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Annual conference will set the course for the future

The *Comprehensive Future* Annual Conference and AGM takes place on Saturday 11 November at the University of London Union, in Malet Street, London.

Our AGM will be an important and timely opportunity to discuss the future work of *Comprehensive Future*, including the response to the new School Admissions Code. It will also choose our first elected steering group and agree our constitution. We are delighted that Sir Alan Steer, head of Seven Kings High School – an all ability school in Redbridge – will be our speaker. He chaired the Practitioners' Group on School Behaviour and Discipline, whose report, *Learning Behaviour*, has been very widely welcomed.

Enclosed are details of the conference and a booking form. Please register as soon as possible. There is no charge for the conference but we welcome donations on the day to help meet costs. However we do need you to register to plan numbers for coffee, lunch etc so please send in the form ASAP. AGM papers will be sent to you before the conference. Details of elections to the steering group are on the enclosed leaflet.

The conference will run from 10.30 am to 1.00 pm, with coffee and registration from 9.45 am and lunch at 1.00 pm. It is being timed to allow attendees to go on to an important public lecture after lunch. The lecture is being given by Professor Peter Mortimore, formerly director of the Institute of Education, who has been working for the OECD. He will speak on Comprehensive Schooling: Current Trends in England and the Nordic Countries at the Institute of Education, which is just behind ULU. This is the Caroline Benn Memorial Lecture organised by the Socialist Education Association.

Are you a member? – Yes!

If you are receiving this newsletter you are a member of *Comprehensive Future*. It was agreed at the last annual meeting in November 2005 that all supporters at that date were deemed to be members and that we are an all-party organisation. Since then new members have joined, either on line or by letter, by signing up to our aim of a comprehensive secondary school system in England with fair admissions criteria to all publicly funded schools, guaranteeing an equal chance to all children and an end to selection by ability and aptitude. There is no membership fee, but donations are encouraged! We need more supporters – please encourage your friends to sign up.

School admissions codes published for consultation

The new School Admissions and School Admission Appeals Code are now out for consultation until 1 December 2006. Available on www.dfes.gov.uk/consultations or 0845 6022 260 or dfes@prolog.uk.com (ref 03853-2006PCK-EN). Following the AGM *Comprehensive Future* will be doing a response. If you wish, please copy your response to us.

All party agreement on selection – but still it remains

Before Parliament went into recess, debates on the Education and Inspections Bill and the Education Order ending selection in Northern Ireland (unless the Assembly meets in time to halt the change) have meant that there have been many statements about selection in the Commons and the Lords. Turn the page to read the words of David Willetts, Baroness Williams, Lord Rooker and Lord Adonis.

**Comprehensive
Future**

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Progress of the Education and Inspections Bill

The Bill will make its final appearance in the House of Lords when Parliament resumes in October. Amendments could still be promoted at Third Reading. The status of the School Admissions Code had already been agreed by Government as a result of protests by a number of Labour MPs before the Bill was published. Below is a brief summary of what has happened so far in relation to the other aims of *Comprehensive Future*.

• **An amendment** to set a target date of 2010 by which selection should be ended, including a provision for a parental ballot for primary parents to retain selection if they so wish, was proposed by our Chair, David Chaytor, and put to a vote at Report stage on May 24 – 114 Labour and Liberal Democrat MPs voted in favour, but it was defeated by Government and Tories. Responding to the Commons debate Schools Minister Jim Knight said: "In 1997, the Government made a commitment to leave it to parents and governors to decide the future of their grammar schools. The spirit of this Bill honours that commitment, as it does not impose any structure on any school. Grammar school governing bodies can bring forward proposals to remove selective arrangements, and the appropriate mechanisms are already in place to enable parents to challenge the continuation of selection in their local schools. . . . As we have heard, parents have organised a number of petitions about grammar schools, but only one has gathered sufficient support to prompt a ballot. I always listen to the opinions of my Hon Friend the Member for Bury, North (Mr Chaytor) with great care, as he has great knowledge and wisdom and adopts an instinctively progressive point of view. However, the evidence suggests that it would be neither productive nor cost-effective for the Government to organise ballots across the country, given that there has been so little call for them so far."

• **Amendments** to ensure local authorities have a duty to promote fair access, social inclusion and community cohesion were met in part by the Government including fair access within the duty to promote high standards in Clause 1 of the Bill.

