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Reframing the English Grammar Schools Debate

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In October 2015 the Department for Education (DfE) permitted a grammar school in Tonbridge, Kent, to open up an annexe in Sevenoaks, 10 miles away. Amidst claims that the annexe was essentially a new grammar school, the decision reignited an old debate about the value of academically-selective ‘grammar’ schools in England. The intensity of feeling is perhaps surprising given that all but a small number of grammar schools have long been replaced by mixed-ability ‘comprehensive’ schools. Yet, the matter taps into longstanding debates around standards, social mobility, opportunity and accessibility. A resurgence of these discussions is now playing out in a changed political and educational landscape characterised by school autonomy, diversity of provision and school choice. This paper describes the key shifts that have taken place in English school organisation and policy thinking since the establishment of the tripartite system and the recent emergence of new roles and opportunities for grammar schools. This is followed by a review of the evidence on the effectiveness and wider social impact of selective education. The paper concludes by reframing the grammar school debate in light of the evidence and the current system, arguing that issues around system performance and social segregation need to be examined more broadly and that the most fruitful debates to be had are around admissions and accountability mechanisms rather than structures and school types.

Keywords: grammar schools, education policy, structural reform, social justice, standards

1. Introduction

“What’s behind the undying fascination with grammar schools? Four decades after almost all of them disappeared in England, there are still appeals for their return.” (Coughlan 2016, para. 1)

In the mid-1960s the number of grammar schools in England peaked at just under 1,300. At this time grammar schools were attended by approximately a quarter of all secondary state school pupils (Bolton 2015b). By the end of the 1970s there were only 261 remaining grammar schools serving under 5% of the secondary school population. In the intervening years, there have been marked shifts in education policy and the English school system has undergone extensive structural reform. Despite their role as an essential structural feature of the English school system having long passed, there are repeated calls for the reintroduction of grammar schools. These old debates are playing out in a new system characterised by autonomy, diversity and choice where there are potentially new roles and opportunities for grammar schools including heading multi-academy trusts, turning around failing schools and meeting the demand for additional school places.

This is an opportune time to review the grammar school debate. This paper starts by tracing the origins of the current system, identifying the key changes in educational policy and policy thinking which have transformed the nature of the issues. This narrative is brought to the present by describing the current system, the role of the remaining 163 grammar schools within it and potential new roles grammar schools could play as the system develops. The following two sections review the evidence on the performance of grammar schools and their impact on system performance and examine the wider social consequences of grammar schools and their role in social mobility. The final section discusses the question of grammar schools in light of the changes in the system which have been examined and the evidence that has been reviewed.

2. The Origins of the Current Grammar School Debate

2.1 The Rise and Fall of English Grammar Schools

The 1944 Education Act created a state-funded national system of grammar, secondary modern and technical schools which sought to provide the type of education which was thought appropriate to pupils of differing interests and abilities (McCulloch 2013). This tiered system reflected the prevailing view that children should receive the type of education which best suited their abilities and needs. With the exception of several pioneering experiments with ‘comprehensive’ education (i.e. schools taking pupils of all ability levels) (Medway and Kingwell 2010), the post-war system was predominantly organised along tripartite lines. Within this system, grammar schools provided schooling for pupils considered to be academically oriented. Secondary modern and technical schools were introduced to cater for pupils who were not deemed to be of an academic bent, although ultimately relatively few technical schools opened. From the final years of the 1940s to the end of the 1960s, around 25-30% of secondary-age students were educated in 1,200 grammar schools (Bolton 2015b).

During the 1960s, majority public support for the tripartite system was collapsing (Benn and Chitty 1996) and a number of Local Education Authorities (LEAs) had introduced some element of comprehensivisation. In addition to the positive arguments supporting comprehensive education, the shift in the public attitude was motivated by numerous concerns about the effectiveness and fairness of a selective education system. The 1963 Newsom report, titled ‘Half our Future’, for example, drew attention to the inconsistent quality of provision and access to qualifications for secondary modern pupils as well as the significant numbers of secondary modern pupils out-performing their grammar school counterparts (Newsom Report 1963, 230-1). It was becoming increasingly apparent that the eleven plus, the grammar school entrance test, was a crude and inconsistent approach to determine provision (Chitty 2007, 81-94). Access to grammar schools often depended more on the number of places available locally rather than a given standard (Whitty and Power 2015; Stobart 2008) and there was growing awareness of practices such as setting higher pass marks for girls than boys in response to the tendency for girls to out-perform boys on the test (Gillborn 2016;

Lowe 1997). Widespread public dissatisfaction with the tripartite system was also fuelled by personal stories about siblings and friends being separated at age 11; the disappointment of expectant and aspiring parents in a growing middle-class (Baker 2007); concerns over segregation, social justice and the soundness of judging aptitude at age 11; concerns about the fixed and limited notion of intelligence captured in the eleven plus (Stobart 2008); and wider concerns about standards in the system at large. By the mid-1960s, there was clearly an appetite for reform of the tripartite system (Chitty 2007, 92-3).

