

SOME PERSONAL STORIES

What selection means for children, schools and the community in my area

The effect of selection is very little reported outside the areas where it is found. Comprehensive Future believes that it is important that the rest of the country realises what is going on. Below are some reports we have had from people from across the country.

We want to hear how selection affects children, schools and communities in your area. Please email info@comprehensivefuture.org.uk with your comments which we can add to this section

FROM A PARENT IN MILTON KEYNES

I have lived & worked in Milton Keynes for over 13 years. It was a conscious decision to live here rather than Buckinghamshire which champions selective education, because we wanted our children to attend comprehensive schools.

How naive I was!!

Buckinghamshire had for years creamed off the more able and my oldest child was soon drawn into the playground talk of 11+ from the age of about nine, the school then actually making provision for taking the exam, even though the local policy was for comprehensive provision. This possibly being due to a tradition from the days prior to Milton Keynes being a unitary authority and Bucks CC encouraging such practices.

However, to my dismay my youngest child of nine is now being taunted in the playground, by suggestions that to attend the local school is somehow an inferior option and that he should take the 11+. The school no longer makes provision for the actual test, and the performance measures available to parents suggest Milton Keynes comprehensive schools to be doing well, but still the parents push for this choice and the buses trundle the children the neighbouring Buckinghamshire towns.

In the middle of this is my middle child who should have been able to attend the local comprehensive school. Not much to expect, no having to sit a test of his ability which he may fail. However he hit the years when the schools were preparing to change the age of transfer to age eleven, from age twelve and so admission numbers were reduced and he didn't get a place at either of the two nearby schools. He wasn't in fact, offered a place anywhere but my enquiries found that only the school that had just been put into special measures could do so.

I wondered then if I should have let him try for the 11+ he might have passed and not had to cope with this rejection.

Appeals ensued all to no avail, and I couldn't see why my child had any more claim on a place than the next child but apparently some are more worthy than my son, because at the age of 11 they had an aptitude for the schools speciality. I was utterly incensed with the whole farcical process.

So here we are now, my oldest daughter now doing well in year 12 at a local Milton Keynes comprehensive, my son in year 9 leaves the house at 7am to go to a Northamptonshire comprehensive and we wait and wonder for the youngest in year 5 !!!

I am passionate about comprehensive education being right for individuals and society as a whole, but our experiences demonstrate that the legislation currently in place is lacking if this is to be a reality, and fear the current bill does little to address the problems we have faced. I do feel enormously disappointed that nothing has been done to stop selection everywhere, as it continues to have a profound effect on neighbouring areas.

FROM A PARENT IN KENT

In my local authority, we have daily traffic congestion chaos, in many ways caused by selective schools with their pupils travelling into the town by car, bus and train. Some pupils travel up to 20 miles each day! 2 Faith schools also add to the problem as parents insist that their children attend the town schools even though they may live outside of the area eg 10 miles away. For example, Paddock Wood has one of the very few comprehensive schools in Kent. It is an excellent school with pupils attaining 1st Class degrees at Uni. However, it is shunned by faith and grammar parents who seem to think the schools in Tunbridge Wells are better. Community schools have closed down because the brightest pupils have deserted to grammar schools in other towns. We also have the bizarre situation of children that live in Tonbridge cannot get into grammar schools in Tonbridge and are forced to travel to Tunbridge Wells some 5 miles distant, to make even worse the rail, bus and road chaos. I am sure that the reverse of this situation happens as well with grammar and non-selective children. Finally, the chaos continues with East Sussex children who live in a fully comprehensive county travel into Kent to attend Grammar schools and the reverse with pupils who fail the 11 plus travelling from Kent into East Sussex!

Grammar and Faith school choices come at high cost to the environment and the choices of children who fail the 11 plus and/or who are not religious.

FROM A TEACHER IN LINCOLNSHIRE

Lincolnshire is still selective.

In my local town of Louth we had the 11+ brought back after the 1997 election! (It had been 14+ since the 1960s with students from two Louth schools and one rural school taking the exam which might send them to the grammar in Year 9 – this is a very old battle!)

The city of Lincoln is non-selective - they don't have grammars but have some highly sought after schools and some others. There is talk of a City Academy coming to town which will obviously have an effect. The rest of the County has grammars and secondary mods.

