

Grammar school facts – exploding the myths

National Grammar Schools Association (NGSA) briefing paper

Background

'Freedom, fairness and responsibility' – David Cameron on his first day as prime minister.

Ever since David Cameron became leader of the Conservative Party, he and his inner circle (almost all of whom were privately educated) have assiduously promoted egalitarian socialist ideology in opposition to academic selection. This in the full knowledge that grammar schools enjoy widespread cross-party support, above all among the Conservative Party's grassroots – see below. However, only hours before the General Election, Mr Cameron publicly admitted that he had been wrong about grammar schools. But what has he done since to remedy the damage he and his allies have caused?

Now, the coalition government's plans include two key policies to promote educational 'freedom, fairness and responsibility'. First, an extension of Labour's academy programme, which was originally intended to re-vitalise failing comprehensive schools, but will now encompass high-performing schools including grammar schools. The latter, for the time being, will be allowed to retain their selective admission arrangements. Secondly, the 'free' schools programme, whereby parents will be allocated taxpayers' money to open or take over schools they themselves will control.

Initially, it appears that the 'free' schools programme could offer the best long-term security for England's remaining grammar schools. (Similar arrangements in Northern Ireland may save them too.) But in answer to the question of whether grammar schools will be allowed to become 'free' schools under direct parental control, the government's answer is an unambiguous 'no'. New grammar schools and expansion of those that currently exist are firmly banned.¹ Meanwhile, the Academies Bill is passing through Parliament to be followed by an Education Bill to legalise 'free' schools.

On 25 June 2010, before the Academies Bill was finalised or its details were confirmed, the Department for Education (DfE) announced that around 80 grammar schools had expressed an interest in becoming academies. At a superficial level, the attractions seem obvious: academies will be free from local authority control; they will be funded directly by central government instead of through their local authority; they will be free to set their own curriculum; and they will be free to set their own levels of pay and conditions for teachers including heads.

There are nevertheless, some serious barriers to freedom: academies will be strictly controlled by the government's prescriptive admissions code and anti-grammar-school admissions forums. Grammar schools that become academies could be destroyed by stealth – they will be compelled to help failing non-grammar schools to raise their achievements and could be subsumed by them.

Shaun Fenton, co-chairman of the Grammar Schools Heads Association, let the cat out of the bag in July 2009 when he announced: 'If it works locally for a grammar school to become an academy [which at that time had to be comprehensive], that is a decision to be made locally. Gradual evolution is fine.'² Considering the financial and other inducements on offer to headteachers, many of Mr Fenton's colleagues would probably agree with him. That is the danger for the only state schools that can seriously compete with the high standards offered by independent schools.

Fears have also been expressed that if they become academies, grammar schools may lose the statutory protection of requiring a parental ballot before they are turned into comprehensive schools – see NGSA chairman Robert McCartney's urgent warning to grammar schools.³ Graham Brady MP has written to schools minister Nick Gibb about this. As yet, there has been no response.

¹ <http://www.education.gov.uk/freeschools/frequently-asked-questions>

² *Times Educational Supplement*, 3 July 2009. See also *GSHA: the things they say* www.ngsa.org.uk/articles.php

³ <http://www.ngsa.org.uk/news-2010-04.php>

NGSA policy

It is important to note that the NGSA supports parental choice. It is not seeking a return to a compulsory 11-plus or a totally selective state education system. The NGSA seeks only the choice of a grammar school education for all youngsters who want it and have voluntarily entered and obtained the required marks in an 11-plus selection test, thereby qualifying themselves for a grammar-school place.

This does not imply or suggest that those who do not want a place in a grammar school, or do not achieve the required marks in the test, have any less value. They too should have the opportunity of a high-quality education according to their needs and wishes – but not at the expense of grammar schools or their pupils.

The current situation

England has 164 selective state-funded grammar schools alongside approximately 3,000 comprehensive schools. Northern Ireland has 68.

