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The development of selective and comprehensive education

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Abstract: *The question of how secondary education should be organised was one of the dominant issues of 20th century education policy in Britain. The origins of the modern comprehensive school, or 'common school' as it was known in the first half of the 20th century, originate in the USA. That was one option available. Selection on the basis of ability, if that could be measured, was another. The issue of 'common school' or selective school arose as a serious consideration in the 1920s, but for the upper elementary stage and not for secondary education. Theories of selection at secondary level were developed in the Spens report of 1938 and, in particular, the Norwood report of 1942. The Education Act of 1944 did not bring in selection, as many people think. It made possible free secondary education for all, but what type of secondary education was left to local authorities to decide, with a number of different types of school adopted in plans submitted from around the country. It was the Labour government elected in 1945 that introduced selection. By the 1960s the Labour government elected in 1964 had turned against selection, and comprehensive education took off. Selection now exists in about 20% of England and much of Northern Ireland. It is completely absent in Scotland and Wales. Debate over whether it should be abolished in the rest of England has begun again, with overwhelming evidence that selection causes harm to more children than benefit from it.*

Key words: Selection, grammar, secondary modern, multilateral, ability, LEAs, Plowden, OECD, social mobility.

With a number of organisations coming together to form the Time's Out for the Test campaign to end the 11+ in England, with a well-attended launch conference in London, and Christine Blower's Private Member's Bill in the Lords to end selection getting its Second Reading, both in early December 2022, the long dormant issue of selection into different types of school at age 10 has suddenly come back to life. The origins of one of the most divisive issues in education go back decades, to the period from the end of the First World War to the end of the Second World War.

You can go back to the idea of the Common School in the Scotland of the 17th century for the origins of comprehensive education, but in its modern form it is an American idea. The whole of the United States was comprehensive by the 1920s, which gave the USA a great advantage in the expansion of higher education after the Second World War when the country had a pool of people educated up to 18 who could take up places in their greatly expanded higher education system.

It was a different situation in Britain. Before the 1944 Education Act the vast majority of children did not go to secondary school at all. They spent the whole of their education in elementary schools, as primary schools were then called.

After the First World War, as the Liberal-Conservative coalition government struggled to build the "land fit for heroes" that Prime Minister David Lloyd George had promised, competing ideas of how schools should be organised were developed. The popular Dalton Plan, for example, "allowed for individualisation of learning in classes with widely differing interests and abilities". [1]

Yet this ran counter to Board of Education thinking and at a time when intelligence testing was developing, ideas of stratification within schools, or between them, increasingly gained ground. This emphasis on increased stratification was taking place within elementary schools.

In the 1920s a few urban local education authorities

(LEAs) began to divide elementary education into two halves at the age of 11. Some went for selective central schools for the brighter child from 11 to the school leaving age of 14, while others thought that all children should progress to upper elementary schools after 11.

The Hadow Report of 1926, *The Education of the Adolescent*, one of three reports that Sir William Hadow produced as chairman of the Board of Education's Consultative Committee, concerned itself with what it called post-primary education. [2] This was not secondary education, which the committee was explicitly prevented from considering by its terms of reference. His report recommended the creation of non-selective senior schools within the elementary school system, for children from 11 to 14 who did not go to secondary school (which the vast majority did not). The debate over selection in the 1930s was over implementing the Hadow Report and whether non-selective senior elementary schools or selective central schools were the way forward. [3]

The issue of secondary education was quite separate. It was available almost entirely only to middle class children whose parents could afford the fees that the pre-war grammar schools charged. There were a few scholarship places available free for the bright working class child, but the cost of actually going to a grammar school, rather than out to work, still deterred some who were qualified. Most grammar schools, like most independent schools, were not particularly selective as they provided the only education available for middle class children. In most cases, if you could afford the fees, your child was in.

Just as the Hadow Report of 1926 had advocated non-selective senior elementary schools, so the idea of a single type of secondary school gathered pace, especially among teachers. These would have multiple departments of different types, and were often referred to as multilateral schools. In January 1925 a conference of the Association of Assistant Masters, a secondary association that many years later became part of the AMMA, which changed its name to

ATL before finally merging with the NUT to form the present NEU, unanimously called for multilateral schools. [4]

The Consultative Committee looked at secondary education in the Spens report of 1938. [5] This and the Norwood report of 1942 [6] developed the idea of the tripartite system. At about the age of ten children would take a test (the 11+, similar to the pre-war Scholarship) which would decide whether they went to a secondary grammar school for an academic education, a secondary technical school or a secondary modern school (which were usually anything but modern). There would be a re-assessment at the age of 13 to allow late developers to transfer to grammar schools and, in theory, those who had got into a grammar school but were not up to it to transfer the other way to secondary technical or modern schools. Transfers to grammar school at 13 hardly ever happened. Transfers the other way never did.