Shifts towards comprehensive organisation were encouraged by the Circular 10/65 policy document and then reinforced through financial pressures in Circular 10/66, introduced by the Labour government in 1965 and 1966 respectively. Comprehensivisation was not mandatory, however, and so many authorities sought to retain at least some degree of selection (Crook, Power and Whitty 1999). Five years later, a Conservative government came to power and the Education Secretary, Margaret Thatcher, replaced Circular 10/65 and 10/66 with the Circular 10/70, allowing LEAs to decide upon local arrangements for schooling and no longer applying pressure for them to become comprehensive.

Strong support for comprehensivisation in many areas meant that the number of grammar schools across the country continued to fall. In 1975, direct-grant grammar schools (those that were funded by both the Local Authority and from privately-paid fees) were required to choose whether to abandon selection and join the maintained sector or become fully independent. Of the 175 direct-grant schools, 51 became comprehensive schools, 119 opted to become independent fee-paying schools and the remainder closed (House of Commons 1978). By the end of the 1970s, just 4.5% of pupils in state-funded schools attended grammar schools (Bolton 2015b). As an issue, however, selective schooling has remained firmly on the political and public agenda and there have been continued calls for their re-introduction from a substantial minority of the population ever since (Coughlan 2016; de Waal 2015).

2.2 The Changing Role of the State

In the final decades of the 20th century the approach of the state in the provision of public services was being questioned. The Conservative government, elected in 1979, sought to reform the British state, introducing a number of policies promoting choice, diversity and competition (see Le Grand 1991; Adnett and Davies 2003). These reforms were underpinned by the political philosophy of the Conservative government which held that creating a 'quasi-market' would simultaneously improve standards and reduce the need for direct state intervention and organisation of the system. The Assisted Places Scheme, introduced in 1980, for example, was designed to 'open up' private education as an option for more families, providing free or subsidised places at independent schools for academically able children from poorer backgrounds (see Power, Sims and Whitty 2013). The 1988 Education Reform Act (ERA) was probably the most pivotal piece of legislation to this end though, transferring powers from LEAs to schools and central government as well as further developing market mechanisms such as increased parental choice or the option for schools to adopt a specialist status

(Flude and Hammer 1989; Jones 2002). Newly-introduced Grant-Maintained (GM) schools and City Technology Colleges (CTCs) both operated outside of LEA control and had responsibility for their own admissions arrangements. CTCs were able to select pupils by their aptitude for technology (Whitty, Gewirtz and Edwards 1993) and a number of GM schools selected by academic ability (Halpin, Fitz and Power 1993). While the state actively incentivised these new school types, the suitable direction to take was left to individual schools (in the case of GM conversion and specialist schools) or other stakeholders (in the case of CTC development).

By the end of the 1990s, the schools ‘quasi-market’ was well-established. The wholesale reintroduction of grammar schools on a national level, mandated from a central government level, or indeed any other ‘blueprint’ for a national school system, did not fit within this focus on independence and autonomy. Nevertheless, sizable factions of the Conservative party continued to call for the reintroduction of grammar schools and a significant proportion of the Labour party supported the abolition of the remaining schools still educating about 4% of the secondary school population (Bolton 2015b). In the lead-up to the 1997 general election, Conservative Prime Minister, John Major, appealed to grammar school supporters with a policy to create a grammar school in every town in England (Williams 2015). The Labour politician, David Blunkett, on the other hand gave a pledge that there would be “no selection under a Labour government” (quoted in Chitty 2013, 74). With the election of the New Labour government in 1997, Major’s plan to reintroduce grammar schools was not realised. Neither, however, were there moves to abolish the remaining grammar schools as some Labour supporters had hoped. As a result, at the turn of the century there were still 162 grammar schools open in England (Bolton 2015b).

The problem, as prime minister, Tony Blair saw it, was that the English system provided ‘excellence for a few instead of the majority’ (Blair 1996, para. 16). The reintroduction or abolishment of grammar schools provided no answers for this. Blair and his advisors held that the key to improving the school system was to combine accountability pressure (DfEE 1997; Barber 2004) with increased autonomy, diversity and choice (Adonis 2012; Whitty and Power 2015), thereby creating pressure for under-performing schools to improve while giving schools and the system more freedom to innovate and find new and improved ways of operating. The 1997 White Paper, *Excellence in Schools*, clearly set out their ‘zero tolerance’ approach to underperformance in which schools that were found to be failing had three options: ‘improve, make a fresh start, or close’ (DfEE 1997, 12). An important part of this was to allow for new types of schools which would improve standards where existing schools had failed:

Our ambitions for higher standards for all and for more diversity in the system depend not only on making the most effective use of our existing schools but also on encouraging new providers to offer new types of schools as they are needed. (DfES 2003, 21)

A notable example of this was the sponsored academies programme which was originally introduced to

establish new secondary schools in to deprived areas. These new schools would operate outside of LEA control and would be supported by external sponsors such as businesses or faith groups (Gunter 2011). The sponsored academies programme continued to develop steadily under the Labour government and by 2010, 203 academy schools had opened across the country.