Only 32 (around 1 in 5) of England's 150 local authorities have any grammar schools at all. The remaining 118 local authority areas are totally comprehensive. Entry to grammar schools is obtained by achieving good results in a voluntary 11-plus selection test, which measures academic ability. The 11-plus, however, is not strictly a pass or fail exam, despite the emotive language used by opponents: different schools and different areas set different tests and have different pass marks. Competition for places in some grammar schools is extremely fierce with up to 1,700 applicants for 120 places, giving a 1 in 14 chance of success. Elsewhere, the chance of obtaining a place may be around 2 out of 5. This unfairness is not the fault of the grammar schools. It is because there are too few places and too few schools to meet demand.

Grammar schools are immensely popular

An overwhelming majority of the public support the autonomy and continued existence of England's 164 grammar schools and the 68 in Northern Ireland. An opinion poll carried out by ICM for the NGSA in February 2010 found 70% of those questioned support the retention of the 232 grammar schools in England and Northern Ireland as self-governing state schools and additional, voluntary choice for parents. Only 19% oppose the idea and 10% don't know. Asked if they would support the introduction of new grammar schools, especially in urban areas where there currently are none, 76% supported the idea, 17% opposed it and 6% didn't know. Support for grammars is strong across all age and income groups with a remarkable 85% of 18 to 24 year-olds wanting more grammar schools.⁴

Responses to a 2002 Household Survey done by Northern Ireland's Department for Education for Martin McGuinness (who was then education minister) produced an amazing 200,551 responses: 64% opposed the abolition of academic selection and grammar schools. In June 2008, YouGov polled 876 adults in Northern Ireland for the Conservative Party. Overall, 58% disagreed with Sinn Fein's plans to scrap the 11-plus and only 36% agreed.⁵ (Please note the consistently small percentages that are hostile to grammar schools.)

The voluntary 11-plus is in demand

As already mentioned, the current 11-plus is entirely voluntary – only those seeking a place in a grammar school need take it. Nor is it a strictly a pass or fail exam. Results will depend on where you live. It is not the high stakes test it used to be. Many of the youngsters who do not gain a place in a grammar school simply join their local comprehensive school. The option of trying for a grammar school, however, is extremely popular, especially among responsible, aspirational parents.

⁴ See http://www.ngsa.org.uk/news_reports.php

⁵ *Belfast Telegraph*, 23 June 2008.

Kent provides a good example. In addition to around 9,000 applicants living within its area, 'out-of-county' applicants to take Kent's voluntary 11-plus for a grammar-school place rose from 1,232 in 2007 to 1,810 in 2009 – an increase of almost 50% in two years. In 2009, 924 out-of-county applicants 'passed' the test, but only 268 could be offered places. The other 656 deemed suitable for a grammar school education could not be offered places in grammar schools because there aren't enough to meet demand.⁶ How can this be fair?

Events in Northern Ireland should also be noted. After Sinn Fein/IRA politicians attempted to ban the 11-plus and refused to administer it centrally, the grammar schools set their own voluntary tests. To cover their costs, the Protestant grammar schools charged parents £35 for each entry. All the costs of administering the tests for the Catholic grammars were met by an anonymous donor, so parents seeking places in Catholic grammar schools paid nothing. Despite these anomalies, the number of entries for the voluntary 11-plus remained at just under 14,000 – only slightly fewer than when the tests were free and centrally administered

Grammar schools achieve excellent results

Although per-pupil funding in grammar schools is usually less than the per-pupil funding allocated to comprehensive schools, grammar schools produce excellent results – as, of course, they should. Analysis of the number of A grade A-levels achieved in important academic subjects such as chemistry, physics, maths, further maths, geography, history, French and German shows that in 2006, in these important subjects, pupils in 164 grammar schools were awarded more than half the total number of A grade A-levels awarded to all the pupils in up to 3,000 comprehensive schools.⁷

This record of achievement in grammar schools should be set against the contents of an internal email sent by Sir Cyril Taylor, who was then chairman of what is now the Specialist Schools and Academies Trust, to the then education secretary and top civil servants. The email summarised research conducted by (pro-comprehensive) Professor David Jesson, who had analysed the GCSE and A-level results obtained by the brightest 5% of pupils selected on the basis of their national tests results, when they were 11-years-old. Sir Cyril wrote: 'Professor Jesson's research and the replies to Lord Quirk's parliamentary questions show that a significant proportion (possibly as many as 22,000 a year) of our most able children [the top 5% educated in comprehensive schools] are not reaching their potential.'⁸ By any standards, this is a national scandal, yet the educational establishment kept Professor Jesson's research strictly 'in house'. Its detailed findings were never published.