• **Both** in the Committee stage and in the Lords an amendment was proposed to set up an independent review of secondary school admissions with a requirement for the Secretary of State to act upon the report. It was proposed in the Commons by David Chaytor and in the Lords by Baroness Sharpe. Lord Adonis responded in the Lords on July 20: "On Amendment No 162 of the noble Baroness, Lady Sharp, raising the important issue of how we keep the national effects of admissions arrangements and their social consequences under review, we agree with her point. As part of his role, the new schools commissioner will use admission forums' reports as part of a two-yearly review of fair access; that is in his job description. He will report to the Secretary of State, and that will of course be made available to both Houses to consider. I am sure that this important document will give rise to a good deal of debate when it appears. I think the noble Baroness will welcome this role for the schools commissioner, which meets the point she is making. An additional statutory review is not needed."

• **Again, both** in the Commons and the Lords, there was a proposal to give the local authority the duty to produce the overview report of local

admission arrangements for the admission forum, rather than the report being produced by this essentially voluntary body. This was rejected by Lord Adonis, who said on 20 July 2006: "We believe it is unlikely that any admissions forum would not wish to prepare and publish a report, given their new strength and role in considering how well admissions arrangements are working to promote choice and access. Forums will have to act in accordance with the code, which will recommend preparation of these reports and will be backed up by regulations."

• **Amendments were** put both by David Chaytor and Sarah Teather to give the power to local authorities to administer admissions for all schools in the area, i.e. to decide if pupils applying meet the criteria. They pointed out that already an increasing number of schools are their own admission authorities, able to set their admission criteria, and a survey of heads indicated that many do not abide by published admissions criteria. A Lib Dem amendment was defeated in the Commons by 87 to 443; again, several Labour MPs voted for the proposal. However, in responding, the Schools Minister, Jim Knight, left the door open for a pilot project. He said, on 24 May 2006: "Under the current system, individual admissions authorities are accountable for decisions to permit or refuse admission to their schools. We do not want to change that, particularly because they, as individual admissions authorities, might be better placed to consider applications against their own admission arrangements – especially where they relate to faith criteria or require an aptitude assessment. As I said in Committee, there is nothing to prevent schools and local authorities from agreeing, through their admissions forum, to take such an approach if their admissions arrangements lend them to it. Indeed, I am interested to know whether any areas are keen to pilot that approach, so that we can learn from it. I hope that Members will accept that as a sign that we are relatively relaxed about that approach, and that we do not feel the need to include such a statutory requirement in the Bill."

• **There have** been several amendments in the Lords and the Commons aimed at bringing Academy admissions under the same local arrangements as maintained schools. Lord Adonis' response on July 18 is typical of the Government response: "Academies are already required to be fully inclusive schools and to comply with the school admissions code and admissions law, which is a more stringent set of obligations than currently apply to maintained schools. They are obliged to do so by the funding agreements that are approved by the Secretary of State. CTCs were established on the basis that they must admit children of all abilities, and they achieve that by pupil banding. Similarly, academies are not allowed to conduct interviews and the remaining CTCs, most of which are moving to academy status, will comply with that requirement by consensual change to their funding agreements."

Thoughts on the subject of selection

"I fully recognise that my party's approach to the issue of selection has changed. In the process of forming a consensus on the best way of reforming education, we have abandoned any idea of a grammar school in every town. We have abandoned any idea of bringing back the 11-plus in grammar schools. We have recognised that our focus should be on how we can best raise standards in all our nation's schools. If there is to be selection, it is best for it to take place by means of setting within schools rather than allowing children across the country to face an invidious decision, at the age of 11, on which school they should attend."

David Willetts, Conservative spokesperson on education, 24 May 2006

"I believe that the comprehensive system in this country has been extremely badly served in its treatment by a very sophisticated public relations system which has given it nothing like the credit it deserves for the remarkable strides it has made and has concentrated on the failures of a very small number of schools."

Baroness (Shirley) Williams, 5 July 2006

"The current admission arrangements, which determine a child's future at age 11 on the basis of two, one-hour tests, are no longer

relevant to today's needs. They distort the primary school curriculum; those who can afford it can pay for extra coaching; and they constitute a high-stakes process that puts unacceptable pressure and anxiety on pupils, parents and, of course, teachers. The result is a system that leaves the majority of pupils being perceived, and perceiving themselves, as failures at the age of 11. Rather than providing a ladder out of disadvantage, there is a significant bias against the less well-off in the test results themselves, which is compounded later in public examinations. . . . It is simply not right that a child's future should be determined at age 11, nor is it right to segregate children into two discrete groups at that age. The Government are committed to ending academic selection in Northern Ireland and to a new system that involves parents choosing schools rather than schools selecting pupils."

Lord Rooker, 10 July 2006

"We are not seeking to change the comprehensive admissions philosophy, which we believe is right for this country, but we want to enable greater diversity in the management, ethos and character of schools within comprehensive bounds, all focused on the enlargement opportunities and the best possible results for pupils."

Lord Adonis, 12 July 2006