Schools that Work for Everyone green paper

UCL Institute of Education response
On creating a school system that works for all

*The research evidence does not support the expansion of between-school selectivity as a means of enhancing pupils’ life chances.*

**Policies that skewed school intakes further would undermine efforts to improve standards across the school system, impacting most on pupils from poorer backgrounds.**

The evidence from comparative cross-country surveys is that attainment overall is lower in selective school systems than in non-selective systems, and that there is a stronger relationship between educational attainment and family background in countries that use selection by ability. Nine of the top-10 education systems in the world on PISA measures have comprehensive systems.

National studies suggest that increased selection and school differentiation are unhelpful for improving outcomes for less advantaged pupils. Related evidence shows how more affluent families use financial, social and cultural capital to access high quality educational resources and schools. A notable example of this is the disproportionate representation of children from affluent backgrounds in grammar schools. Hence the need for a policy focus on ensuring every school is a good school, to guarantee equality of access to educational excellence for all.

Schools that face serious improvement challenges often share characteristics, including significant difficulties in: community cohesion and local economic challenge; securing a balanced intake of pupils; and recruiting and retaining teaching staff. Policies that skewed school intakes further would undermine efforts to improve standards across the school system, for all pupils, but especially for pupils from poorer backgrounds.

To take the specific issue of teacher recruitment and retention: the evidence shows that a substantial amount of the variation in pupils’ test scores can be attributed to teacher effectiveness. One of the disadvantages that children from poor and ‘just about managing’ families face is that they are more likely to attend schools that are struggling to recruit good teachers. While Teach First has achieved a good deal in placing excellent teachers in disadvantaged schools, it is difficult to see how this can be scaled up, especially in the context of the current challenges facing teacher recruitment. Added to this is very high child population growth, which implies a need for an increased pool of high-quality teachers. This affects all pupils, but schools serving disadvantaged pupils are likely to be most affected. Their job in attracting teachers risks being made more difficult by the proposed introduction of more grammar schools and more independent school bursaries and the switching of high attaining and engaged pupils into those schools.

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The pupils at greatest risk of low educational attainment are those whose parents have poor basic literacy and numeracy.

FSM (Free School Meals) and ‘Ever FSM’ measures appear to remain the most cost-effective means of identifying the green paper’s target group, but administrative data linkage may offer other options.

The socio-economic gradient in academic attainment is not only relevant at the bottom end of the distribution. Equally, income poverty is not the only salient measure of disadvantage. The pupils most at risk of low educational attainment are those whose parents have low levels of education, and especially those whose parents have poor basic literacy and numeracy skills.\(^5\) If the cycle of intergenerational transmission of poor basic skills is to be broken, education policy must target this group of pupils. It seems unlikely that many of this group would benefit from selective schooling.

There are limitations to the FSM measure,\(^6\) but at present it appears to represent the best option in terms of robustly and cost-effectively explaining variation in pupil achievement by socio-economic background.\(^7\) The use of the ‘Ever FSM’ measure usefully extends the category to include those on the cusp of poverty. Nevertheless, the opening up of administrative data and the opportunity to link across them seems to offer the potential for more fine-grained analysis of the profile of pupils in different types of schools.

On the proposals to enlist independent schools

The tenor of the government’s proposed strategy is to use independent schools as a lever to bring improvement in state schools. This objective may be confounded by switching bright pupils from the state sector.

Putting aside the heterogeneity of the independent schools sector, there are some examples of productive collaboration and sharing of facilities between independent and state schools, such as, for example, the Harris MAT’s work with Westminster school. However, a cursory analysis shows that independent schools have not found it easy to recreate their success in the state sector. Independent school head teachers have themselves noted that while there are evident successes in close partnership working across the sectors there are other cases where the trial ended with comparative failure, or at least encountered significant problems.\(^8\) Rather than take on sponsorship of a state school, as the green paper proposes, it is possible that some independent schools might instead opt to lose charitable status, notwithstanding the uncertain legal complications this would entail, and the loss of tax exemptions. The value of these exemptions is estimated at around £200 per pupil – a lot less than the annual fee increases parents have born for years. (These points aside, all sponsors, including independent schools, are subject to the criteria recently developed by the National Schools Commissioner and RSCs, in keeping with research evidence on the need for greater rigor in sponsor allocation.\(^9\))

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\(^7\) Sutherland, A., Ilie, S. and Vignoles, A. (2016) *Understanding the Factors Associated with Academic Achievement: Key Stage 4*, London: DfE.


In turn, it is important to remember that independent schools benefit from levels of funding per pupil that are three times as high, on average, than in the state sector. Thus, the ‘independent school ethos’ is backed by substantial resources which, realistically, are unlikely to be forthcoming in the immediate future for the state sector.

The proposal on bursary provision similarly ignores the complexities to such a scheme, as captured by the research evidence. The proposal has similarities with the Assisted Places Scheme (APS) that ran from 1981 till 1997. That scheme had its successes but also encountered a number of problems. These included:

- being subject to gaming so that schools could classify the desired applicants as insufficiently wealthy – as acknowledged by insiders as well as by outside commentators;
- being monopolised by more affluent families;
- being insensitive to the needs of pupils from poorer backgrounds who did access the scheme.

A common finding was that where less advantaged pupils were in a minority, and with no accommodations made by the school, they tended to disengage from the values of the school and consequently could not take full advantage of participating in the scheme. Indeed, the evaluation of the APS found that the more disadvantaged recipients of an assisted place were less likely to remain in school beyond 16 and go on to university than pupils of similar ability who entered state maintained grammar or comprehensive schools at age 11. More recent research suggests that fee-waiver scholarships continue to be predominantly taken up by more affluent families.