The old debate about whether to either reintroduce or abolish grammar schools did not fit within the priorities of the New Labour government or their approach to school improvement. Rather than taking a stance for or against grammar schools, New Labour sidestepped the issue (Whitty and Power 2015), introducing the 1998 School Standards and Framework Act (SSFA) which shifted the power to abolish existing schools away from central government and to the LEAs. Local support for such a move had to be demonstrated. Just one area, Ripon in Yorkshire, chose to ballot parents on ending selection and the majority of parents there voted to retain their grammar school. Following this, no other LEAs put the issue up for a vote. In an attempt to draw a line under the issue, the SSFA legislation allowed for the maintenance of existing grammar schools but prevented the introduction of any new academic selection within schools. As a result, the number of schools and the proportion of children attending them remained stable over the course of the Labour parliament and this continued throughout the subsequent Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government (Bolton 2015b).

2.3 The Current System and the Reinvention of the Grammar School Debate

The previous section described how quasi-market reforms to the English education system since the 1970s have rendered the debate about the wholesale reintroduction of grammar schools no longer relevant. Some support for grammar schools remains, however, and proponents of selective schools are now looking for new roles and opportunities for grammar schools within a diverse and somewhat fragmented education system. This section describes how key mechanisms and structures within the current system are creating new potential roles for grammar schools, positioning old arguments about standards, access, social mobility within the new educational landscape.

In 2010 the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition took power. They saw the academies programme, started under Labour, as a vehicle to enable school independence from Local Authority (LA) control on a greater scale and further promote diversity within the system. There was a rapid expansion of the academies programme, including the opportunity for all existing schools to convert to academy status and thereby become directly funded by central government (DfE 2012). Unlike Labour's academies, converter academies did not necessarily require sponsorship. By September 2015, 41% of secondary schools in England had converted to academy status, bringing the total proportion of secondary academies (both sponsored and converter) to 55% (Bolton 2015a). Like sponsored academies, converter academies received additional freedoms in relation to their admissions arrangements, curriculum, staffing, financial control and organisation of school days and term times. Secondary schools most likely to convert were foundation, voluntary aided

(often faith-based schools) and voluntary controlled schools and, significantly for the purposes of this paper, 85% (139) of the 163 grammar schools have also converted (Bolton 2015a).

Despite these moves to separate schools from LA control, the Conservative party remain committed to the principle of localised decision-making, but prefer to situate this at the school and parental level, empowering the public through market mechanisms rather than democratic channels (Conservative Party 2010; Cameron 2012). Following the academies programme, LAs still retained the statutory duty for the provision of school places for all children in their area. Where there is a lack of school places, LAs require existing schools to expand their provision or non-state providers (such as academy trusts, businesses, faith groups or individuals) to establish new schools to meet the need (DfE 2016c, 2016a). Expansion of pupil numbers was particularly encouraged for schools rated Good or Outstanding by Ofsted with schools being allowed to expand their schools sites to meet excess demand. The Weald of Kent grammar school, as a school rated Outstanding by Ofsted, was able to take advantage of this policy to expand their provision on to a new site, the new Sevenoaks 'annexe'. Although the move stems from a general and pre-existing policy, it has nonetheless reignited the old grammar schools debate. Commentators have suggested that approval of the annexe is tantamount to permitting a brand new selective school (Adams and Nardelli 2015; Espinoza, Finnigan and Gurney-Read 2015), thereby contravening the 1998 SSFA legislation and the current Admissions Code (DfE 2014). At first sight, Prime Minister, David Cameron's support for the Weald of Kent 'annexe' appears as a marked shift from earlier comments where he questioned parents' desire for academic selection at age 11 and described the grammar schools debate as 'entirely pointless' (BBC News 2007); yet, Cameron's stance stems from a clear principle: good schools should be able to expand (Green 2015). This does, however, raise a question about whether this sets a precedent for grammar school expansion more widely. Also, whether or not further 'annexes' are allowed on separate sites, grammar schools are currently expanding simply by adding additional school places (Gloucester Citizen 2015).

Another important aspect of the academies programme has been to encourage the introduction of new types of schools such as Free Schools, Studio Schools and University Technical Colleges (UTCs) under the umbrella of academy status (DfE 2012). In attempts to tackle what was argued to be a lack of necessary skills within the workforce, the coalition government also sought to revive and raise the status of vocational education (Gove 2011). Studio Schools and University Technical Colleges were introduced to provide both a core academic curriculum and vocational specialisms to 14-19 year olds. They were also presented as providing additional choice and a sound alternative for students who wanted to follow a more practical or technical route. At present, there are 40 Studio Schools and 39 UTCs open (DfE 2016b) with specialisms including engineering, media, hospitality, design and enterprise. It is interesting to draw a parallel between these developments and the original intentions of the tripartite system. The principle that different provision is required for different pupils is now being realised in a new context. Rather than selection at 11 and national structures, however, the system is characterised by tracking at a later stage and "increasingly fragmented local

landscapes of schooling with different patterns emerging in different parts of the country" (Simkins 2015, 4). There are currently relatively few vocational alternatives and so access is currently highly dependent on the availability of local providers.

