

NGSA News

Newsletter of the National Grammar Schools Association (www.ngsa.org.uk)

December 2005

NOTE TO SCHOOL SECRETARIES: Please forward this newsletter to your head, deputies, and chairmen of governors and parents' associations. Thank you.

The Truth About Grammar Schools

Having recently changed its constitution to gain more public support, especially in England's 114 (out of 150) English LEAs which are fully comprehensive, the NGSA published a new pamphlet in October, *The Truth About Grammar Schools* by Fred Naylor and Roger Peach.

This is packed with evidence which supports the idea that parents should be able to choose between selective and comprehensive secondary schools. Those who would deny that choice ignore evidence and base their hostility purely on ideology. The denial of parental choice and the legal right of parents to choose between selective and comprehensive education systems aims to produce 'equality of results' as opposed to 'equality of opportunity'. (The former can only be achieved by handicapping more able pupils and abolishing competition. Compulsory social mixing, moreover, is ideologically totalitarian.)

In areas which still offer the choice of selective schools, it is not only grammar schools that do well for their pupils. Answers to Parliamentary Questions show there is little difference between comprehensive schools and secondary moderns in respect of the percentages of their pupils gaining 5 or more A*-C grade GCSEs (51.4% and 42.3% respectively). More shocking, and nationally disastrous, is the comparison of the total number of pupils in grammars and in comprehensives gaining higher grades A-levels in academic subjects (including maths, physics and chemistry). Pupils in only 164 grammar schools gain roughly half the total number of top grade A-levels obtained by pupils in around 2,500 comprehensive schools.

The 1998 Human Rights Act gives parents the right to have their child educated 'in conformity with their own religious or philosophical convictions'. Unfortunately, this Human Right is often ignored and parents need to fight for it. If standards are to rise, more grammar schools are needed, especially in areas where they don't currently exist.

The Truth about Grammar Schools costs £5 including postage from the National Grammar Schools Association (to which cheques should be made out), c/o Specialist Business Services Ltd, 91 High Street, Brackley, Northamptonshire, NN13 7BW.

NGSA Annual General Meeting/Conference

Along with our AGM, a conference aiming to protect existing grammar schools and persuade politicians to open new ones has been arranged for Saturday, 21 January 2006 at the RAF Club in Piccadilly, London. Entitled 'Grammar Schools Work – No Opportunity, No Choice', speakers include Roger Peach (NGSA vice-president), Stephen Elliott (chairman of the Parental Alliance for Choice in Education, Northern Ireland) and Peter Morris (Professional Association of Teachers).

A provisional programme and an application form, which needs printing out and returning to Barry Clouting, can be found at the end of this newsletter.

State schools fail around 16,000 of the brightest pupils each year

Parliamentary Questions (PQs) from critics of the government's education policies have forced ministers and their allies to address huge variations in results from different types of school. So, presumably to distract from embarrassing evidence implicit in the answers to these PQs, Professor David Jesson, a staunch opponent of grammar schools, has done some new research. At the time of writing, this has still not been published. But Professor Jesson, who is an associate director of the Specialist Schools and Academies Trust, did speak about it at a recent SSAT conference.

Using data supplied by the Department for Education and Skills (DfES), Professor Jesson has tracked 37,500 pupils whose national test results when they were 11-years-old placed them in the top 5% academically. When these pupils had reached 16, all 7,500 pupils in independent schools had achieved at least five A* or A grade GCSEs. Only two thirds of the 30,000 very bright pupils in state schools reached the same level of achievement. At A-level, the gap widens. Almost all the brightest pupils in independent schools achieve at least three A grade A-levels. Only a third of the very bright pupils in state schools do so.

However, by comparing the performance of pupils in independent schools with *all* pupils in state schools, Professor Jesson and his colleagues have cleverly avoided drawing attention to the successes of grammar schools. The PQs have shown that this under-achievement is not evenly spread between all types of school: 23% of all candidates from independent schools and 19% of candidates from *state* grammar schools achieve at least three A grade A-levels. But the proportion is only 5% in comprehensive schools and 8% in FE/sixth form colleges.

Apparently, this important information about pupil performance in different types of *state* school was not mentioned at the SSAT conference. Nevertheless, newspapers have now recorded that each year more than 16,000 comprehensive school pupils, whose performance in national tests when they were 11 placed them among the brightest 5%, fail to achieve the top exam grades they are capable of.

No-one should be surprised that high-ability grammar school pupils do well. But why aren't thousands of very bright youngsters in comprehensive schools reaching the same high level of achievement? (N.B. Of course, there are some good comprehensive schools, but clearly, there aren't enough of them!)

Northern Ireland's grammars threatened from Westminster

Two Westminster MPs, Peter Hain and Angela Smith, have now published proposals to change the admission arrangements of Northern Ireland's grammar schools by ending academic selection. Northern Ireland has around 70 grammar schools, but if the proposals go ahead, all will become comprehensive.

Northern Ireland's has the best-performing state school system in the UK and the politicians have no mandate for this change. The government's own consultation showed 64% of those who responded were opposed to the proposals. On 14 November, a leading article in the *Belfast Telegraph* expressed fears of a 'one size fits all system' that may cause Northern Ireland to 'be saddled with a hybrid education system that threatens to push down standards all round'. *Sunday Life* (11 December) observed that 'the debate on future education arrangements is the most important public policy issue in the province today.' Angela Smith, who controls education, has tried to deceive the media and the public by misquoting a letter from the national statistician. The educational establishment is in trouble over the manipulation of evidence. There are even rumours that abolishing the grammar schools was part of a secret bargain struck by Tony Blair with former IRA leader Martin McGuinness as part of the peace process.

