

Dear Justine Greening,

I am writing on behalf of the Kent Education Network, a group of Kent parents, teachers and education professionals, who feel that academic selection is causing widespread problems in our county. We are concerned by government support for new grammar schools because we believe a selective system is damaging, unfair and unnecessary.

In our county the eleven-plus denies the majority of children a chance to study at a third of schools. Kent grammar schools select by parental attitude as much as they do by ability. Any child who is unlucky enough to have a parent uninterested in education has no chance of attending a grammar school at all. Wealth is also a factor, with some Kent grammar schools offering a third of places to children from independent prep schools. A recent survey suggested that 45% of Kent parents pay for tutoring, and we hear of families on low incomes even missing family holidays to pay for tutors ahead of the test.

We support offering an academically rigorous education, but we oppose selection and grammar schools because it can not maximise the potential of all children, it is detrimental to the life chances of all who do not attend selective schools. If the government's aim is only to ensure the most able children achieve their potential, then the grammar school system is not even an efficient way to do this. Many highly able children do not even reach grammar schools, and many underachieve in schools that have less provision for their needs. If the goal of your government is to ensure high achieving pupils do well then a system should be in place in every school to monitor and encourage high achieving pupils. We support inclusive education and do not feel that children should be barred from more advantageous education based on a test result.

Here are some of the problems we find with divided education in Kent.

Kent's education system is biased towards those with advantage.

Tutoring is common in Kent, and it means those with money to pay are more likely to win grammar school places. In the 1950s Phillip Vernon proved that coaching improved eleven-plus scores by 14 points. No local authority has wanted to research the impact of tutoring, but Kent tutors tell us that a tutor-proof test is impossible.

Independent primary schools spend a lot of time preparing children for the eleven-plus test, and it is clear that prep schools have significantly higher pass rates than even the best state primary schools. The quality of the primary school a child attends also sways test results, as Kent's eleven-plus is based on the school curriculum. The eleven-plus pass rate in an independent school is 68%, in an 'Outstanding' rated primary school it is 50%, and in an 'inadequate' rated primary school it is just 23%. It should not be the case that attending a poor school, or being poor, gives a child less chance of passing a school admission test, but this is clearly true in Kent.

An eleven-plus system gives more and better choice to those who pass the test.

Parents in grammar school areas face much-reduced choice if their child fails the eleven-plus. Grammar schools are out of bounds, popular non-selective schools have small catchment areas so you need to live nearby, and faith admissions reduce choice further. Many parents have only one or two schools to choose from, often schools with poor reputations. We do not feel that it is right that a test pass gives a child more school choice, and better school options.

To fail the test means a one in four chance of a less than good school, while a pass in the test assures a good or better school. 78% of Kent grammar schools are rated 'Outstanding' compared with just

4% of non-selective schools. This imbalance is the same in every area that operates selective education. Ofsted admits that a comprehensive school is twice as likely to achieve an Outstanding rating as a non-selective school in a grammar school area. This suggests that the quality of non-selective schools must be affected by the presence of grammar schools.

Two tier education causes teacher recruitment problems.

There is a crisis in education with a shortage of qualified teachers, and in areas that operate grammar schools the non-selective schools find it harder to recruit teachers. A recent study showed that grammar schools find it easier to attract highly qualified teachers, with secondary modern schools more likely to use unqualified teachers. To operate grammar schools creates an imbalance in the school system with side effects that are hard to overcome, and which affect the quality of education for many.

We know many Kent non-selective schools that are unable to offer three science subjects or to teach specialist subjects such as computer science. This means children who fail the eleven-plus get a poorer quality of education than they would receive in a comprehensive system.

The eleven-plus test has no scientific basis and does not select children accurately.

The exact definition of 'grammar school ability' is little discussed, and in fact it varies depending on the test taken. In Kent it is a two hour multiple choice test that needs a child to be a good all-rounder in all three papers - Reasoning, English and Maths. A maths genius with average English skills wouldn't get a grammar school place in Kent. A child who passed an easy eleven-plus in Dover wouldn't get a place in a grammar school in Reading where school places are decided based on scores standardised to two decimal places in an attempt to 'distinguish' pupils. This arbitrary definition of 'high ability' is nonsensical and not at all fair.

The eleven-plus test is set in the first few weeks of year 6 purely for administration reasons. We have never heard of any credible evidence for the benefits of judging academic ability at age ten. We aim to select the brightest future scientists with a method that doesn't hold up to scientific scrutiny.