A study by Green et al (2015) signals further limitations to a secondary school bursary scheme in terms of social mobility even where poorer pupils access a place: the researchers’ finding is that independent schools are successful in augmenting pupils’ confidence at primary level only and, at both primary and secondary levels, their "locus of control" – i.e. their sense that they can influence the things that happen to them.

In the meantime, drawing high-attaining and ‘pro school’ pupils out of the state sector would likely have negative consequences for the state sector – including grammar schools. This is because switching bright children from state schools will benefit those at independent schools while prejudicing those at state schools. The peer effects of one child’s behaviour and enthusiasm for learning on another are well known. Also important is the parental pressure that tends to accompany the active, enthusiastic and bright children.

References:


On the grammar school proposals

There is broad consensus in the research literature that grammar schools do not improve social mobility and that there is little case for their expansion.

There are very real practical and political barriers to pupils moving in and out of grammar schools, so the suggestion that the 11+ exam would be replaced by something more flexible would make little difference to the likely impact of expanding the number of grammar school places.

The research evidence indicates that expansion of selection would widen educational inequalities. Examples of findings on the impact of grammar schools specifically include the following:

- Grammar-educated children in selective Local Education Authorities (LEAs) outperform similar children in non-selective LEAs on average, but non-grammar-educated children in selective LEAs underperform more markedly compared to similar children in non-selective LEAs. \(^{15}\)

- Earnings inequality is significantly higher among individuals who grew up in selective areas compared to those who grew up in comprehensive areas, especially for those in the lowest percentiles. \(^{16}\)

- In 2013 only 3% of grammar school pupils were eligible for Free School Meals (FSM), compared to 13% in other non-selective schools, and only 40% of high-achieving FSM eligible pupils got into grammar school compared to 66% of high-achieving non-FSM pupils. \(^{17}\)

- The last big expansion of grammars, the 1944 Education Act, did not improve the chances of disadvantage children accessing grammar schools. \(^{18}\)

Very recent analysis has shown the limitations of current performance indicators for measuring the performance of grammar schools. This is because of the higher than usual levels of ‘noise’ obscuring the value that grammar schools have actually added to their pupils’ performance (e.g. due to tutoring to the test, and movement between the state and independent sectors). \(^{19}\)

The research evidence also counters the regressive assumption that present attainment can be read as a measure of innate ‘ability’. There is a vast research literature showing why disadvantaged young people are more likely to have low attainment, but this should not be understood as an indicator of ability or potential. New research from UCL highlights this

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\(^{19}\) Allen, B. (2016) Education Datalab blog: ‘Provisional KS4 data 2016: Grammar schools reporting fantastic Progress 8 scores? Not so fast...’; ‘Progress 8 is too favourable to grammar schools and understates secondary modern achievement’.
Yet a bi-/tri-partite system makes precisely this assumption, and hence would likely always disadvantage young people from poorer backgrounds, who start at a disadvantage in 'school readiness' on entry to the system.\textsuperscript{21} Notions that pupils could be transferred in and out of different schools depending on attainment at different times are fanciful given the factors militating against this.

Socio-economic inequalities in children’s attainment emerge during the early years, and widen during the primary school years.\textsuperscript{22} By age 11, most of the emergent social class gap in education has already become apparent in children’s test scores. This suggests that primary and pre-primary education are vital to closing these gaps with a view to promoting the social mobility of those at the bottom and middle of the socio-economic distribution. It also suggests that imposing a high proportion of low income children on selective schools will pose challenges without such action.

Factors that exacerbate middle-class advantage in selective systems include: a lack of transparency in testing arrangements; additional complexity in negotiating the system (e.g. via each school selecting their own test); and ‘soft’ criteria such as teacher reports and interviews being admitted. By age 11, it is clear that no cognitive test can be seen as class or culture free. ‘Teaching to the test’ would inevitably take place in primary schools.

\textit{School composition is the strongest predictor of school performance; it is therefore difficult to see how selective schools can benefit non-selective schools. The same applies to the proposals for ‘grammar’ centres within Multi-Academy Trusts.}

The evidence indicates that areas with selective schools are not more successful than others, and that comprehensive education is a mark of most successful school systems.

At individual school level, research shows that teacher quality has the most significant impact on outcomes,\textsuperscript{\textsuperscript{23}} and excellent schools (whether selective or non-selective) can bring benefit to other local schools (whether selective or non-selective) by sharing expertise and supporting school-to-school professional development.

To the extent that selection per se is beneficial for pupils at selective schools, this is known as a school composition effect. Having a high proportion of able pupils in a school benefits the individual pupil, partly due to peer group effects but also potentially due to factors such as the ability to attract good teachers to the school.\textsuperscript{\textsuperscript{24}} Conversely, having a high proportion of less able pupils is disadvantageous for the individual pupil. School composition is the strongest predictor of school performance. It is therefore difficult to see how, on balance, selective schools can benefit neighbouring non-selective schools, as the green paper aspires to be the case. The proposals on encouraging multi-academy trusts to select within their trust risk introducing further social segregation and losing the wider benefits of pupil


This is especially so regarding the suggestion that chains might move their highest attaining pupils to a single centre.

As indicated above, there are a host of practical reasons why it is logistically, educationally, and politically difficult to move pupils between schools at different ages within the secondary phase. It is often forgotten that for some pupils to move in to a selective school, others have to move out. A large body of research has demonstrated that even within schools pupils move between attainment sets and streams rarely. Research by Taylor et al, forthcoming, shows some of the practical reasons for this.

Similarly, as regards the green paper's faith school proposals, it is worth noting that the research evidence suggests faith schools' performance is at least partly due to the profile of their pupils in terms of prior attainment and socio-economic background, as opposed to simply the faith element.\textsuperscript{26}
