

Selection in England – the current situation

There are many misconceptions about the selection at 11 in England, one the main ones being that it has a marginal effect on English education. In England selection at 11 remains an important influence on secondary education. Government makes many promises of 'no return to the 11plus'. In fact thousands of English children and their parents unlike their Scottish and Welsh counterparts continue to face entry tests for secondary education and the reduction in parental choice, de-motivation of children and social segregation that selection brings.

There are grammar schools in 36 of the 152 English local authorities, 15 of them (Bexley, Bournemouth, Buckinghamshire, Kent, Kingston, Lincolnshire, Medway, Poole, Reading, Slough, Southend, Sutton, Torbay, Trafford and Wirral) fully selective with around 20% of their school places selective. The other 21 (Barnet, Birmingham, Bromley, Calderdale, Cumbria, Devon, Enfield, Essex, Gloucestershire, Kirklees, Lancashire, Liverpool, North Yorkshire, Plymouth, Redbridge, Stoke on Trent, Telford and the Wrekin, Walsall, Warwickshire, Wiltshire, Wolverhampton) have varying numbers of grammar schools.

Some other schools, particularly in selective areas are partially selective on ability. These are schools which were selecting before 1997. Appeals to the adjudicator can change that. An answer to PQ (8 Feb 2006) indicated that 35 schools select partially on ability but these are only the ones known to the Government for, as the Minister said, the information is not collected centrally. Of the 17 local authorities he listed with schools selecting from 10 to 33 % on ability 10 are local authorities which also have fully selective schools, so here partial selection adds to the burden of entrance testing which many children will be facing in these areas. According to Coldron (2008) there are 43 (out of 152) English local authorities with some schools that select all or part of their intake on general ability as measured by a test.

Furthermore all schools can select 10% of their intake on aptitude for specific subjects if the admission authority for the school decides to do that and as more schools become admission authorities this is rising. (West et al 2009).

4.9% of English children are in grammar schools which means that it is likely that a minimum 15% are failed by selective tests every year, not including those facing tests on aptitude or for partially selective schools.

In Northern Ireland, the Government has ended the 11plus by 2008 although some grammars may set their own tests. The decision to end selection followed publicly funded research and consultations. There are fewer children in Northern Ireland in

selective schools than in England. (46,268 pupils in grammars in NI 2003 -4, 111,500 2004 England (PQ 19 May 2004)

In England the situation is very different. Selective entry into grammar schools remains unless a majority of local eligible parents votes for change or grammar school governing bodies decide to change their admission policies to admit children of all abilities. No governing bodies have done this so far. (School Standards and Framework Act 1998 and the Education (Grammar School Ballots) Regulations 1999 and School Organisation (Prescribed Alterations to Maintained Schools) (England) Regulations 2007

Before a ballot can be held 20% of eligible parents in the areas concerned must sign a petition calling for a ballot. To require all of the 164 grammar schools in England to take children of all abilities would need 48 petitions and ballots. Crucial to the legislation is the definition of an eligible parent. This differs depending on whether the ballot would be an area or feeder ballot. Area ballots would be needed to end selection in the ten LEAs defined by the regulations as fully selective (Bexley, Buckinghamshire, Kent, Lincolnshire, Medway, Slough, Southend, Sutton, Torbay, Trafford). Here all parents living in the area are eligible to sign a petition and ballot, including those with children below school age or those living outside the area but with children in the schools within the LEA. For the 38 ballots in the other 26 English local authorities with grammar schools only parents who have children in the feeder schools to the grammar schools would be eligible. Feeder schools are those which have sent a total of five or more pupils to the grammar schools in question over the year when the signatures are being gathered and the preceding two years. In feeder school areas many local parents are ineligible to sign petitions and vote.

The only ballot to be held was a feeder school ballot in Ripon in 2000, where two thirds of eligible parents who took part voted to keep the status quo. Private school parents made up a quarter of the electorate, although a parliamentary question at the time revealed that only 4.6% of primary children in North Yorkshire were in private education (Hansard 2000).

Parents with children in infant schools are ineligible. The second largest group of the Ripon electorate, after private school parents, were the parents in a school 10 miles away, while some Ripon parents were ineligible.

So far the costs incurred by the grammar school ballot regulations amount to £2.32 million.(Parliamentary answer 17 June 2009)

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