Pupils do better at grammar schools

A major study, *Evidence on the effects of selective educational systems* by researchers at Durham University, found that: 'The majority of studies (and all of those we judge to be methodologically strongest) report that pupils who attend grammar schools do better than equally able pupils in comprehensives.' They also reported that: 'In terms of raw KS4 (GCSE) results, it is clear that pupils in grammar schools do much better.'⁹

The existence of grammar schools does not adversely affect other nearby schools

There is no evidence that grammar schools adversely affect other local schools. In fact, the competition they provide almost certainly raises standards in other types of school. The Durham University study mentioned above says:

"We have also failed to find any evidence of collateral harm to any other schools, arising from the existence of grammar schools. Overall, schools are just as likely to be performing

⁶ Figures obtained from Kent County Council in 2009 and 2010.

⁷ *A serious omission* by Nick Seaton, October 2007.

⁸ Leaked email dated 19 May 2005.

⁹ *Evidence on the effects of selective educational systems* by Robert Coe, Karen Jones, Jeff Searle, Dimitra Kokotsaki, Azlina Mohd Kosnin, Paul Skinner, CEM Centre, Durham University, October 2008

well, whether or not they are 'creamed' by a grammar school. Hence, on the basis of KS4 performance at least, there do not appear to be strong grounds for abolishing selection as it currently operates."

Nor should anyone assume that the remaining secondary modern schools are inferior. Many produce better results than dozens of comprehensive schools which, by definition, have all-ability intakes.

Grammar schools are less socially selective than many comprehensive schools

Research by academics at Buckingham University compared the social mix in England's 164 grammar schools with the 164 most socially selective comprehensive schools. In the grammar schools 13.5% of the pupils were from 'income deprived' backgrounds compared with only 9.2% in the comprehensives. Needless to say, the grammar schools also achieved better results than the more socially selective comprehensives: 97.7% of pupils in the grammars achieved 5 or more grade A*-C GCSEs including English and maths compared with only 66.7% in the comprehensives.¹⁰

Suppression of evidence and possible dirty tricks

The scandalous failure properly to publicise the serious under-achievement of thousands of bright youngsters in comprehensive schools (which must, of course, happen each and every year) has already been mentioned. But there have been other examples of anti-grammar school spin and it must be asked why. Soon after Mr Cameron became party leader, Conservative shadow education ministers highlighted research purporting to show that grammar schools do not cater for youngsters from less wealthy homes. Some of this research was flawed and on occasion, it was misrepresented.

Prior to the General Election The Conservative Bow Group¹¹ and Policy Exchange¹² (said to be David Cameron's favourite think-tank) both published research highlighting the exceptional A-level results achieved by independent schools compared with the mediocre results from comprehensive schools. Fair enough! Yet both failed to detail the exceptional results from England's remaining state-funded grammar schools.

Just before the general election, Ian Hitchen analysed the 150 most popular questions on education posted to Mr Cameron on the Conservative Party's website. Members could vote for the questions in order of preference. Ranked by net votes in favour, questions favouring 'more grammar schools' were way out in front, with 19 questions and 1395 net votes. 'Less bureaucracy' came second with 7 questions and 632 net votes, and 'more discipline' came third with 8 questions and 603 net votes. Yet in his online presentation afterwards, Mr Cameron brushed aside the grammar school question around halfway through the session. However, 24 hours before polling began, he did publicly admit that he had been wrong about grammar schools. It was too little and too late.