While Britain was moving towards a selective system of secondary education, the trend in much of the Empire was in the opposite direction. All the Dominions of the British Empire with the exception of the Irish Free State were comprehensive by 1939 (at least academically. Clearly, the Union of South Africa was not racially comprehensive.) [7]

There was very little discussion of comprehensive secondary education in Britain prior to the 1944 Act, for until that act there was no legal basis for the establishment of comprehensives. (The exception was the Isle of Man, which went comprehensive in 1938, but the island was a Crown dependency with its own laws that were not dependent on the domestic legislation of England, Scotland or Wales.)

There had been support for the concept of the common secondary school from parts of the Labour Party and some trade unions from early in the 20th century, but that was on the periphery of educational discussion. Far more mainstream was debate over selection within elementary schools and the implementation of the Hadow report.

The Education Act 1944 was the work of the Conservative President of the Board of Education, R A Butler,

known universally by his initials as RAB, and his Parliamentary Under Secretary, Labour's James Chuter Ede. Ede played a more significant role than his junior position might at first indicate. He had been a teacher in Epsom, Surrey, before going into politics. He became active in local government, becoming chairman of the Education Committee of the Surrey County Council, even though he was Labour and Surrey was one of the strongest Conservative counties in England. (It was also a county with a strong tradition of liberal education policies.) His deep knowledge of education and links with the teacher unions (he had been a member of the NUT) were invaluable to Butler and the two formed a strong war-time partnership. Yet there is not a single mention of selection, comprehensive education or multilateral schools in Ede's war-time diaries. [8]

The most contentious issue in the Education Act 1944 was the role of the churches in education. This was hugely controversial and took up an inordinate amount of time in the couple of years leading up to the Act becoming law. The wartime Coalition set out its plans in the Board of Education's White Paper, *Educational Reconstruction*. [9] It outlined the plans for what became the Education Act 1944 as being the provision of free secondary education for all, the integration of the voluntary (church) schools more fully into the national system and the streamlining of local administration with the abolition of the Part III authorities introduced by Arthur Balfour's Education Act of 1902.

It is often thought that it was the 1944 Act that introduced the tripartite selective system, but that is not so. The 1944 Act made secondary education for all possible. It left it up to each local education authority (LEA) to decide what system of secondary education would suit it best. In the period up to 1945 this was not a contentious issue. There is no mention of comprehensive education in the Conservative Party's education policy report of 1942, which was a fairly bland document. [10] Butler himself favoured some experimentation, supporting those local authorities that wished to introduce comprehensive schools, or multilateral

schools as they were more usually then known as. [11] [12] The Conservatives at this time did not take an ideological view of selection, and a number of Conservative LEAs made plans for comprehensive reorganisation in whole or in part, especially in rural areas. Conservative authorities that planned to introduce multilateral (i.e. comprehensive) schools in the late 1940s included Surrey, Westmorland and the West Riding of Yorkshire.

The issue was sharper and more divisive in the Labour Party. Many saw the new grammar schools as more egalitarian, although some on the left favoured the multilaterals. Their American origin made some in the Labour Party suspicious of them. Some also argued that multilaterals would be more expensive, at a time of great post-war austerity, as they would require more new buildings while a selective system could more easily be fitted into the existing school building stock. Some also suggested that to get a decent sixth form at a time when very few progressed that far, multilaterals would have to be very large by British standards, as American high schools usually were. When London County Council announced its plans for multilaterals they included schools of between 1,250 and 2,000 pupils. The average for most authorities that went down this route was 500 to 600 pupils. [13]

In accordance with the 1944 Act, LEAs began filing their development plans with the new Ministry of Education. Joan Thompson of the Fabian Society kept tabs on them. By 1947 she had a sample of 53 LEAs and reported a considerable variety of plans. [14] As well as the three types of school outlined in the tripartite system, councils also went for combinations whether multilateral or bilateral. The bilateral schools had either grammar and technical streams, grammar and modern or technical and modern streams. Among these various alternatives 10% of schools were multilaterals accounting for 26.5% of pupils. Grammar schools accounted for 17% of schools and 12% of pupils. Secondary moderns were the largest category, with 50% of schools and 41% of pupils. The following table gives the full results. [15]

Table 1. Types of secondary schools in the development plans

Type of school	Schools %	Entrants %
Grammar	17%	12%
Technical	7%	6%
Modern	50%	41%
Grammar-technical	2%	1.5%
Technical-modern	11%	10%
Grammar-modern	1%	1%
Multilateral	10%	26.5%

Source: *Secondary Education for All*, Joan Thompson, the Fabian Society, April 1947, page 8.

LEAs reacted to the freedom given to them by the 1944 Act to submit plans with a wide range of school types reflecting local need. On the basis of Joan Thompson's survey of 53 LEAs, comprehensive/multilateral schools would have provided for over a quarter of pupils, which would have been a decent foundation for comprehensive education to have built on. But it was not to be. In 1945 the Labour Party won a landslide at the general election. Clement Attlee became Prime Minister and the Labour Cabinet plumped for selective education. Those LEAs, Conservative and Labour, that had planned comprehensive and/or multilateral schools, and that was a considerable number, were stopped dead in their tracks. Labour insisted that all LEAs adopt a selective system of secondary education, although in practice this tended to be grammar and modern schools rather than the full tripartite provision as secondary technical schools were few and far between. The government even wrote to all LEAs helpfully pointing out that the secondary moderns were meant for the working class.

