
Grammar Schools: where are we now?

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ABSTRACT Apart from one amalgamation there are as many grammar schools in England as when Labour took office in 1997. Selection at age 11 still influences English education and unless there are changes its effect is likely to increase. Legislation introduced in 1998 which could have ended selection had no effect. The pressure from the right-wing minority for more selection continues while the case for ending selection becomes even stronger. Ending selection could be achieved without any school closures. What is lacking so far is the political will.

Where are we with grammar schools? Sadly, we are much as we were in 1997 and onwards when a Labour government with a massive majority failed to end selection at age 11 for English children. There are grammar schools in 36 of the 152 English local authorities. Fifteen authorities (Bexley, Bournemouth, Buckinghamshire, Kent, Kingston, Lincolnshire, Medway, Poole, Reading, Slough, Southend, Sutton, Torbay, Trafford and Wirral) are fully selective, with around 20% of their school places selective. The other 21 (Barnet, Birmingham, Bromley, Calderdale, Cumbria, Devon, Enfield, Essex, Gloucestershire, Kirklees, Lancashire, Liverpool, North Yorkshire, Plymouth, Redbridge, Stoke-on-Trent, Telford and the Wrekin, Walsall, Warwickshire, Wiltshire, Wolverhampton) have varying numbers of grammar schools.

One of the misconceptions about selection at 11 is that it has a marginal effect on English education. In fact in England selection at 11 remains an important influence on secondary education. Thousands of English children and their parents, unlike their Scottish and Welsh counterparts, continue to face entry tests for secondary education and the reduction in parental choice, demotivation of children and social segregation that selection brings. So when claims are made about most children going to comprehensives nowadays, we need to take a hard look at the statistics.

Some of the confusion arises from the official characterisation of schools. Department for Education (DfE) statistics [1] now categorise state-funded secondary schools according to their admissions policies under several headings: comprehensive, selective, modern, non-selective, unknown, city technology colleges, academies, free schools, university technical colleges (UTCs) and studio schools. Academies are further divided into selective or not. Officially now we have 163 grammar schools (the only change since 1997 is that two amalgamated) but only 47 secondary modern schools. Of the grammar schools, 139 are now academies. In the past many secondary moderns were renamed 'comprehensive' although in terms of their intake they could hardly be so. For example, in fully selective Southend with 12 secondary schools, three are categorised as comprehensive and none as secondary modern, and there are nine academies, of which four are selective.

The School Standards and Framework Act (SSFA) (1998) which introduced the grammar school ballot legislation applies only to maintained schools. The regulations require that in order to end selection in named grammar schools in an area, a parental ballot would have to be triggered by a petition of eligible parents. If a ballot was triggered it would either be an area ballot in the 10 areas the government defined as fully selective, where most parents are eligible to vote, or, for the other schools, a feeder school ballot where only parents whose children attend feeder primary schools could vote. The only ballot triggered was a feeder ballot in Ripon in 2000. It illustrated some of the many unfair aspects of the legislation – for example, that parents with children in prep schools were over-represented and parents with children in infant schools could not vote. Since 2003 Comprehensive Future [2] has been pointing out the major weaknesses in the petitioning and balloting process. More than one Labour insider has said there was never a real intention by the Labour Government that selection would end.

Alternatively, grammar schools' governors can decide to change to an all-ability intake if they can persuade the existing parents in the school to support such a move. A recent guidance note from the DfE [3] reminded academies that although in converting to academy status grammar schools cease to be maintained schools, they are still subject to the same provisions for removing selection as they were subject to as a maintained school, i.e. parents must be able to ballot for the removal of selection and the school itself must be able to remove selection. The academy's funding agreements must include an annex to the agreement in which those provisions are set out.