The new landscape of autonomous schools lends itself to a system of federations and chains (Chapman et al. 2011, 170). In more recent years, since the expansion of the academies policy, there has been an increasing focus on multi-academy trusts (MATs) or chains (Howarth 2013). A recent Education Select Committee report (House of Commons 2015) argued that "harnessing the effectiveness of partnerships to raise school performance is particularly important where schools are autonomous. More needs to be done to encourage collaboration and ensure that it happens" (House of Commons 2015, 38). Governments have been keen to engage ostensibly high-performing private, independent and grammar schools in becoming sponsors for academically less successful schools in their areas (DCSF 2007; DfE 2013). Some independent and grammar schools have chosen to sponsor state-funded schools although with varying degrees of success (Mansell 2015; McKinney 2016; Paton 2013). One notable example of this is the sponsorship of a poorly-performing² local secondary school by the King Edward VI foundation in Birmingham.

This section has described the new roles being taken by grammar schools within the current educational system. Justification for grammar schools taking a leading role in system improvement and for their expansion, to a large extent, rests on them having relatively high performance. Moreover, if grammar schools were to educate a greater proportion of the secondary school population or expand to new sites, there are likely to be wider impacts on nearby schools. To properly evaluate these developments and establish the most appropriate direction for future policy, we need to examine the current evidence on the performance of grammar schools, selective systems and the wider impacts of a partially selective system. This task is undertaken in the following two sections.