The decision of Attlee's Labour government to insist on only a selective system for secondary schools has had a major and negative effect on both secondary and higher education, and remains a baleful influence on education in the 20% of

England which retains selection to the present day. It condemned millions of children to be written off as failures at 10, with life changing consequences, and delayed the expansion of higher education as England in particular did not have the number of school students educated to 18 needed for the expansion of higher education. In 1945 only 2.5% of young people, almost entirely men, went into higher education. That was slightly fewer than before the English Civil War three hundred years earlier. [16] That number increased very slowly in the 1950s and 1960s, until the Robbins report of 1963 led to an expansion of universities, but they were not actually created until the 1970s. This also had a negative impact on Britain's economy. As former universities minister David Willetts has observed: "One reason Britain fell behind key competitors such as the US in the post-war period is that we had fewer highly educated workers than they did." [17]

Labour divided

Attlee's policy did not have universal support within the party. For example, in the 1948 party conference in Scarborough Mrs Edna Harrison of the Derbyshire North East District Labour Party moved a motion that: "This conference affirms the principle of the common Secondary School for all, up to the age of 16". But she was followed by a composite motion moved by Mr T P Riley of Walsall which, in its many parts, did not mention selection or the common school at all. Mrs Harrison had her supporters, but we will never know how many they were as when it came to a vote the chairman suggested that the motions that had been proposed should be remitted to the National Executive for further consideration. And so they were, so there was no vote that might have embarrassed the party leadership. [18]

The post-war Labour government put its selective education stamp on education for the next 20 years. It was largely accepted by the Conservative Party, which in its 1950 *Campaign Guide* said that with comprehensive and multilateral schools, while "Conservatives are willing to see a

few of these functioning, they consider that they should be in the nature of an experiment as they have not proved altogether satisfactory in other countries. To enable these schools to give adequate sixth form work they must be far too large.” [19] Again, the low numbers staying in education until 18 were thought to mean very large comprehensive schools to give a good size sixth form, which for many regardless of party was a major argument against them.

The Conservatives were back in power the following year, but changes to secondary education came very slowly. The priority was building more schools for the post-war baby boom and recruiting enough new teachers to teach in them. The last of the all-age elementary schools was not converted into primary and separate secondary schools until the 1960s. [20]

Yet there was some movement. In 1954 the Ministry of Education published *Early Leaving. A Report of the Central Advisory Council for Education (England)* [21] This was the Gurney-Dixon report. It noted that grammar schools were virtually the only way within the state system that pupils could progress to GCE A-levels, never mind university. The secondary technical schools had very few pupils staying on until they were 18, and the secondary modern schools had none. The tiny number of comprehensive schools were too few to be statistically significant. The report looked at how those who had failed the 11+ but transferred to grammar school at 13 performed compared to those who started grammar school at 11. The report noted that: “There is just as high a proportion of good academic achievement among the transfers as in the whole intake into maintained grammar schools, even though when tested at the age of 11 they were presumably all regarded as below grammar school standard.” [22]

The Gurney-Dixon report also found that: “During the five to seven years of the grammar school course a large number of pupils have shifted their position in academic order.” [23] The theory of the tripartite system was that the intelligence of children could be accurately measured at about

the age of ten and, apart from a few late developers, would not change thereafter. The report found that this was simply not true, and that “certainty about individuals is impossible”. [24]

If it had been within the committee’s terms of reference, which it was not, they would also have found that significant numbers of pupils at independent schools whose parents entered them for the 11+ as an insurance policy just in case in future they could not afford the fees at private schools, failed the 11+ but passed the easier Common Entrance at 13 and went on to get GCE O-levels, A-levels and go to university where they got a degree. It was the first evidence that selection tests at age 10 (the age at which the vast majority of children took the rather mis-named 11+) were not accurate predictors of later academic performance.

It was also in the mid-1950s that the Conservative government abolished the legal limit on secondary modern schools providing O-level courses for their students. This restriction had been brought in by the post-war Labour government and prevented secondary modern students from studying beyond 15. O-levels were meant for 16-year-olds. The reversal of this policy meant that secondary moderns began to provide O-level courses for children who, in theory, should not have been able to do O-levels. It was another crack in the wall of the theory of the tripartite system.

Parental opinion was slowly beginning to change. Some LEAs who had been thwarted in their comprehensive reorganisation plans in the 1940s began to look again at ending selection. The first area to go comprehensive was the Isle of Man in 1938. It was not part of England and was completely independent in its internal affairs. The second place to go comprehensive in all its schools was the island of Anglesey in Wales, in 1953. It did not have any grammar schools, sending those who passed the 11+ to grammar schools in neighbouring authorities. Anglesey County Council just stopped sending children out of county and increased the size and scope of its existing schools.

