.

A few questions that open the conversation up:

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- "Which subjects make you curious enough to keep going when a chapter gets hard? Which ones drain you?"
- "If your friends' choices and the relatives' opinions were off the table, which two or three subjects would you pick?"
- "Which two courses or careers shall we read up on together this month, so we can check which subjects keep them open?"
- "What's the heaviest pressure on you right now?" Then listen, without comparing them with anyone.

Where Rosemounts helps

The rules tell you which doors a subject combination keeps open. They can't tell you which one fits your child.

That is what the VIP+™ Career and Life Design Program is for. It looks at your child's Values, Interests, Personality and Skills together, and a counsellor talks the results through with your child and with you. The choice then starts from who your child is, rather than last term's marks or what friends are picking.

What we won't promise: no assessment predicts a rank, a job or a salary, and no subject choice guarantees an admission. If you ask about fees, you'll get the full fee and what it includes, straight away. This guide is yours to use on its own, with no obligation to book anything.

To talk it through, WhatsApp us on +91 73022 22330 with one line: which class is your child in?

Sources

Checked 14 November 2026; the note on UK universities was added on 19 November 2026. ICSE and ISC rules are from CISCE's own regulations; exam and university rules are from published summaries of the 2026–27 bulletins and should be rechecked against the official bulletins each year.

- CISCE: Regulations for the ISC Examination, Year 2028
- CISCE: Regulations for the ICSE Examination, Year 2027
- CISCE regulations and syllabuses, all years
- ISC pass rule change from 2027 (EducationWorld)
- ICSE best-five percentage (explainer)
- Applied Mathematics at UK universities: University of Edinburgh and University of Warwick
- Official bulletins to check each year: JEE Main (NTA), JEE Advanced, NEET-UG (NTA), CUET-UG (NTA), JoSAA

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