3. Educational Effects of Grammar Schools

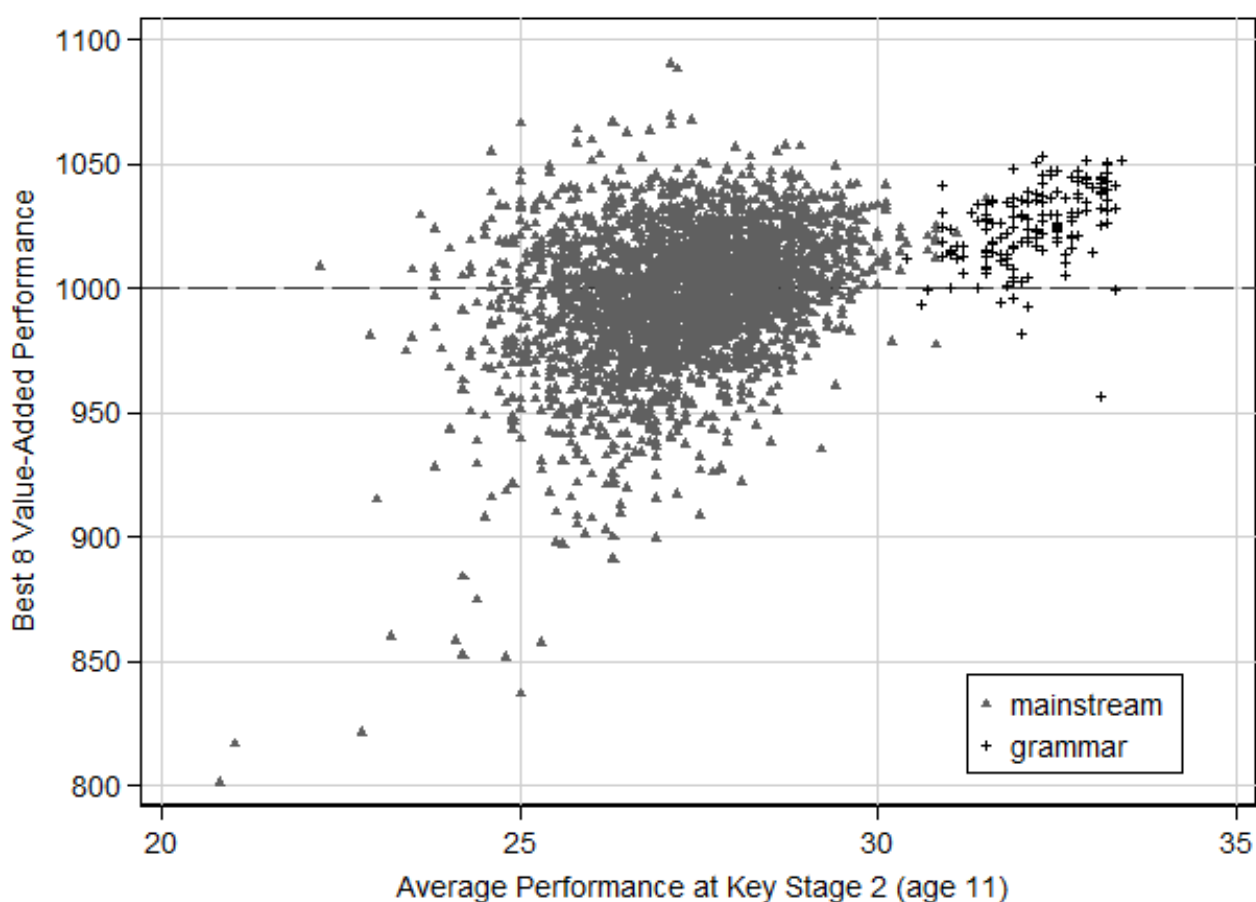
3.1 Academic Performance

In terms of examination results, grammar school pupils are consistently amongst the best performing in the country. To meaningfully judge the effectiveness of grammar schools themselves, however, comparisons must be made that take the aptitude and characteristics of grammar schools' intakes into account. Research comparing the examination outcomes of grammar school pupils against comparable pupils in non-selective schools tend to find a small advantage in favour of grammar school pupils (Coe et al. 2008). A comprehensive review of the evidence conducted in 2008 on behalf of the Sutton Trust found that the 'grammar school effect' could be anywhere between 'three-quarters of a grade per subject in favour of grammar schools at one end, and no real difference at the other' (Coe et al. 2008, 235). This huge range of estimates varied according to the choice and quality of the variables used for the outcome attainment measure and for measures of prior intake

characteristics. In general, the more numerous and higher-quality the control variables, the lower the effect. As a result, Coe et al. (2008) concluded that the effect is most likely on the lower end of this range.

The current ‘Best 8’ value-added (VA) measure shows grammar schools out-performing mainstream schools. The measure compares pupils’ performance on their best 8 GCSE (or equivalent) subjects at KS4 (age 16) to other pupils with the same prior attainment at KS2 (age 11), ignoring all other possible differences in intake characteristics (see below). If schools’ pupils make more progress than the average for pupils with the same KS2 results, the score will be above 1000. Below 1000 indicates lower relative progress. This is shown in Figure 1, below, which plots school performance on the Best 8 VA measure against average intake prior attainment score at aged 11:

Figure 1 – School 2015 Best 8* Value-Added Performance by Intake Prior Attainment



Source: 2015 DfE Performance Tables data

* The Best 8 Measure includes a double weighting for English and maths so is the equivalent of 10 subjects.

Grammar schools can clearly be seen on the figure as the cluster of schools on the right with a high average KS2 score (of about 31 to 33). A dashed reference line has been added at 1000 points on the Best 8 VA measure to indicate typical progress. The vast majority of grammar schools are situated above this reference line, indicating relatively high performance on this measure. The mean Best 8 VA score for grammar schools in 2015 was 1025 points which equates to just over 4 extra grades across the Best 8 subjects, or about a third

of a grade to a half a grade extra per pupil, per subject (depending on whether the increase falls in double-weighted English or mathematics). On the face of it, then, grammar schools appear to be high-performing schools.

The problem with this figure as an estimate of the grammar school effect is that it is simplistic to assume that pupils with the same KS2 scores are otherwise equivalent. There are several other factors which are consistently found to be associated with rates of progress over time, even after adjusting for prior attainment (Chapman et al. 2015). This was reflected in former performance measures such as the 2007 contextualised value-added (CVA) measure which, as well as adjusting for prior attainment, controlled for associations between performance and deprivation, local area deprivation, in care status, special educational needs status, pupil mobility, gender, age within year, English language status, ethnic group and school average prior attainment (Evans 2008). Adding extra contextual variables explains more of the variance in pupil outcomes and so reduces the size of the overall value-added. The aim is to eliminate the impact of as many extraneous influences as possible but without attenuating genuine differences in school effectiveness between different pupil groups (OECD 2008). This requires a high level of theoretical understanding of the non-school influences on pupil performance as well as high-quality measures to capture them (Creemers, Kyriakides and Sammons 2010). There are still no national measures for important factors such as maternal education (Dearden, Miranda and Rabe-Hesketh 2011; Sammons, Toth and Sylva 2015) or access to tuition (Sutton Trust 2014). These non-school factors are unlikely to be distributed evenly between grammar-school and non-grammar school populations yet without controlling for them and others, biases will remain in the measure. Any unmeasured or unmeasurable (Tymms 1996) advantageous characteristics or circumstances of grammar school pupils will upwardly bias the estimates of the grammar school effect (Coe et al. 2008). The current value-added measure (as in Figure 1), by taking only prior attainment in to account, ignores confounding effects associated with other differences in pupil characteristics. On the descriptive measures that are available there are marked differences in the characteristics of grammar school and non-grammar school pupils, as can be seen on Table 1 below:

Table 1 – Descriptive Statistics by School Type for Grammar Schools (n = 163) and Mainstream, State-Maintained Secondary Schools (n = 3053)

	Grammar Schools				Non-Grammar Schools			
	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min	Max	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min	Max
KS4 Best 8 Value-Added Score[†]	1025.1	15.3	956.9	1053.3	997.4	26.7	801.3	1090.6
Percentage of Disadvantaged Pupils[‡]	6.2%	3.9%	1%	24%	29.2%	16%	0%	97%

Percentage of pupils with Special Educational Needs[§]	0.3%	0.6%	0%	3%	2.4%	2.5%	0%	100%
Average (capped) point score at KS4	412.9	20.8	355.3	456.9	311.3	33.3	59.8	412.9
Key Stage 2 Average Point Score	32.1	0.7	30.4	33.4	27.3	1.2	20.8	31.5

Source: 2015 DfE Performance Tables data

[†] Best 8 Value-Added Scores were available for 2900 of the non-grammar schools and 162 of the grammar schools

[‡] Using the official DfE measure which uses Free School Meals (FSM) and looked after status as indicators.