The major breakthrough in comprehensive education

came in 1957, when Conservative controlled Leicestershire County Council reorganised its grammar and secondary modern schools into a two-tier comprehensive system of upper and lower schools with a break at 14. This two-tier system has an echo in the present University Technology Colleges which also have an age range of 14 to 18. But as the UTCs have found out, there are also problems with this age range and the Leicestershire model was not widely followed. Leicestershire County Council at that time did not include the City of Leicester, which was Labour controlled and fiercely defended its grammar schools. The city only went comprehensive when it was merged with the county in the reorganisation that followed the Local Government Act 1972. The Tories controlled the enlarged county and against much protest from Labour in the city the Tories turned it comprehensive.

It was the failure of the secondary moderns that undermined the selective system. Middle class parents who could not afford private school fees were increasingly not prepared to see their children go to secondary moderns. The provision of grammar school places varied widely, within an LEA as well as between them, and this also undermined the selective system. In reality there was no percentage of the population that was of grammar school ability. The number of pupils who went to grammar school varied from 8% to 40%, and depended on the provision of school buildings in a given area rather than pupil ability.

A change of opinion in the 1960s

There was a sea change of opinion in the 1960s. In the early part of the decade the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) began publishing reports highlighting the failures of selective systems. These would become increasingly influential. The National Union of Teachers, most of whose members taught in primary schools where the union had a virtual monopoly, changed from being strongly pro-selection to supporting comprehensives. Within the Labour Party, the pro-comprehensive supporters had at

last triumphed and Labour tapped into the growing demand for change with a strongly pro-comprehensive line. It helped Labour return to power in 1964 and win a bigger majority in 1966. The result was Circular 10/65 which required all LEAs to submit plans for comprehensive reorganisation.

This political movement was underpinned by the seminal Plowden report, *Children and Their Primary Schools*, published in 1967. [25] (In Wales there was a parallel report, *Primary Education in Wales*, the Gittens report. [26]) Plowden (and Gittens) came down unequivocally in favour of ending selection. This was not just because grammar schools were not the most effective way of educating children, but because of the harm done to the roughly 80% of children who failed their 11+ (or did not take it) and went to secondary moderns. As Plowden warned, “selection procedures may create the future they predict. The reputation, good or bad, which a pupil earns by his performance at 11 tends to influence what his teachers and parents expect of him in the future and what he feels he can do. Boys and girls tend to live up to, or down to, their reputations.” [27]

Plans for reorganisation were nowhere near implemented when Labour lost the 1970 election. One of the first acts of the new Conservative government was to issue Circular 10/70, in June 1970. While this repealed the compulsion of Circular 10/65 and its follow-up Circular 10/66, the Tory government did not stop those LEAs that wanted to go comprehensive from doing so. The party’s policy was a return to R A Butler’s policy of leaving it up to the LEAs. A few Tory authorities took advantage of this change of policy and halted their plans. Those that did included a small number, like Kent, Buckinghamshire, Lincolnshire and the City of Plymouth, who were strongly opposed to going comprehensive. Yet most LEAs, including most Conservative ones, continued with their plans even though, in some Conservative areas, there was strong opposition from the right wing of the Tory party.

It is one of the great ironies of the move to comprehensive education that the Education Secretary who

closed more grammar schools and approved the opening of more comprehensives than any other was Margaret Thatcher, Tory Education Secretary from 1970 to 1974. It was under Thatcher that England went from having a predominantly selective system of secondary education to a predominantly comprehensive one. As the Conservative *Campaign Guide 1974* proudly boasted, Margaret Thatcher had approved 91% of the comprehensive reorganisation proposals submitted to her. Out of about 3,600 reorganisation proposals put before her under Section 13 of the Education Act 1944 as amended, she turned down only 325. [28] The *Guide* could have added that these 325 were poor proposals that HMI recommended against.

The progress of the comprehensive reforms continued when Labour returned to power after the February 1974 election, under Wilson and later Jim Callaghan.

In October 1976 one of the main academic architects of the selective system was engulfed in scandal which further undermined selective education. Sir Cyril Burt had had a very distinguished career, and was Professor of Psychology at University College, London, until his retirement in 1950. From his early work in Liverpool to his years as Educational Psychologist of the London County Council from 1913 to 1931, he developed his interest in intelligence tests, becoming known as the father of the 11+. In 1942, Burt was elected President of the British Psychological Society.

Not long after he died in 1971 he was accused of having fabricated his research evidence which, given his close association with the development of the 11+, was a devastating blow to the credibility of the selective tests used for entry into grammar schools. In his balanced biography of Burt, Professor L S Hearnshaw concludes that “the evidence ... has shown beyond reasonable doubt that these charges (of fraud) were true. Burt did deceive the scientific community on matters of moment, and even after the utilization of his data by others to substantiate conclusions of social significance, he never issued disclaimers. He committed a grave offence against the tacitly accepted codes of scientific ethics ... in a

man of Burt's standing they were scandalous and hard to forgive." [29]

Comprehensive reorganisations decline to a trickle

Under the long years of the Conservative governments of Margaret Thatcher and John Major, the number of comprehensive reorganisations declined to a trickle, but this was because by then the only selective areas left were where opposition to ending selection was very strong. To the despair of his Education Secretary, Gillian Shephard, and her political advisor, Dr Elizabeth Cottrell, John Major (who had gone to a grammar school) at one time talked about bringing back "a grammar school in every town". As Shephard pointed out to him, this also meant a secondary modern in every ward. Nothing came of the proposal.