The pressure for more grammar schools has continued more or less unabated since the SSFA stopped any more being created by establishing a list of the existing grammar schools and outlawing any new selection on ability except by banding. There are several high-profile lobbyists for more grammar schools, including political commentators Stephen Pollard, Peter Hitchens and Conservative Voice with the support of Conservative Members of Parliament (MPs) Boris Johnson, Liam Fox, Graham Brady and David Davis and the National Grammar Schools Association and, of course, the UK Independence

Party. So far, these calls do not seem to be being answered but clearly the support for more grammar schools is strong amongst some vocal Conservative MPs. This could be significant.

Nonetheless, it is interesting that the majority of the new intake of MPs attended comprehensive schools [4], as did 43% of the Cabinet.[5] Also encouraging is that support for comprehensive education seems to be becoming less of a left/right issue. The most trenchant criticism of the Conservative Voice campaign for more grammar schools came from Jonathan Simons of Policy Exchange.[6] A recent collection of essays from the think tank Civitas, not exactly left leaning, dealt with many aspects of the debate about grammar schools and included an inspiring contribution from Suffolk head teacher Geoff Barton about the value of students of all backgrounds working together in a neighbourhood comprehensive.[7] If David Cameron is concerned about the need to end social segregation in this country, he cannot surely increase selection at 11?

But will selection increase in any case as grammar schools expand? Already many grammar schools have taken in more pupils and as pressure on school places moves to secondary schools there are plans for expansion of many schools, including grammar schools. In Labour-run Redbridge the council plans an expansion of its grammar schools, Ilford County High School for boys, in Barkingside, and Woodford County High School for girls, in Woodford Green, by 420 places each as part of its school expansion programme. In Gloucestershire two grammar schools plan to expand despite the fact that there are falling rolls in the area. As a result, the eleven local non-selective schools say that this move will threaten their viability.[8]

More complicated is the application of the Weald of Kent girls' grammar school to open a satellite or annex in Tunbridge Wells several miles away to provide grammar school places for Tunbridge Wells. The decision hinges on whether such an 'annex' is in fact a new school and thereby unlawful. If an annex does not have the same admissions criteria as the school from which it is an annex, it is surely a new school? This decision has been on Secretary of State for Education Nicky Morgan's desk for some time. She has been reported to be taking legal advice.

Undoubtedly the criticism holds that parents who can afford to pay for tutoring are more likely to get their children into grammar schools. This is illustrated by the glaring discrepancy between the percentage of children in grammar schools eligible for free school meals and the percentage of those in the surrounding area. In response to this, both Buckinghamshire and Kent have introduced what have been labelled 'tutor proof tests'. However, an effective parent-led campaign in Buckinghamshire revealed that these new tests resulted in the gap between the percentage of state and private school pupils passing the so-called 'tutor-proof' test increasing by more than three percentage points in favour of privately educated pupils. Only 20% of state school pupils taking the test passed whereas 70% of private school pupils did so.[9]

Sensitivity about the social bias of selection has also resulted in some grammar schools lowering the entry pass mark for poorer pupils. The King Edward VI foundation in Birmingham, which runs five grammar schools, has set a lower qualifying score in its 11-plus test for children entitled to the pupil premium – i.e. those who have been entitled to a free school meal at some time in the past six years. Some 20% of its places are to be allocated to these applicants.[10] Of course, all schools are facing financial pressures and admitting pupils who are eligible for free school meals will mean more pupil premium money for grammar schools. However, this arbitrary choice of 20% highlights the weaknesses of selection.

The case for ending selection was well established when it was abandoned in many local authorities over 40 years ago. Evidence continues to emerge that shows that selection at 11 is divisive, that it damages overall educational outcomes and that it has damaged social mobility (for example, see Chris Cook in the *Financial Times* [11], and Dickson et al in *The Conversation* [12]).