[§] Including pupils with a statement of special educational needs (SEN) or an Education, Health and Care (ECH) plan.

Accounting for differences such as the proportion of disadvantaged pupils and other pupil intake characteristics (also see Section 4.1, below) will generally, but not necessarily, lower value-added estimates of the grammar school effect downwards. If, for example, the Best 8 VA score is adjusted¹ by the proportion of disadvantaged pupils in the school and the proportion of pupils with a statement of special educational needs, the mean grammar school effect of 25 (above) is approximately halved to 13, giving a grammar school effect of about 2 grades per pupil on the Best 8 measure or about 1 grade extra in every fourth or fifth subject. Herein lies the difficulty of value-added estimates of the grammar school effect: there is always a strong suspicion that unobserved differences between pupils remain and accounting for them would reduce any given estimate.

One of the strongest suggestions that the value-added grammar effect estimates are upwardly biased is the finding of Manning and Pischke (2006) that grammar school pupils tend to already be making relatively high progress at primary school before even attending a grammar school. This finding was also replicated by Coe et al. (2008, 222) who comment that the most plausible explanation for this is that there is ‘some unmeasured (or inadequately measured) characteristic ... such as greater social or cultural resources, greater academic ability or enhanced motivation’ that causes relatively higher progress at both stages of schooling. Another difficulty with interpreting a value-added estimate of the grammar school effect as causal is the difficulty linking the value-added estimates with a causal explanation. Peer or 'compositional' effects (i.e. the effect of having more-able peers over and above individual ability) are consistently found to be very small (see Gibbons and Telhaj 2012, 33) and more recent studies are less likely to pick one up at all (Yeung and Nguyen-Hoang 2016). Moreover, studies have also found that measurement error can lead to spurious compositional effects, inflating value-added scores for schools with high-ability intakes (Harker and Tymms 2004; Televantou et al. 2015).

One way to address the problem of unobserved differences biasing estimates is to use an experimental or quasi-experimental design to create a fair comparison group (Shadish, Cook and Campbell 2002). Currently there are no UK studies which have done this to estimate the performance of grammar schools. One U.S. study

which did use a quasi-experimental design was Dobbie and Fryer Jr (2011), who examined outcomes for pupils just below and above the cut-off score for entrance into New York's 'exam schools', reasoning that pupils just missing out on a place would be otherwise similar to those narrowly passing the exam. Their findings showed that there were differences in what courses were taken, with exam school students taking more rigorous qualifications. This is in line with UK results showing that grammar school pupils tend to take more demanding GCSE subjects (Coe et al. 2008). In terms of later performance on the Scholastic Aptitude Tests (SATs), however, there was little suggestion that pupils who just missed out on attending the exam schools were disadvantaged:

"Surprisingly, however, there is little impact of attending an exam school on Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) reading and writing scores, and, at best, a modest positive impact on SAT math scores. Moreover, the impact of exam school attendance on college enrollment or graduation is, if anything, negative."

(Dobbie and Fryer Jr 2011, 2)

In light of these findings and concerns over the limitations of the data to control all differences between grammar school intakes and other comparable pupils in the value-added analyses, one might question whether there is in fact a grammar school effect at all and whether any effect is large enough to be of any substantive value. It is important to note, however, that there is no suggestion in the research that the grammar school effect is negative (i.e. that grammar school pupils perform worse than comparable pupils in non-selective schools); the best available evidence suggests there is a modest performance advantage for pupils who attend a grammar school. The next section examines the effect on those who miss out.

3.2 Performance of Selective Systems

“Sir Michael Wilshaw [Chief Inspector of Ofsted], speaking about the rising interest in grammar schools, said: "Let's not delude ourselves. 'A grammar school in every town', as some are calling for, would also mean three secondary moderns in every town, too - a consequence rarely mentioned.”

(Coughlan 2016, , Final Section, Para. 8)

The performance of grammar school pupils should not be considered in isolation from that of pupils who miss out on a grammar school place (Boliver and Swift 2011). A frequent finding in the literature on grammar school performance (e.g. Atkinson, Gregg and McConnell 2006) is that the performance benefit to grammar school pupils of a selective system is offset by a negative effect for secondary modern pupils (i.e. those in nearby non-selective schools). This result is also found in studies of streaming and setting: In what is now a large and fairly consistent evidence base (albeit with few robust UK studies), when pupils are taught grouped by ability, the most-able pupils tend to benefit at the expense of middle- and lower-ability pupils (EEF 2016). This dispersion of outcomes is found at both school-level and system level. National and international