The political response

The response from many national and local politicians to the grammar school question is totally at odds with public opinion. Instead of attempting to satisfy demand, leaders of all the main political parties have refused to allow more grammar schools, while simultaneously undermining the ones that exist. This has created a ratchet effect, whereby the number of pupils in grammar schools can be reduced in some areas of the country, but with no possibility of expansion elsewhere. The net effect can only be downwards.

¹⁰ *Worlds Apart: social variation among schools* by Professor Alan Smithers and Dr Pamela Robinson, Buckingham University and The Sutton Trust, April 2010.

¹¹ *A-levels: The Widening Gap* by Chris Skidmore, Conservative Bow Group, October 2007.

¹² See, for example, *The hard truth about 'soft' subjects* by Anna Fazackerley and Julian Chant, Policy Exchange, December 2008.

As already mentioned, all 68 grammar schools in Northern Ireland are threatened. Of England's 164, the NGSA has identified around 40 that are under threat. The threats include: massive new academies that can only be filled by depriving grammar schools of pupils; federations, where two grammars are federated (merged) so two schools become one; Building Schools for the Future plans where millions of pounds worth of capital funding depends on 'co-operation' between selective and non-selective schools; and merging a grammar school with non-selective school to form a comprehensive academy, as in the case of St Bernard's Catholic Grammar School and St Joseph's School in Slough.

In another example, having undemocratically engineered a 'hard federation' between Boston Grammar School for boys and Boston High School for girls, Conservative-controlled Lincolnshire County Council reduced the places available for boys from a possible 112 down to 69. Using similar tactics, Conservative-controlled Kent County Council has recently reduced places available at Clarendon House Grammar School for girls in Ramsgate from a possible 110-120 down to 68.

Such reductions in pupil numbers obviously have an immensely damaging effect on schools' budgets, which inevitably leads to the loss of highly qualified staff. These schools were viable until recently. So, if primary school standards are rising, as we are led to believe, how can it now be impossible to fill all their places with suitable pupils?

What should be done?

The United Nations Declaration on Human Rights was written soon after the Second World War as a bastion against totalitarianism. It gives parents the right to choose an education for their child in accordance with 'their own religious or philosophical convictions'. How can denial of this right be fair or responsible?

As the evidence shows, there is massive, unsatisfied demand for grammar school places. The evidence also shows that, given the choice, many thousands of responsible parents are willing voluntarily to enter their child for an 11-plus test of academic ability in the hope of obtaining a top-quality state education. Grammar schools are among the best schools in the state system and parents know this. They also understand that deliberately impeding the brightest pupils cannot possibly help those who are less fortunate.

So politicians must understand that in the absence of a mandate to undermine or ban one particular type of school for ideological or political reasons, they are abusing their power.

The following measures are urgently required:

- 1) Instead of constantly threatening grammar schools or trying to abolish them by stealth, politicians must, by law, guarantee the long-term future of all existing 232 grammar schools.
- 2) The number of 11-year-olds admitted each year by existing grammar schools must be maintained at the highest possible level. Reductions in the number of 11-year-olds admitted each year must not be disguised by increasing admissions at sixth-form level.
- 3) All youngsters, wherever they live, must have the opportunity to win a place in a grammar school, if they can demonstrate the required academic ability. Bans on increasing places for 11-year-olds in existing grammar schools, or setting up new grammar schools where there is demand, are undemocratic and unacceptable.
- 4) Governors, parents and other NGSA supporters may like to contact their MP through <http://www.theyworkforyou.com> or by other means to ensure they act for the benefit of those who elect them. (Further information, if required, is available at www.ngsa.org.uk).

NGSA/30 June 2010.

Postscript – The email below was received on 27 June 2010:

Dear Mr Seaton,

Thank you for your email dated 01 June 2010 concerning Academies.

At present the Academies Bill will allow schools that select all or some on ability to continue (*sic*) to do so. There are ongoing discussions about selective schools changing to a non-selective as an academy, no decisions on the policy have yet been taken. We are continually (*sic*) updating the Q&A on the Department for Education's website and as soon as the decisions have been made by Ministers the website will be updated.

Yours sincerely,

Michael Frain,

Academies Policy, Finance and Performance Division, Department for Education.