As Professor Chris Husbands has pointed out [13], the argument for grammar schools depends on four assumptions about selection being true. These are that:

- a test at age 11 will reliably discriminate between those who are academically able and those who are not. In fact, all tests have a high error rate;
- it is possible to test for academic ability at age 11 in a way which is valid – that is, that a test performance at age 11 will be strongly predictive of performance at ages 12, 13, 14, 15 and beyond. The 11-plus was widespread at a time when psychologists believed academic ability to be fixed, stable and predictable; the research evidence now is clear that it is none of these;
- it is possible to design tests which have high specificity – that is, that they test academic ability and nothing else, such as socio-economic status. But the evidence is to the contrary: poorer children have always been underrepresented in grammar schools; and
- it is possible to identify a defined group of pupils who will benefit from a grammar school education by comparison with the rest of the population. When grammar schools were widespread, the selected proportion varied hugely from area to area; it still does: approximately 6% in the Birmingham grammar schools and, just 20 miles away, about 30% in Rugby. Both proportions cannot be correct.

In practice, as Husbands says, none of the assumptions hold; there is no academically credible argument in favour of selection for grammar schools at age 11.

But selection persists and it is possibly no coincidence that the argument focuses on ‘closing’ or ‘abolishing’ grammar schools rather than ending selection. For the proponents of selection it seems better to conjure up images of bulldozers rather than justifying dividing children up at age 11. Even one

Labour leader candidate seemed to think comprehensive supporters aim to close down schools.[14] This is nonsense. No school need close; in fact, as secondary numbers rise we need more schools – what we need is an end to selection. What we do not need in the twenty-first century is to tell 11-year-olds that they have failed, when they have eight more years of education ahead of them.

Comprehensive Future campaigns for an end to selection and the growing problem of unfair admissions. Do join us!

Notes

- [1] Department for Education (2015) Schools, Pupils and their Characteristics: January 2015. SFR 16/2015, 11 June.
<https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/schools-pupils-and-their-characteristics-january-201511>
- [2] <http://comprehensivefuture.org.uk/briefing-to-labour-national-policy-forum-2003/>
- [3] Department for Education (2015) Academy Conversion: model ballot documents for grammar schools. 25 June.
<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/academy-conversion-model-ballot-documents-for-grammar-schools>
- [4] Sutton Trust (2015) A Comprehensive Commons. Blog by Conor Ryan, 12 May. <http://www.suttontrust.com/newsarchive/a-comprehensive-commons/>
- [5] *Mail Online*, 11 May 2015. <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3076454/David-Cameron-carries-Cabinet-reshuffle.html#ixzz3fgWhgKop>
- [6] <http://www.policyexchange.org.uk/media-centre/blogs/category/item/5-reasons-why-a-return-to-grammar-schools-is-a-bad-idea>
- [7] Civitas (2015) The Ins and Outs of Selective Secondary Schools: a debate. March. <http://www.civitas.org.uk/education/theselectiondebate>
- [8] <http://www.theguardian.com/education/2015/apr/13/grammar-schools-comprehensives-gloucestershire-funding>
- [9] *The Guardian* (2014).
<http://www.theguardian.com/education/2014/sep/16/state-school-pupils-worse-tutor-proof-11-plus-tests>
- [10] <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/education/education-news/grammar-schools-set-lower-pass-mark-for-poorer-kids-10131366.html>
- [11] Chris Cook (2013) Grammar School Myths.
<http://blogs.ft.com/ftdata/2013/01/28/grammar-school-myths/>
- [12] M. Dickson, L. Macmillan & S. Burgess (2014) Hard Evidence: do grammar schools boost social mobility? <http://theconversation.com/hard-evidence-do-grammar-schools-boost-social-mobility-28121>
- [13] Chris Husbands (2014) Selection at 11 – a very English debate. www.sec-ed.co.uk/best-practice/selection-at-11-a-very-english-debate/#sthash.2oKW7xsx.dpuf

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[14] <http://www.theguardian.com/education/2015/jul/07/labour-leadership-candidates-education-interviews-burnham-cooper-corbyn-kendall-schools>

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