We are concerned that no one is charged with checking the test for bias, with papers based on English likely to disadvantage dyslexic children, or those who don't speak English as a first language. Some ethnic groups seem to do disproportionately well in the test, and others do unusually badly, yet no one studies why this might be.

It is clear that the eleven-plus does a very poor job of sorting children. If we look at SATs results 20% of pupils in Kent grammar schools are classed as 'medium attainment'. Either the SATs tests are inaccurate or the eleven-plus test is inaccurate. People seem to believe that grammar schools are establishments for the cleverest children, but in fact many pupils are of average ability, and children of similar ability will be denied places based on a couple of checks wrong in a speedy test.

A child with 320 points gets a wealth of school opportunity and advantage, while a child with a score of 319 feels they are 'not academic'. Kent County Council does not tell parents their child's score but simply that they are 'not suitable for grammar school.' That child with 319 points will feel lesser than a child who scored two points more and feels like a genius.

The results of high ability children in non-selective schools are generally worse than in comprehensive schools

Looking at one year group in Kent we find just over 1,600 high ability children attending non-selective schools and 3,100 attending grammar schools. The performance of the able children in

non-selective schools was an average C+ grade and 8.7 GCSE entered, with just 82% achieving 5 GCSE compared to 92% of pupils nationally. So our county has a school system for high achievers that neglects the many high achievers in secondary modern schools. We feel it is not possible for non-selective schools to offer top sets for all subjects, to offer a broad range of academic A levels, or to encourage children to aspire to attend top universities, when non-selective schools do not have a pupil intake with a true representation of abilities. Grammar schools do not exist in a vacuum; they clearly change their local community of schools.

Disadvantaged children get a bad deal.

Government figures show that disadvantaged children are behind their advantaged peers in all primary school tests, so of course they are less likely to pass a test like the eleven-plus. In Kent these children have less school choice, and worse school choice (according to Ofsted ratings) than children in comprehensive areas, as well as less opportunity to be taught by experienced teachers (Education DataLab research.)

Methods of pro-actively selecting poorer children for grammar school will not help the many disadvantaged children who will still attend troubled secondary modern schools.

There is flawed logic in a grammar school system.

To believe the eleven-plus has merit means believing three propositions.

1) That it makes sense to distinguish a minority of intelligent young people and segregate them from the rest. To want to do this suggests a lack of confidence in the ability of mixed ability schools to educate these pupils properly. The eleven-plus was introduced when we believed some children 'incapable of handling abstract ideas' but no one has told us what the modern purpose is. When it was introduced there was a supposed benefit of a 'more suitable school' to those who failed. Now failing only gives disadvantage.

2) That intelligence is fixed rather than acquired through experience or teaching. Not many educationalists believe this these days, and few would say ability is fixed at ten. Many who support growth mindset theories would say that a government-led system promoting the idea of fixed intelligence is damaging to children's future learning.

3) That the innate quality of a pupil can be accurately measured by the eleven-plus test. The test measures mostly reasoning skills; it does not measure application to work, nor does it measure potential inspired by ambition or love of learning. It doesn't even predict future GCSE results accurately, with research showing 22% of eleven-plus pupils are misallocated by the test based on eventual GCSE grades.

When your government is presented with evidence from all political positions that so overwhelmingly rejects selection at age ten or eleven we can only wonder what must be the values held by those who support this return to an outdated, ineffective educational practice. If your government believes in good education for all children then this policy should not be pursued. We urge the government to reconsider plans for new grammar schools. Those who attend grammar schools often do feel advantaged, but those who cannot attend find less school choice, and if you hear few complaints this is mostly because people are ashamed to admit to their child's eleven-plus failure.

If you would like to meet or receive further evidence from Kent we will be happy to discuss this further.

Yours sincerely,

Joanne Bartley, chair, Kent Education Network

(others)

We enclose the following evidence in support of our letter:

- A flier promoting St Peter's school in Bournemouth. It shows evidence that able students did better at A Level in his comprehensive school, than in all bar one of the selective schools locally.
- Dr. Michael Collins history of "IQ" and aptitude testing – with specific relation to the Kent Test.
- Chris Cook's research into the results of disadvantaged children in selective areas.
- Education Datalab research Inequalities in access to teachers in selective schooling areas.
- Sutton Trust 'Misallocation of pupils' research into GCSE outcomes of eleven-plus pupils.
- A Kent Education Network report looking at the impact of selective education in our county.