evidence consistently finds that the net effect of earlier tracking is to increase inequality of outcomes without having a large or consistent effect on the overall performance of the system (Woessmann 2009). It must be noted, however, that such international comparisons are crude and there are many variables underlying this generalisation including the age of selection, the number of tracks available, the extent to which tracking occurs across- and within-schools, the proportion of pupils selected for higher tracks, the curriculum and resources for each track and many other factors. Moreover, the evidence is not entirely consistent. Examples can be found of well-conducted studies which do not find negative effects for non-grammar school pupils. Coe et al. (2008), for example, found little evidence of a negative impact on non-selective schools who have had high-ability pupils 'creamed' off by nearby grammar schools. This, combined with them finding a small grammar school effect (see above), implies a small net positive effect on the system overall. Overall, however, these results suggest that the net effect of the expansion of grammar schools in size or number will most likely be zero-sum, with grammar school pupils receiving a modest benefit at the expense of other pupils in the state sector.

3.3 Wider Educational Outcomes

There is currently very little robust evidence on the wider educational effects of grammar schools on their pupils and their performance in non-academic areas (Coe et al. 2008). Studies of the selective system in Northern Ireland found there to be very little difference between grammar school pupils and other pupils on a range of attitudes (Gallagher and Smith 2000). Ofsted consistently judge grammar schools positively across a range of inspection outcomes, including non-academic outcomes. Ofsted judgements, however, are widely thought to be heavily biased by intake ability, even by the inspectorate itself (Busby 2015). Similar to the problem of judging academic effectiveness, it is very difficult to separate the effect of intake characteristics from the effects of school performance in relation to wider educational outcomes.

Looking at peer effects and selectivity in systems more generally suggests areas where grammar schools may have effects on wider educational outcomes such as attitudes and behaviour. One likely effect on attitudes is known by educational psychologists as the 'Big Fish, Little Pond Effect' (BFLPE) (Marsh and Hau 2003). This refers to the well-established finding that average peer achievement has an influence on pupils' academic self-concept (i.e. self-beliefs about academic abilities and skills). The performance of others is one reference point when forming self-concept (Marsh and Seaton 2013), yet individuals tend to appraise their competence relative to their immediate peers more so than the larger population. As a result, a high-attaining pupil in a primary school can find him or herself to be a relatively poor performer at a grammar school, leading to lower academic self-concept relative to comparable pupils with an average-ability reference group. A large body of research links academic self-concept to future academic performance and 'how [pupils] feel about themselves, their accomplishments, persistence, and educational decisions' (Marsh and Hau 2003, 366).

At the level of the system, the available evidence from international comparisons suggests that more comprehensive systems promote a number of positive values:

"Young peoples' sense of belonging, experience of bullying, sense of a fair society, hopes for the future, enjoyment of school, a willingness to help the disadvantaged, learning to trust others, and plans to continue in education or training, are all better in systems with mixed school intakes."

(Gorard 2010, 57)

These effects are found to be relatively small and cross-cultural comparisons have their obvious drawbacks. Nevertheless, Gorard (2010) notes that these effects are found across datasets, countries and time periods. Yet it is also interesting to note that in subsequent research making international comparisons, Gorard (2012) found that English pupils (in a relatively more comprehensive system) were less likely to agree that pupils who were struggling academically should receive more teacher support and more likely to recommend that the struggling pupils be taught elsewhere. Comprehensive systems may allow pupils to more acutely see the cost in terms of teacher time of mixed ability teaching than pupils in more tracked systems; although, again, this may reflect a wider cultural attitude rather than a feature of the system.

Overall, there is little evidence that there are any large systematic differences in grammar schools or selective systems in terms of wider educational outcomes. Effects on attitudes may differ according to whether pupils are high or low achievers in the grammar school and there are some suggestions that more comprehensive systems tend to promote a number of pro-social attitudes and positive attitudes towards society. Educational effectiveness studies which have examined non-academic outcomes, however, find school effects which are considerably smaller than those on (value-added) academic performance (Chapman et al. 2015). In sum, many of the apparent differences between grammar schools and other schools in terms of wider educational outcomes, from extra-curricular skills to attitudes and behaviour, are likely to reflect intakes rather than anything essential to selective educational provision.

4. Grammar school intakes and social mobility

Advocates of grammar schools argue that they can have long-term positive impacts in terms of social mobility (Ross and Hope 2014). The notion of grammar schools operating meritocratically and lifting socioeconomically disadvantaged children out of poverty is appealing. But this can only work if grammar schools are actually serving poorer children to begin with. This section looks at the evidence on the student compositions of grammar schools in England and then considers the extent to which the schools are operating as the engines of social mobility that some suggest they have the power to be.