The election of New Labour and Tony Blair with a large majority in 1997 could have led to the completion of the comprehensive reform in England. (Scotland and Wales were completely comprehensive by the 1970s.) In the 13 years of Labour government not a single grammar school was reorganised. New Labour was strongly opposed to completing the comprehensive reorganisation, but on political rather than educational grounds. This was a choice. It did not have to be this way. In 1997 Labour controlled almost every LEA in the country, with only a few shire counties still Conservative. As the Socialist Education Association made clear to Blair at the time, a Labour government could have left it up to the LEAs. Buckinghamshire and Kent would still have held out for selection, but there would have been a further advance for comprehensives. Instead, Blair devised a system of parental ballots in selective areas that were deliberately almost impossible to secure. Only one ballot took place, in Ripon, Yorkshire, where the grammar school and the secondary modern were opposite each other. Labour ensured that the system of ballots was rigged to never succeed. For example, the parents of children at the secondary modern did not get a vote, but parents at the grammar school did, as did parents at independent prep schools outside Ripon, most of whom

would never use the state education system.

With the Tories back in power in 2010, in a coalition with the Liberal Democrats, the new Prime Minister, David Cameron, was pro comprehensive. However, many in his party were not. During his election campaign for Tory leader before the election he was up against David Davies. At a hustings meeting of Conservative party members in Exeter, Cameron was asked about selection and gave an answer sympathetic to comprehensives. Out of an audience of several hundred, only two people applauded. [30]

Cameron won the keys to Downing Street in 2015, but the following year he lost the EU referendum and resigned. A lot of UKIP folk flooded into the Conservative Party while One Nation MPs were expelled. The Conservative Party moved to the right. Theresa May succeeded Cameron and announced plans for new grammar schools. Yet the negative reaction from within her own parliamentary party was so strong that the plans got nowhere. [31] Under the brief leadership of Liz Truss, May's idea was revived. Truss lasted 45 days. With the grown-ups back in charge of the party, that plan was soon dropped. In answer to a written question from Jonathan Gullis, who for a few days had been a minister at the DfE, Nick Gibb, recently appointed Schools Minister although it was his third stint in the job, who personally supports grammar schools, replied: "The Department maintains a diversity of schools and wants grammar schools to continue to play an important role within the education system. The Department's priority is to concentrate on ensuring that as many children as possible, whatever their ability, have access to an outstanding education, rather than creating more grammar schools." [32]

So, we are back in the position we were in when New Labour came to power in 1997. Should Labour win the next election, its leaders have made it clear to pro-comprehensive campaigners within the party that Sir Keir Starmer is no more likely to end selection in England than Tony Blair was. Equally, the Conservatives have moved away from introducing new grammar schools, but won't do anything to get rid of existing

ones. The stalemate looks set to continue.

The evidence

Policy in this areas is determined by politics, not facts or evidence. Labour does not want to risk upsetting its carefully crafted moderate image under Starmer. The Conservatives don't want to take on the right wing of the party in the remaining selective areas. But what is the evidence?

The OECD has been producing reports showing the benefits of comprehensive education since the early 1960s. From 1980 its research Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) has repeatedly shown both academic and social benefits from comprehensive systems. The 2012 PISA report stated: "Early student selection has a negative impact on students assigned to lower tracks and exacerbates inequities, without raising average performance." [33]

As Andreas Schleicher, Director of the OECD Education and Skills Directorate, said to *Education Journal* in September 2022: "The evidence from PISA shows no positive correlation between early selection and better overall academic outcomes, but it does show a strong correlation between selection and the impact of social background on learning outcomes." [34]

Speaking at the launch of the OECD annual publication, *Education at a Glance*, in 2016, Andreas Schleicher said: "Schools are very, very good in selecting students by their social background but they're not very good in selecting students by their academic potential. And the earlier they select, the worse that relationship is. Academic selection ultimately becomes social selection." [35]

Within the UK, research over decades has consistently shown the advantages of comprehensive education. For example, in the mid 1970s Surrey County Council had a report from its Chief Inspector, Joan Dean, put before the Education Committee, which showed improvements at every level, from screening tests of five year olds to Oxbridge entrance, which followed the phases of primary and secondary reorganisations across the county. (Surrey had undertaken a Plowden

reorganisation of primary schools and comprehensive reorganisation of secondary schools in phases across the county, starting in the west and ending up a few years later in the east of the county.)

