

Response from Comprehensive Future to consultation on 21st century schools
2 March 2009

Summary

Our response relates in particular to the following questions in the consultation document -

2. Is there anything missing from the vision for a 21st century school system?
9. Is there a need for any further guidance that would create a system of 21st century schools?
- 10b. Are there any other issues you think should be considered?

Our answer to all three would be to end selection on ability and aptitude and ensure a fair admissions system to all publicly funded schools.

Response

1. Comprehensive Future's aim is a comprehensive secondary school system with fair admissions criteria to all publicly funded schools and an end to selection on ability and aptitude. This response is therefore concerned with responding to issues in the consultation paper as they affect the secondary phase of education.

2. There is much in the consultation paper we support for example the commitment to every child and for all schools to be good schools and the acceptance that the state school system is a system, and that what happens in one part affects the rest (foreword by the Secretary of State). This is self evidently the case on admissions policy. We look forward to these principles being established in the White Paper.

3. A school system breaking down barriers to achievement

We welcome the aim for 'a school system which is supported to break down barriers to achievement and which breaks the link between deprivation and low educational attainment'. 1.3. Similarly Para 1.6 which refers to maintaining high aspirations for all children and young people. When children face selective entry tests the majority fail, thereby receiving in effect an official message of failure. This inevitably lowers aspirations; across the country. This is true for generation after generation in some areas. Thousands of children each year are rejected by entry tests for secondary schools. This creates barriers rather than breaking them.

4. Again we welcome the aim expressed (2.5) that ' a world leading education system... must breakdown the links between social background, deprivation and low educational achievement.' (We note grammar schools are not included in the list of schools which will ensure this.) . Or later in para 2.5 'all children supported to progress... gaps in achievement for disadvantaged and vulnerable children narrowed'...

5. We note similar aims (which we support) in the Government's recent paper on social mobility - *New Opportunities: fair chances for the future* – for example page 7 – 'The Government will renew

efforts to remove all the barriers, whether financial, cultural or aspirational, to education'. Para 4.8 – 'if we are to deliver a truly fair and excellent system, we must go further in tackling the long standing attainment gaps which exist between children of different backgrounds'. Para 4.9 'These reflect a variety of factors including the aspirations and support of parents'...

6. Our main point is that these laudable and necessary aims cannot be achieved while children in increasing numbers face entry tests for secondary education because increasing numbers of own admission authority schools set entry tests on aptitude and fully selective schools continue to be allowed to select.

7. All the main political parties are now expressing concern about the link between deprivation and low educational attainment. There is widespread acceptance of the need for balanced intakes. The attainment gap is of wide concern. International evidence is that selection worsens this. It should be possible to gain cross party backing for a strategy to phase out selection.

8. A 21 century school

Many factors can make it difficult for schools to provide the vision in the paper. One of them is pupil intake. To achieve the vision set out in the paper schools need time to undertake these necessary but time consuming tasks.

(Section 2) for example –

- Personalized learning
- Identifying and addressing additional needs
- Working with parents
- Working with other providers and wider children's services

These tasks are infinitely more time consuming where a high proportion of children have additional needs. In selective areas it is likely that these children will be concentrated in the non-selective schools. In some cases these will be schools dealing with high levels of pupil mobility, due to homelessness or migration. Increased funding will help to meet these demands but there is a need to ensure more balanced intakes into all schools, this the White Paper should address. Ending selection must be part of this solution.

9. Schools working together

In the foreword there is a hope expressed that 21st century schools will work together for the benefit of all local children, for example on admissions ... 2.11 has the vision of ' a model of collaborative institutions working together... Unless selection is ended this will not happen.

10. Para 3.34 raises the question of how 'we can remove barriers that prevent (strong school to school partnerships) being created. It is obvious that selection is such a barrier. While there are a number of schools with such a marked difference in intake and status collaboration is undermined.

11. Partnership is not a substitute for seeking to secure more balanced intakes. In nearly all cases teaching and learning 11 -14 will continue to take place in separate institutions. 'Partnership' between a selective school and a secondary modern without ending selection will do nothing to overcome the damage that rejection at 11plus causes to the children.

12. Personalised learning

We welcome the promotion of genuinely ' personalised' learning, (3.3 onwards) aiding both slower and faster learners, and providing each and all with what they need, including deployment of personal tutors. This aim undermines any intellectual or practical justification some may claim for continuing selection. Given that good comprehensives have shown that they can accommodate the so called academic, and non academic, why should a system that divides children according to these criteria, so making a large number of children feel inferior before they even get to their first day at secondary school be allowed to continue?

13. Sustainable and cohesive communities

Page 28 refers to the aim that the White Paper will explore how schools can be supported to make a contribution to 'sustainable and cohesive communities'. 'Schools are said (3,20) to have a key role in shaping the society we want to build in the future' and to support 'community cohesion'. This aim we support. It again points to the need to end a situation where school children are divided by selection at 11, many traveling long distances because of it and families are divided.

14. Children from disadvantaged backgrounds

Para 4.5 refers to the fact that there are 'few incentives' for schools to take in their fair share of children from disadvantaged backgrounds... nor to narrow gaps in attainment. The figures on FSM speak for themselves – that allowing schools to select means that some schools inevitably have more than their fair share of children from disadvantaged backgrounds. If the White Paper is aiming to establish a new ethos of shared responsibility, it should state it as a basic principle underpinning the education system, not an optional extra.

15. A recent report by the Cabinet Office Social Exclusions Task force on Aspiration and Attainment among young people in deprived communities (Dec 2008) is an illuminating analysis. It states that – *Aspirations change as children get older. 11-14 is a crucial age group when young people form solid aspirations that inform their future life choices and outcomes*'.

16. These findings reinforce our view that selection labelling thousands of children as failures at 11 is not appropriate to a 21st century school system. If we want all young people to start their secondary school with a positive attitude to themselves, their school and what they might achieve, then an end to selection is clearly called for.

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