

URGENT NOTE TO SCHOOL SECRETARIES: Please forward this newsletter to your head, deputies, and chairmen of governors and parents' associations. Also, if you have received it by email, please acknowledge so we can keep our email list up to date. Thank you.

Annual Conference/AGM

The Grammar School Choice: Surviving in a Hostile Environment

**Saturday 16 April 2005 from 10.30am to 1.15pm
at the Ramada Hotel, Matson Lane, Gloucester GL4 6EA**

Speakers include:

Professor Chris Woodhead, chairman of Cognita Schools and Sunday Times columnist.
Councillor Jackie Hall, Conservative education spokesman, Gloucestershire County Council.
Miles Bailey, chairman, Save Our Schools, Gloucester.
Stephen Elliott, chairman, Parental Alliance for Choice in Education, Northern Ireland.

Do come and share information and compare notes. Governors, heads, teachers and parents from grammar schools are all welcome.

Full details and an application/registration form are at the end of this newsletter or at:
www.ngsa.org.uk/conference

Gloucester grammars still under threat

Last year, an LEA 'consultation' on plans to close one of Gloucester's four grammar schools found 82% of those responding were opposed. So that idea has been suspended – for the time being. Now the Labour controlled LEA, supported by Liberal-Democrats, has set up a Task Group of headteachers (including only 2 grammar school heads) to consider how to reduce grammar school places by 120 a year. Two of the grammar schools are foundation schools, which should mean that the LEA cannot reduce their admission numbers. But even if the loss of 120 places is evenly divided between all 4 schools, that means losing one form of entry from each school. Within a short time, this will cause loss of funding, loss of teachers' jobs and, almost certainly, the loss of some specialist subjects. Any changes approved by the LEA will take effect from September 2006.

The ruling politicians have used 'falling rolls' as justification for the chaos they are creating. But the parents have discovered that when the LEA applies to the DfES for funding, it claims that school rolls will rise over the next 6 years from 40,000 to almost 43,000! Also, what is happening in Gloucester closely follows the anti-choice proposals published earlier this year by the Labour-dominated House of Commons Education and Skills Committee in *Secondary Education: School Admissions*, Volumes I and II (The Stationery Office, 2004).

But reducing places in grammar schools makes no sense at all, when grammars produce such excellent exam results – not just for the very brightest, but for pupils of lesser ability too. In *Making a Difference: Performance of Maintained Secondary Schools in England*, 2003, the National Audit Office noted that: ‘Our analysis suggests that on average, across their range of pupils, the 164 selective schools in England made a bigger difference to the academic achievements of pupils than the average for other schools at Key Stage 3... The difference made by selective schools at both key Stage 3 and GCSE level appears to be of particular benefit to pupils who have a relatively low level of prior academic achievement.’

More recently, *The Daily Mail* (7 January 2005) reported that : “Ofsted has delivered another ringing endorsement of grammar school performance. They account for just five per cent of secondaries nationwide yet take more than three times as many places in the watchdog’s list of the best performing schools over 12 years of inspections. An Ofsted spokesman said: ‘We haven’t analysed the reasons for grammars’ success. But two possible contributory factors could be that they are more likely to have a stable cohort of children over time and are more likely to have stable staffing.’” Yet although Ruth Kelly, the new education secretary, has promised to allow successful and popular schools to expand, she has ruled out the possibility of grammar school expansion: ‘Under this government there will be no free for all in admissions or the setting up of new grammar schools.’

Local parents in Gloucester, who are fighting magnificently for their schools, have two proactive parents’ groups: Save Our Schools (SoS), chaired by Miles Bailey and Review Action Group for Education (RAGE), chaired by Angus McKellar. The fight for Gloucester’s grammar schools must be won. If you are not already helping and would like to, please contact Miles Bailey at miles.bailey@virgin.net

Northern Ireland’s grammar schools also under threat

In Northern Ireland, the proportion of GCSEs graded A*-C was 69.4% this year, way ahead of England. Almost certainly, this is because Northern Ireland still has a differentiated school system. Yet although ‘consultation’ has shown that 63% of all parents want to retain academic selection, the 11-plus exam is to be replaced by ‘teacher recommendation’. As *The Daily Telegraph* leader put it on 26 August: “Ulster will be forcibly integrated into the ‘all shall have prizes’ mentality of English educational theorists and teaching unions.” Majority public opinion has been brushed aside, as in Gloucester.

The ‘progressives’ in Northern Ireland are masters of spin, too. They claim they are not abolishing grammar schools, just the 11-plus exam. But, as the principal of Belfast Royal Academy, William Young, points out: ‘How can [grammar schools] exist, apart from in name only, if one removes the principle which makes them what they are – academic selection?’ (*Belfast Telegraph*, 23 October 2004).