In 2013 the journal the *Oxford Review of Education* published a paper on selection in Buckinghamshire. It found that any success that grammar school pupils had was at the expense of pupils not in grammar schools. It also found that: “The low prevalence of FSM (free school meals) eligible pupils in the grammar schools casts doubt on their ability to aid social mobility.” [36]

Nationally, the Education Policy Institute published *Grammar Schools and Social Mobility* in 2016. The full list of conclusions follows. The emphasis is that of the authors of the report.

1. Once prior attainment and pupil background is taken into consideration, **there is no overall attainment impact of grammar schools, either positive or negative.**

- At school level, grammar school pupils perform highly in raw attainment terms, with 96.7% of their pupils achieving five A*-C GCSEs, versus the national average of just over 57% in all state-funded schools.

- This high performance is driven however by the very high prior attainment and demographics of pupils in grammar schools.

2. Pupils **who are eligible for free school meals (FSM), a proxy for disadvantage, are under-represented in grammar schools.** Only 2.5 per cent of grammar school pupils are entitled to FSM, compared with an average of 13.2 per cent in all state funded secondary schools.

- A main cause of this significant under-representation of disadvantaged pupils in grammar schools is that, by the time the ‘11 Plus’ entry exam (or equivalent) is taken, 60 per cent of the disadvantaged attainment gap – equivalent to 10 months of learning by this stage – has emerged.

3. **We do not find a significant positive impact on social mobility.** The gap between children on FSM (attaining five A*-C GCSEs, including English and Maths) and all other children is

actually wider in selective areas than in non-selective areas – at around 34.1 per cent compared with 27.8 per cent. Our analysis indicates the reason for this is:

- grammar schools attract a larger number of high attaining, non-FSM pupils from other areas and so, in selective areas, there is a disproportionately large number of high attaining, non-disadvantaged children. Indeed, pupils travel, on average, twice as far to attend a selective school as a non-selective school.
- pupils eligible for Free School Meals in wholly selective areas that don't attend a grammar schools perform worse than the national average.

4. An expansion of grammar schools in areas which already have a large number of selective schools could lead to lower gains for grammar school pupils and small attainment losses for those not attending selective schools – losses which will be greatest amongst poor children.

- In the most selective areas, the positive effect of attending a grammar school is 2.3 GCSE grades spread over 8 subjects (0.3 grades per subject).
- Within those highly selective areas, that gain falls to 0.8 of a grade overall (or 0.1 of a grade in each of eight GCSEs), in areas where grammar school places outnumber the proportion of high attaining pupils.
- In the most selective areas there is a small negative effect of not attending grammar schools – an average of 0.6 grades lower per pupil across all GCSE subjects (or just below 0.1 grade per subject).
- But that impact is greater for pupils eligible for free school meals who do not attend grammar schools, they achieve 1.2 grades lower on average across all GCSE subjects (or just below 0.2 of a grade lower in each of eight GCSEs).

5. If you compare high attaining pupils in grammar schools with similar pupils who attend high quality non selective schools, there are five times as many high quality non selective schools as there are grammar schools.

- This means high attaining pupils perform just as well in high quality non-selective schools as selective schools.

These are schools which are in the top 25 per cent based on value added progress measures and represent good quality schools operating at a large scale

- These schools are much more socially representative than grammar schools, admitting close to the national rate of FSM pupils (12.6% versus 13.2% nationally, and just 2.5% in grammar schools). They also admit close to the national share of children with special educational needs.

6. Other interventions to raise school standards and attainment have proven to be more effective than grammar schools in raising the attainment of disadvantaged pupils. The Labour **sponsored academies programme has had a more positive impact on the attainment of disadvantaged pupils compared with the present grammar school system.** This finding is based on:

- Research commissioned by the Education Policy Institute from the LSE, which showed that the Labour sponsored academies demonstrated average attainment gains of one grade in each of five subjects (or 0.6 of a grade over eight subjects). The pupil intakes of grammar schools and sponsored academies are clearly very different in terms of prior attainment, but it is notable that those early sponsored academies educate around 50,000 FSM entitled pupils compared to around 4,000 such pupils in grammar schools.

[37]

A POSTbrief note from the Parliamentary Office for Science and Technology, *Academic Evidence on Selective Secondary Education*, published in 2016, found that “available evidence from England and international comparisons using PISA data suggests that selective education systems widen educational inequality.” [38]

In December 2016 the Sutton Trust published research which showed that students from families on below average incomes (those ‘Just About Managing’), were significantly under-represented at grammar schools. The research also found:

- Disadvantaged white British children enter grammar school at the lowest rate of any major ethnic group;

- While there had been modest increases in the rate of grammar entry for disadvantaged black children and white non-British over the past five years, the rate of white British entry had not improved;
- High proportions of grammar school pupils come from the independent primary school sector, at roughly double the rate that might be expected;
- Much of the higher pupil achievement at grammar schools is attributable to high levels of prior attainment of the pupils entering grammars, and that highly able pupils achieve just as well in top comprehensives as they do in grammar schools. [39]

In 2017 the House of Commons Education Select Committee published a report, *Grammar Schools, Evidence Check*, which concluded that despite nearly seventy years of trying: “The Government has yet to demonstrate how an admissions system could be designed in a manner which would be immune to gaming, or being reduced to the ability to pay.” [40] The Committee’s Conservative chairman, Neil Carmichael, said: “The focus on opening new grammar schools is, in my view, an unnecessary distraction from the need to ensure all our young people are equipped with the skills to compete in the modern workplace.” [41].