In a typically disingenuous statement, Peter Hain told the *Belfast Telegraph* (10 December): 'The grammar schools are not under threat. Increasingly they are becoming less grammar and more comprehensive because of falling rolls. People are voting with their feet.' Then the minister had the nerve to claim he believed in straight talking!

Meanwhile, we welcome new members and supporters among schools and concerned individuals in Northern Ireland. Stephen Elliott (who will be speaking at our January conference) and his colleagues in the NGSA and the Parental Alliance for Choice in Education (NI) have spent months unpicking the political propaganda which is being used to destroy the grammar schools. Robert McCartney QC, who leads the UK Unionist Party, has looked at the evidence and is now calling on parents to fight, and ministers to reconsider. And whatever happened to the idea that politicians and their officials are the servants of the public, not its masters?

Lack of grammar schools blamed for falling social mobility in Scotland

The most extensive research of its kind ever carried out in Scotland has found that Scots in their 30s and 40s are much less likely to improve their social standing than their parents. Researchers at Edinburgh University surveyed 15,000 Scots born between 1937 and 1975 and compared their jobs with those of their parents. Upward social mobility, for which the Scots have always been famous, is fast disappearing.

Business leaders, academics and some politicians have blamed Scotland's totally comprehensive education system. *Scotland on Sunday's* leading article (11 December) was unequivocal: 'What is required is an end to the one size fits all approach to education which penalises the poorest most. It is a reality our political classes refuse to confront: the bright child from a deprived background is less likely to get an education which allows him or her to go on and become a doctor, lawyer, business leader or senior civil servant than their forerunners of the 1940 and 1950s.'

Admissions update

Many thanks to all the headteachers who completed and returned the questionnaire on admissions attached to our July newsletter. Unfortunately, there were too few responses to provide a representative sample of all 164 grammar schools in England. But it is not too late to spend 5 minutes completing the form, which would be most helpful and much appreciated. To find it, go to www.ngsa.org.uk, click on news on the left of the homepage, then click on the newsletter for July 2005.

We thought things were improving when, just as schools were breaking up for summer holidays, the government published new draft guidance on admissions. This included the proposal that authorities should stop forcing parents to name their 'first preference' choice of secondary school *before* they are allowed to know whether or not their child has passed the 11-plus exam. This discrimination against parents seeking a place for their child in a grammar school has caused serious reductions in applications to grammar schools, because parents were afraid to risk having their child placed in an unpopular, 'sink' school, if they were unsuccessful in the 11-plus.

The new draft code regarded the use of 'first preference first' in areas with selective schools as 'poor practice' and recommended that authorities should use 'equal preference' instead. Unfortunately, in the consultation which ended on 18 October, although there were 149 respondents who supported this recommendation, 158 'including 7 responses from governors of 1 school' opposed the proposal. Of those who responded, 87 supported the release of test results before parents must state their preferences, but 93 wanted the authorities to retain this nasty piece of blackmail.

Sadly, as a result of all this – and obvious disagreements within the government about whether parents should be allowed any choice at all – the new draft admissions code has now been shelved. Nevertheless, if, next year, any admission authorities try to make parents choose a secondary school before they know the results of their child's 11-plus exam, the parents and the grammar schools involved should object in the strongest terms. Earlier this year, North Halifax Grammar School's took a firm position against Calderdale LEA, which was forcing parents to make choices before they knew their child's 11-plus results. The School was supported by the government's adjudicator and threatened legal action – a good example which parents, governors and other schools should follow.

Even though the new proposals for admission arrangements have been shelved, they provide useful ammunition: The draft code states: 'In areas where grammar schools exist, it is good practice for

parents to be able to know the outcome of selective tests before the closing dates for applications to schools under co-ordinated schemes. In considering their co-ordinated scheme, [Local Authorities] in areas with grammar schools should take account of the interests of all groups of parents' (paragraph 4.44). The draft code also states: "It is poor practice to use a 'first preference first' scheme where there is an element of selection locally' (paragraph 6.5).

In any event, neither the existing School Admissions Code of Practice published in 2003 nor, obviously, the new draft code, is statutory. Where guidance is unfair or discriminatory, it should simply be ignored.

And finally...

The following, written by Fiona Millar of the anti-grammar school pressure group, Comprehensive Future, appeared in *Education Guardian* on 20 September: 'Selection by faith, ability, interview and/or headteacher reference should be firmly in the list of 'unacceptable and inappropriate' admissions criteria. And the whole system should be mandatory and overseen by an independent local authority, not individual schools.'

Conference Programme (Provisional) Grammar Schools Work – No Opportunity, No Choice

10.00 – 10.30	Registration and coffee
10.30 – 11.00	Legislation – Roger Peach, Vice President, NGSA
11.00 – 11.45	The Northern Ireland experience – Stephen Elliott, Chairman, Parental Alliance for Choice in Education (N. Ireland)
11.45 – 12.30	Increasing Opportunities – Peter Morris, Executive Member, Professional Association of Teachers
12.30 – 13.15	Open forum
13.15 – 13.30	Annual General Meeting
13.30	Buffet Lunch

Application/Registration Form

I/We wish to attend the NGSA Conference at the RAF Club, Piccadilly London on the 21st January 2006

Name(s):

School:

Parent/Governor/Head teacher/Teacher/Other e.g. committee ?

Address:

Telephone:

Email:

Please indicate any special dietary requirement:

I enclose payment [£12.00 per person] of £

Please register by Thursday 12th January 2006 by returning this form to: Barry Clouting, Milbourne House, 3 Deerhurst Close, Mill Lane, Calcot, Reading RG31 7RX or by email to: b.clouting@tiscali.co.uk