The anti-grammar school lobby in Northern Ireland has also used dubious claims of falling rolls as justification for its destructive activities. Prominent anti-grammar politicians, many of whom are based in Westminster, have been publicly challenged by Stephen Elliott, who leads the Northern Ireland branch of the Parental Alliance for Choice in Education. The politicians are worried, but only pressure from parents, governors and teachers will persuade them to retreat.

Grammars excel in latest ‘value-added’ tables

“Grammars shine at ‘adding value’” was the BBC News Online headline on 12 January 2005 as journalists received the latest secondary-school value-added tables. Many newspaper reports were equally positive. On 13 January 2005, a report in *The Times* observed that: ‘Grammars represent only 5 per cent of secondaries in England but account for more than 40 per cent of the best 100 schools nationally for the progress made by pupils between the ages of 11 and 16.’ *The Times* also noted that: ‘Critics of the grammars have argued in the past that they get the best exam results because they cream off the most able pupils. However, the Government’s value-added rating [largely] discounts this argument because it is intended to highlight schools that excel at raising achievement beyond the standards expected when pupils arrive at 11.’

This suggests that journalists are perhaps giving more credence to the ‘value-added’ tables than they deserve. Grammar schools have excelled in the ‘value-added’ tables despite the DfES’s ‘value-added’ methodology: there is solid evidence that ‘value-added’ tables are intended to undermine the successes of the best schools and gloss over the poor performance of the worst (see www.ngsa.org.uk). Meanwhile, if you have any concrete evidence of unfair manipulation of results, please contact NGSA.

Blatant discrimination by the Department for Education and Skills

Government plans to improve parental choice by allowing successful and popular schools to expand specifically exclude grammar schools. Education ministers and the DfES even excluded the NGSA and individual grammar schools from their consultation. But they did include the British Humanist Association, the National Secular Society, the GMB, the TGWU and Unison! The NGSA wrote to complain and accused the DfES of discrimination. This led to a full page article in *The Sunday Express* on 9 January 2005, headed ‘Labour’s war on grammar schools’.

Tomlinson proposals will not help grammar schools

No-one should be fooled by the political spinning attached to Mike Tomlinson’s proposals for a radical reform of the exam system. If all the Tomlinson proposals are accepted, it is now acknowledged that exam league tables will disappear, thus making it easier to disguise failure and impossible for high-achieving schools, such as grammar schools, publicly to demonstrate their successes.

The idea of having two new top grades (A-plus and A-double-plus) at A-level is superficially attractive. But past experience shows that the educational establishment will gradually water down these top grades to make them easier to achieve. For example, on 16 January 2005, *The Sunday Telegraph* revealed that pupils can now get a B grade in GCSE maths with marks of only 17 per cent – in other words with 83 per cent of their answers wrong. Even a grade A with the OCR exam board only requires 45 per cent. Again, this dumbing down of exam standards helps to disguise low achievement. It will do nothing for the high achievers such as grammar school pupils or their teachers.

Important notice – please can you help?

As a result of the current attacks on grammar schools, the NGSAs, its national committee and its regions are being re-organised to focus the Association more tightly on the key issues, and to improve our communications. We urgently need help, especially with secretarial work and email communications. Knowledge of education is always valuable but, at present, our main requirements are for reliable, committed people with knowledge of computing.

If you would like to be involved and are willing to offer some of your time, please contact either Brian Wills-Pope at brianwp@btconnect.com (Tel. 01803 200973) or Barry Clouting at b_clouting@tiscali.co.uk (Tel. 01189 410186). Or speak to either of them at the Gloucester conference. Expenses will be paid and your help will be greatly appreciated!

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Programme

10.00-10.30:	Registration/Coffee	
10.30-10.33:	Brian Wills-Pope	Chairman's opening address
10.33-11.00:	Prof. Chris Woodhead	The need for choice and standards
11.00-11.30:	Cllr Jackie Hall	The political fight for choice
11.30-12.00:	Miles Bailey	The parental fight for choice
12.00-12.30:	Stephen Elliott	The attack in Northern Ireland
12.30-12.55:	All speakers	Open Forum/What should be done?
12.55-1.00:	Chairman's rounding-up	
1.00 –1.15:	Annual General Meeting	
1.30pm:	Lunch	

Application/Registration Form

I/We would like to attend the NGSA conference in Gloucester on 16 April 2005

Name(s):

School:

Governor/headteacher/teacher/parent?

Address:

Telephone:

Email:

I/We will require lunch: Yes/No

Please register by 2 April at the latest by returning this form by post to: Barry Clouting, Milbourne House, 3 Deerhurst Close, Mill Lane, Calcot, Reading RG31 7RX or by email to: b_clouting@tiscali.co.uk