The Education Select Committee heard evidence from a panel of academics and policy experts, responsible for leading items of research in this field, where they expressed their scepticism at the influence of grammar schools in improving attainment. Members of the panel were in broad agreement that the evidence that pupils from lower socio-economic backgrounds did better in grammar schools was weak.

While the Schools Minister cited evidence relating to GCSE results, Progress 8, and university entries in support of the case for grammar school success, the Committee's report urges caution when making comparisons between high- and mixed-ability pupils at selective and non-selective schools. The Committee stresses the importance of ensuring that,

where comparisons are made, they take into account wider socio-economic issues.

In December 2022 the House of Commons Library published a research briefing on grammar schools that quoted an article in the *Financial Times* in 2013, where the journalist Chris Cook analysed evidence from areas of England where selective schools remained in place. He concluded “the net effect of grammar schools is to disadvantage poor children and help the rich.” [42]

Conclusion

The research evidence on this subject is vast, and only a small part of it has been cited here. The overwhelming majority of it shows that children do better in a comprehensive system, and all research shows that in a selective area those who are not selected and end up in a secondary modern (or whatever the non-selective schools are called) that disadvantages them, and that it is the most disadvantaged that are most adversely affected by selection.

In an article in *Education Journal* to coincide with his address to the Times Out for the Test conference in December 2022, Professor Andreas Schleicher, Director of Education and Skills at the OECD, concluded: “... the future isn’t that much with selection and grouping students, but with personalising education in ways that help every learner reach their full potential.” [43]

Yet as we have noted, the decision on whether to end selection in England will be based on political considerations and not educational evidence. The level of selection has remained static for nearly 50 years. The new campaign to end selection, Time Out for the Test, will only succeed if it galvanises public opinion so that politicians in both main parties conclude that there are more votes to be lost by continuing with selection where it still exists than by abolishing it.

Foot notes

[1] *The Politics of Educational Reform 1920-1940*, Brian Simon, Lawrence and Wishart, London, 1974, part of the Studies in the History of Education series, page 239. For more detail of the plan see also *Individual Work and the Dalton Plan*, A J Lynch, 1924, and *The Triumph of the Dalton Plan*, C W Kimmins and Belle Rennie, 1932.

[2] *The Education of the Adolescent*, report of the Board of Education Consultative Committee under the chairmanship of Sir William Hadow, published by His Majesty's Stationery Office in 1926.

[3] See, for example, *Selective Central or Senior Schools*, in *The Year Book of Education 1933*, edited by Lord Eustace Percy MP, former President of the Board of Education, published by Evans Brothers, London, page 190.

[4] Simon, page 141.

[5] *Report of the Board of Education Consultative Committee on Secondary Education with Special Reference to Grammar Schools and Technical High Schools* under the chairmanship of Will Spens, (the Spens report) published by His Majesty's Stationery Office in 1938.

[6] *Curriculum and Examinations in Secondary Schools*. Report of the Committee of the Secondary Schools Examination Council under the chairmanship of Sir Cyril Norwood (the Norwood report), published by His Majesty's Stationery Office in 1942.

[7] *Comprehensives and the Conservative Party*, D Argyropulo, Conservative Central Office, 1978.

[8] *Labour and the Wartime Coalition. From the Diary of James Chuter Ede, 1941 - 1945*, edited by Kevin Jefferys,

published by The Historian's Press, 1987.

[9] *Educational Reconstruction*, Board of Education White Paper, Cmd. 6458, July 1943.

[10] *Looking Ahead. Educational Aims, Being the First Interim Report of the Conservative Sub-Committee on Education*, published by the Central Committee on Post-War Reconstruction set up by the Conservative and Unionist Party Organisation, September 1942.

[11] Conversation between R A Butler and the author, then chairman of the Conservative National Advisory Committee on Education, 1980. There is also a news reel interview with Butler, probably from British Pathé, from the late 1940s saying the same thing. This was confirmed by a conversation between the author and Butler's widow, Lady Molly Butler, then a vice president of the Conservative Education Association, over tea at the Carlton Club a few years later.

[12] Multilaterals were a type of comprehensive where the different types of education (grammar, technical and modern) were all contained in different departments of a single school. Almost nobody before the 1944 Act was proposing comprehensive schools that did not stream internally.

[13] *Secondary Education for All. An Analysis of Local Education Authorities' Development Plans*, Joan Thompson, the Fabian Society Research Series pamphlet No. 118, published by Fabian Publications Ltd with Victor Gollancz Ltd., 1947.

