

Time's Up For The 11+

By Laura Coryton

“Time’s up, pens down, the exam is over” - these are the words a coalition of organisations and influencers would like to hear about the 11+. Last week over 150 people of different ages, genders, ethnicities and backgrounds gathered in Hamilton House, London, to support the launch of Times Up For The Test, a campaign geared to end state-sponsored selection in our education system.

As we reported last week, the campaign is backed by a variety of notable cross-party stakeholders, including the National Education Union, Comprehensive Future, Headteachers’ Roundtable, John Bercow and Alastair Campbell, all of which back the campaign’s statement that “nowhere in England should young children be divided based on an ill-conceived perception of intelligence”.

During the event, many speakers delivered emotional and motivating calls to end selection. This includes Andy Burnham, Mayor of Greater Manchester, who shared that his father failed the 11+ and that this experience significantly impacted his perception of his ability and potential. From the impressionable age of ten, he felt he was assigned to failure.

Burnham argued this experience was entirely unnecessary and that selection in state schools should have been abolished before his father was ten, let alone in 2022. He said that if we truly believe in equality, levelling up and enabling all children to thrive, we would all agree the 11+ has no place in today’s society. He gained the loudest roar of applause of the evening. Burnham was closely followed by his Conservative counterpart, Steve Mastin, of the Conservative Education Society, who worked as an advisor to Michael Gove when he was Education Secretary. Mastin argued he might begin to listen to those who support the 11+ if they can make a valid case for the creation of secondary modern schools, which are introduced by default every time a grammar school is established. He said he has yet to hear anyone attempt to make this case.

Mastin, who joined the event virtually all the way from Australia, concluded by arguing families and students should be able to choose the school they wish to join, not the other way around. The 11+ takes this vital choice away from families. He wants to see this power returned.

The final speaker was Greg Dyke, former director-general of the BBC, who explained that although he passed the 11+, one of his siblings did not. This caused a division within his family which did not need to occur. He then explained he had recently found his preparation book which included example questions asked in the selective exam, which he shared to showcase how arbitrary and irrelevant it is.

When the time came for the audience to ask questions, something quite extraordinary happened. One by one people rose from their seats to share their experiences of the 11+ and sometimes the trauma it caused. Several people explained they never usually speak at all in front of people but felt impassioned to do so at the event to show their support. Two even shed tears while they were speaking.

While the event attracted people of all backgrounds, political persuasions and success rates of the exam itself, they were all ferociously united by their mission to end selection in state schools in favour of a more compassionate, diverse and forgiving state education system in which everyone can thrive.



Madeleine Holt of Comprehensive Future and More than a Score addressing the conference