Many of the secondary moderns really struggle to get their results up to the average. Some are slow to 'improve'. Is that surprising, when they are full of students with low self esteem and low ambition? Could selection have something to do with this?

(There are some excellent non- grammar schools which have been able to operate on comprehensive lines and get students to Oxbridge. However, these are, as far as I can tell, both few and far between.)

Bussing children to school is quite normal in Lincolnshire. There is a lot of 'far between' in this large rural county. However, it seems perverse that in some areas, children are taken 10 miles or more from their home town to go to the grammar, while others are bussed in the opposite direction to go to the secondary modern.

And it is not just Lincolnshire children who suffer under this divisive system. I work as a supply teacher in the county and in the neighbouring towns of Grimsby and Cleethorpes. As I drive north, I meet busloads of children coming south to the grammar schools of Lincolnshire. The knock on effect of selection in Lincolnshire into the so-called comprehensives in North East Lincolnshire is stark and debilitating.

FROM A HEADTEACHER OF A NON SELECTIVE SECONDARY IN KENT

In West Kent there are 7 grammar schools, all single sex, and 10 non-selective schools. In the selectives there are 31 on Free school meals, the standard measure of social disadvantage, and in the non selectives there are 688. This clearly proves that 11 plus selection is actually social and economic selection, and it debunks the argument often advanced that grammar schools 'rescue' children from poor backgrounds and offer them an 'escape' through good education. If they ever did that they are certainly not doing it now.

Self perception of children in selective areas who either did not take the 11+ or who failed it remains depressed for their whole educational career, regardless of their achievement subsequently. In my own school I spoke with a year 13 student last year who had all A* and A grades for GCSE, and who was predicted to get 3 As at A Level. When I suggested to him that he apply for a place at Oxford or Cambridge, he was hesitant and ultimately ruled it out, citing the fact that he had not done the 11+ as a reason.

The 11+ causes social and family division. Curiously in selective areas non-selective schools have a very high incidence of twins, because parents want them to go to the same school, and often with identical twins one is likely to pass the 11+ and the other not, and with non-identical twins of different sex, coeducational non-selectives are the only option as most grammar schools are single sex. Many families are torn apart by different siblings passing and failing the 11+.

In my own village the grammar schools are in one direction and the main secondary moderns are in the other. Thus youngsters wait on different sides of the road for buses to their schools, on the one side in their blazers and ties, and on the other in their polo neck shirts and sweat shirts, often hurling insults at each other – the grammar school boys' favourite insult is 'chav' and the insult hurled in the other direction is 'snob'.

FROM A PARENT GOVERNOR IN NORTH YORKSHIRE

There are two single sex grammar schools in Skipton. The VA grammar school gained funding for new buildings under the Basic Need programme. It immediately increased its admissions number in 2003 and forced it through 1 year ahead of the consultation process laid down in the Admissions Code of Practice and ignoring the Schools Organisation Committee. North Yorkshire LEA, instead of referring the increase to the Adjudicator, increased the admission number at the other VC grammar school on the basis of equal opportunity. This meant a 26 % increase in available grammar school places yet the number of children from the town allowed entry remained the same. This meant that all of the places would be drawn from children in other schools' catchment areas. These schools and neighbouring LEAs referred the increase to the Adjudicator but the increase was allowed to proceed. £3-4m of funds will have been spent on the two grammar schools but no increase in access for Skipton's children. Both schools have failed to fill up to their new admissions number in the subsequent years.

Coaching for the 11+ is rife yet year after year North Yorkshire deny that coaching has any effect. The school serving the poorest part of the area send few children to the grammar school all the while getting excellent SAT scores. This gives the LEA little cause for concern. There are so few children going from the poorer part of the town that in any ballot about the continuation of selection no parent in that area would get a vote.

FROM A GOVERNOR IN HIGH WYCOMBE

The impact of selection for at least one 'upper' (secondary modern) school in Buckinghamshire is a racially segregated school that does not reflect its local community.

At the 2001 census, just 19% of High Wycombe's population was described as 'non white'. In contrast, at school we are 80% 'non white', which rises to almost 100% in our Sixth Form.

Consequently, nearly 900 children, mainly of Pakistani (Mirpuri) heritage, are being educated separately from their white peers who attend other schools. This separation contributes nothing to the social cohesion of our town.

Parents don't want it to be like this. Governors don't want it.