[14] *Ibid.*, and a second report, *Secondary Education Survey. An Analysis of LEA Development Plans for Secondary Education*, Joan Thompson, the Fabian Society Research Series pamphlet No. 148, published by Fabian Publications Ltd with Victor Gollancz Ltd., 1952, analysed the plans of 111 councils.

[15] The figures and Table 1 are taken from page 8 of the Fabian Society's 1947 report. It is not clear from this whether the various types of bilateral school and the multilaterals are in completely non-selective areas or whether they are in areas that also have grammar schools.

[16] *A University Education*, David Willetts, Oxford University Press, 2017, page 18. See foot note 16 which quotes Stone, *The Educational Revolution in England*, page 69.

[17] *Ibid.*, page 33.

[18] *Report of the 47th Annual Conference of the Labour Party, Scarborough, 1948*, the Labour Party, 1948. The report on the education debate starts on page 153.

[19] *General Election 1950. The Campaign Guide*, published by Conservative and Unionist Central Office, 1949, page 427.

[20] Possibly the last area to be reorganised was Crediton, in Devon, which certainly adopted a slightly bizarre reorganisation plan. In 1963 the all-age Haywoods elementary school became a primary school. The children from 11 to 15 transferred to a new secondary modern, The Shelley School, with the deputy head of the grammar school, Queen Elizabeth's, situated at the other end of town, appointed as the new school's first and last head. The secondary modern and the grammar school shared the same governing body, and the intention was to merge the two schools into one comprehensive on two sites soon after. Because of financial constraints, the merger took another ten years to bring about, under the name of the grammar school, Queen Elizabeth's. The combined school was led by the head of the grammar school, while the former head of The Shelley School returned to his old position as Deputy Head of Queen Elizabeth's. It now serves the whole of Crediton and is one of the finest comprehensive schools in Devon.

[21] *Early Leaving. A Report of the Central Advisory Council for Education (England)*, Ministry of Education, report of the Central Advisory Council for Education (England) under the chairmanship of Sir Samuel Gurney-Dixon, 1954.

[22] *Ibid.*, page 13.

[23] *Ibid.*, page 14.

[24] *Ibid.*, page 14.

[25] *Children and Their Primary Schools, A Report of the Central Advisory Council for Education (England)*, under the chairmanship of Lady Bridget Plowden, (the Plowden report), published in two volumes by the Department of Education and Science through Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1967.

[26] *Primary Education in Wales*, a report of the Central Advisory Council for Education (Wales) under the chairmanship of Professor Charles Gittens, (the Gittens report) published by the Department of Education and Science through Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1967.

[27] *The Plowden Report*, page 154.

[28] *The Campaign Guide 1974*, Conservative Central Office, 1974, page 315.

[29] *Cyril Burt Psychologist*, Professor L S Hearnshaw, Hodder & Stoughton, London, 1979, page 318.

[30] Personal recollection of the author, who was there.

[31] 'Nicky Morgan hits out at Theresa May as PM faces first Commons revolt over grammar school plans. Former Education Secretary becomes latest Tory politician to condemn Ms May's proposal', the *Independent*, 10 September 2016.

[32] Answer to written Parliamentary question, House of Commons *Hansard*, question 89066, from Jonathan Gullis MP, Wednesday 23 November 2022.

[33] *What Makes Schools Successful? Resources, Policies and Practices*, report of PISA 2012, Volume IV, OECD, Paris, 2012. <https://www.oecd.org/pisa/keyfindings/Vol4Ch2.pdf>

[34] Email from Andreas Schleicher to Demitri Coryton, editor of *Education Journal*, 30 September 2022.

[35] *Education Journal* No. 279, 20 July 2016.

[36] 'Who benefits from grammar schools? A case study of Buckinghamshire, England' by Richard Harris and Samuel Rose, in the *Oxford Review of Education*, Volume 39, 2013 - Issue 2. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03054985.2013.776955>.

[37] *Grammar Schools and Social Mobility*, Jon Andrews, Jo Hutchinson and Rebecca Johnes, Education Policy Institute, September 2016, page 8.

[38] *Academic Evidence on Selective Secondary Education*, the Parliamentary Office for Science and Technology, published on Friday, December 16, 2016.

[39] Sutton Trust, *Gaps in Grammar*, 9 December 2016.

[40] House of Commons Education Select Committee, *Evidence Check: Grammar Schools*, HC 780, Session 2016/17, 13 February 2017, page 18.

[41] Press statement from the House of Commons Education Select Committee, *Government must show new grammars close attainment gap*, 13 February 2017.

[42] *Grammar Schools in England*, Robert Long, Shadi Danechi and Alpesh Maisuria, House of Commons Library

Briefing Note number SN 07070, 14 December 2022. The reference to the article in the FT is “Grammar school myths”, *Financial Times*, 28 January 2013.

[43] “Selective education is not the way forward”, by Professor Andreas Schleicher, Director of Education and Skills, OECD, writing in *Education Journal*, number 507, 30 November 2022.

This paper is an extended version of a policy analysis that appeared in *Education Journal* No. 507, 30 November 2022, pages 12 to 19.