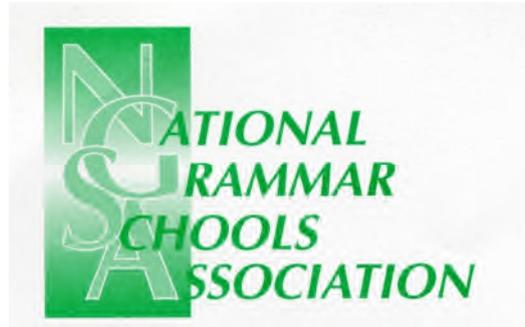


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New Grammar Schools How, When and for Whom?

The Government consultation paper on the creation of new grammar schools contained two central propositions.

Firstly, that grammar schools are “good schools” much in public demand and, as such there should be more of them. Secondly, that more places in them should be occupied by able, but disadvantaged, children.

In responding, the National Grammar School Association welcomed these propositions, but expressed reservations about the strategy for achieving both.

Since grammar schools by their nature are academic, all children, regardless of their background, are requested to demonstrate by a selective test that they will benefit from the education they offer. In competition with their better-off peers who enjoy a range of advantages from informed, aspirational parents to private coaching, disadvantaged children are severely handicapped.

LITERACY and NUMERACY

The NGSA considered that the main obstacles to the provision of a level playing field for the disadvantaged were:-

- The failure of many primary schools to achieve even basic standards of literacy and numeracy among their pupils;
- Parental apathy and lack of awareness of available educational opportunities and
- An ideological antagonism among many primary school teachers to selective education or any form of competitive pupil assessment that identifies the able.

The parlous state of literacy and numeracy at primary school level, and the failure of teaching methods to improve them, was exposed in the Rose Report in 2006. Since then, the latest statistics show little improvement. In September 2016, 47% of primary school pupils at Key Stage 2 level (age 10 to 11) failed to achieve the required standard in reading, writing and mathematics. Ofsted reported many cases with an even higher failure rate. In Peterborough, it was 61%; Luton and Dorset 57%; while, in Liverpool, it was 56%.

INTENSIVE IMPROVEMENT OF PRIMARY SCHOOLS

In areas of even more acute deprivation, the failure rate is probably even higher. It is generally accepted that if children are not reasonably literate upon leaving primary schools then later improvement is unlikely. The most recent research among university teachers confirms that this failure is evident even at student level.

The NGSA advised that unless wide and intensive programmes were put in place to increase and improve parental awareness among the disadvantaged and just-managing families and to urgently improve the quality of primary education, the prospect of disadvantaged children gaining grammar school places was unlikely to improve.

Despite the fact that primary education is the foundation of all subsequent learning and achievement, little reference was made to its importance in the Government paper. Instead, heavy reliance was placed upon the existing grammar schools, independent schools and the universities as the principal agencies for improving existing levels of education.

Considering that the present 163 state grammar schools educate only 5% of the state post-primary cohort - and that in three-quarters of England there are none - their outreach effect, though welcome, is likely to be marginal.

RECOGNISING CORE PROBLEMS AT BASE LEVEL

Not surprisingly, since the period of consultation closed on December 13, 2016, the Education Secretary, her advisers and Nick Timothy of the PM's Office have had a series of meetings almost entirely with members of the Grammar School Heads Association (GSHA) an exclusive body only open to head teachers.

The first details of how the Government intended to implement the expansion of selective schools was revealed in a briefing note set out in a GSHA newsletter. The details appear to confirm the top-down strategy outlined in the government's consultation paper, itself the source of the NGSA's initial reservations.

Scant regard is paid to the realities which require the identification of able, but disadvantaged, children and offering them a level of primary school education enabling them to compete successfully in a selective test. Reform best succeeds by recognising and addressing the core problems at the base levels.

CREAMING OFF IS “ NEGLIGIBLE”

One of the proposals suggested in the briefing note, and certainly its most incomprehensible, is a plan to make the new grammar schools super elite, catering for only the top 10% of children in the disadvantaged areas in which they are to be cited. The given reason for this bizarre proposal is the need to mollify the objections of the heads of non-selective post primary schools in the area, that the new grammar schools might “cream off” their best pupils.

This objection was dismissed as “negligible” in a research report carried out by Durham University for the Sutton Trust. Indeed, their research is referred to in the Government’s consultation paper. If this plan is implemented then disadvantaged children, who currently experience difficult obstacles in gaining a place in a “regular grammar school”, will face a much greater hurdle in securing a place in a “super elite” one. How the anti-selective brigade must be rejoicing at this proposal.

BOTTOM UP REFORM

The NGSA has recently become aware of a proposal by the North West Academies Trust which demonstrates a complete and practical scheme for the “bottom-up” approach advocated in the NGSA’s response paper. The trust has an outstanding record in turning around some of the worst-performing primary schools in England. It proposes to open two free primary schools on two sites across the disadvantaged areas of the Wirral.

The applications opening paragraph discloses its aim:

“... to provide a high quality innovative education which enables pupils to go on and attend a grammar school. Our schools will admit a mixture of pupils with the criteria that at least 50% are in receipt of free school meals...”

Is it presumptuous to suggest that the Minister, her officials and the PM’s special adviser might find it more profitable to consult with such as the North West Academies Trust rather than solely with the representatives of established and perhaps vested interests?

A CHALLENGING SOLUTION

Already, the independent schools – at the price of Government financing for bursaries - are offering places and no doubt the existing grammar schools will require additional financial support to finance the outreach assistance they offer.

To realistically fulfil the need to get more disadvantaged children into grammar schools, something more than top-down tinkering is required, instead there should be bottom-up reform, which is a much more challenging solution.

Bob McCartney QC . Chair NGSA March 8 2017