How has this happened?

The basic issue is the relationship between educational achievement and social deprivation. We are situated alongside some of the most affluent wards in the South east – but we serve the most disadvantaged wards in our area.

We have mapped the postcodes of our children against the Indices of Multiple Deprivation put out by the Deputy Prime Minister's office - 48% of our pupils live in areas that have been identified as within the most deprived 10% in England, in terms of income deprivation. The majority of these disadvantaged children come from the Mirpuri community.

These are the children who come to us - 45% of our pupils are eligible for free school meals, in contrast with the grammar school half a mile away – which has 2.7% FSM.

FROM A PARENT CAMPAIGNER IN GLOUCESTER CITY

Gloucester has two Boys Grammar Schools, 11-18 (4-form entry) and two Girls Grammar Schools, 11-18 (4-form entry). There are five other schools, two 11-18 'Comprehensives' and three 11-16 'Comprehensives'. Two of the 11-16 'Comprehensives' are continually in and out of Special Measures. One of them, Central Technical College, is due to be run by a private company next September.

Each November, Gloucester parents are given a complicated application form. There are three choices; the first is that they can apply for their children to enter an exam for entry to any of the Grammar Schools. Second choice is they can choose to send their children to one of the higher performing comprehensive Schools in the County of Gloucester. These are all outside the 3-mile zone so the cost of transport is borne by the parents. The third choice is that they can opt to apply to one of the five inner city schools. Parents of children on free school meals invariably take this option.

Here are two letters from Gloucester city parents, sent to us:

1. I did not understand what 'selection' was until I heard the other mothers arguing about it. I know all about it now. The Head Teacher at the Junior School said my son was 'borderline'. He might just pass to go one of the two Boys Grammar Schools. Other parents told me not to waste my time. Only 50% of the places went to Gloucester children. Parents from Cheltenham and the Cotswolds pay for special lessons for their children to pass the exam.

2. My son was allocated a place at the Central Technical College. I checked into its record. It has been in and out of special measures twice in the last five years. 50% of the intake are children with special needs. I decided to send him to Newent Comprehensive. It is 8 miles out into the County. The bus fares are really expensive, but at least it is a good comprehensive. Our son loves football and is playing for the school. The problem is that if he plays a game he does not get back to the school until 6 p.m. My husband and I don't get back from work until then. It is a 45 minute drive to the School at Newent, so we have had to stop him from playing football. He is very upset. We really do need a good local comprehensive in Gloucester.

FROM A PARENT IN SALISBURY

I have a five year old who started school last September and the reality of living in an area which maintains a girls' and a boys' grammar school is just starting to sink in. We are not from Salisbury and had no reason to understand its schooling system before we moved here but it is very different to what we were both exposed to as children. We were both comprehensive educated children who went to university and gained a lot from our mixed schooling. Salisbury is dominated by CofE schools which seems inexplicable. It leaves parents who care about these things with very little choice. There are very

few 'secular' schools but we chose to send our son to one. It is an infants' school but even this still feeds in to a CofE junior school.

This junior school has a very good academic record and in the last year it has become apparent to us that this is clearly based on its perceived 'success' in getting children through the 11+ and into the two Grammars. This school streams from its first year intake at 7. It is considered to be a 'crammer for the grammar'. Children are pushed hard and I feel that, consequently, this has a knock on effect even on the infant school, not least because it causes parents to start stressing out about their child's progress even at Reception stage! I find the whole situation uncomfortable and deeply worrying. For example, I have frequently heard parents discuss and agree with the streaming of 5 year olds at the infant school my son attends. They believe this will allow 'the best to progress' and get through the 11+. Parents also highlight on the children's faults and abilities in relation to the 11+ e.g. 'he's good at reading but not problem solving and he needs to improve if he's to get through the 11+'. The other high schools are considered to be lower than the low and parents are horrified at the thought their child should attend one - one told me 'I don't know what I'll do if he fails the 11+' and her child is 6! I also feel that it filters down to teachers who feel they are under pressure to demonstrate 'progress' above what is required even by the arbitrary targets they work to. I feel we suffer the double whammy of faith schools and selection in this area and it alarms me that very few people seem concerned about it. Yet, if these grammars didn't exist, parents would undoubtedly be much happier and less stressed. It's an awful situation to be in.

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