4.1 Grammar school intakes

Grammar schools ostensibly select their pupils based purely on academic ability. The 11 plus seeks to provide a fair method where the most-able pupils will pass and gain entry to the grammar school, irrespective of their social background. The evidence shows, however, that grammar schools are also socially selective in the sense that they take proportionally fewer children from poorer backgrounds than would be expected based on their location (Atkinson, Gregg and McConnell 2006; Cribb et al. 2013; DCSF 2008). In a recent comparison, Bolton (2015b) found that 2.6% of grammar school pupils were eligible for FSM compared with 14.9% across other secondary school types³. The 163 remaining grammar schools are not equally spread across the country, and predominantly exist within more affluent areas. Nevertheless, as Coe et al. (2008) highlighted, they still "enrol half as many academically able children from disadvantaged backgrounds as they could do" when compared with rates of disadvantage in their local areas (Coe et al. 2008, 3). In relation to other student characteristics, grammar schools have been shown to take substantially higher proportions of non-white pupils than other school types (Bolton 2015b), even after controlling for prior attainment and socioeconomic background. The data indicates that there are larger proportions of Asian and Chinese pupils attending grammar schools compared with other schools (Cribb, Sibieta and Vignoles 2013).

The relatively small number of grammar schools are unlikely to have a substantial impact on overall levels of pupil clustering across the country. There is, however, evidence to suggest that they are associated with higher levels of segregation on a more local basis (Gorard and See 2013). Coe et al. (2008) sought to establish the extent to which 'cream-skimming' (where the 'best' pupils are believed to be 'taken' or 'creamed' from other local schools) occurred as a result of grammar school existence. They found that a "relatively small number of schools are substantially creamed: 161 schools (5% of non-selective schools nationally) lose more than 20% of their potential pupils to grammar schools. Three-quarters of these schools are in just four LAs" (Coe et al. 2008, 4). It is also important to note that, although grammar schools take disproportionately few disadvantaged pupils, they are not the most socially-selective schools in the country: Coe et al. (2008, 178) found that Voluntary Aided, CTCs, single sex, faith-based, larger than average, and/or schools drawing from areas with the most competition for school places tended to be more selective. Social selectivity is, therefore, a wider issue.

The evidence suggests that such social stratification can have negative social effects. International comparisons have highlighted that countries with more stratified systems tend to have more inequalities in the results between students and schools (Alegre and Ferrer 2010; Condrón 2013). Moreover, attending schools with a greater social mix has been shown to have a positive impact on a number of important individual and social outcomes. These include children's civic awareness, tolerance of those from different backgrounds and occupational aspirations (Clotfelter 2001; Frankenberg, Lee and Orfield 2003; Levinson and Levinson 2003; Wicht 2016).

4.2 *Why are fewer disadvantaged pupils attending grammar schools?*

The mechanisms influencing grammar school intakes, like those of other schools, are complex and often closely intertwined. The evidence described above suggests that the link between disadvantaged children and underperformance (DfE 2010; Coe et al. 2008; Gorard and See 2013) is not enough to explain their substantial under-representation of poorer children in grammar schools. Admissions arrangements, the primary schools that children attend and the actions of parents during the school choice process may also have an impact.

Some commentators have suggested that the admissions arrangements for grammar schools can disadvantage pupils from more deprived backgrounds (Cribb et al. 2013; Murray 2013). The requirement to pass the eleven plus test has led to a whole industry developing around the provision of extra tuition. Only pupils with families able to afford this can access tuition and potentially gain an advantage in passing the test. There is also concern that the need for parents to spend time applying for the test and money transporting their child to the test centre, could disadvantage those from more deprived backgrounds as has been shown in relation to the banding tests that some schools use (Dickens 2015). The possibility of grammar school attendance and the extent of eleven plus test preparation will vary by school. Previous research has shown that grammar school pupils are more likely to have attended fee-paying independent primary schools than pupils at other types of state-funded secondary school (Cribb, Sibieta and Vignoles 2013). About 13% of grammar school pupils attended non-state primaries compared to a national average of 6.5% of non-state pupils. Where there are a large number of pupils taking the eleven plus in a particular primary school, the expectation that pupils will apply as well as the resources available to prepare for the test will be greater.

The school choice literature suggests that parents play an important role in determining whether a grammar school is a feasible option and in navigating the admissions procedures (Allen, Burgess and McKenna 2014). Some evidence has indicated that parents from higher socioeconomic (SES) backgrounds are more likely to value academic performance than those from lower SES backgrounds (Hastings, Van Weelden and Weinstein 2007; Leroux 2015) providing motivation to gain entry to selective schools. A body of research has also highlighted the role of peer group and social mix in influencing the schools that parents consider and choose (Bagley, Woods and Glatter 2001; Benson, Bridge and Wilson 2015; Burgess et al. 2011). In line with earlier work (Francis and Archer 2005; Modood 2003), Cribb, Sibieta and Vignoles (2013, 8) suggest that "differences in educational attitudes and aspirations" may play a role in where children attend school and their attainment. (Ball 2003) argues that, for middle class parents, school quality and student composition are inextricably linked and that parents use the prospective peer group as indicator of academic success. Moreover, he suggests that middle class parents who opted for private schooling were not only interested in having their children educated with others 'like them' but also were actively attempting to avoid those who were perceived as socially 'different' (Ball 2003). This self-sorting based on socioeconomic status and/or other characteristics is unlikely to be a phenomenon exclusively linked to the private sector and may

well be a key motivator in encouraging parents towards grammar schools as an alternative to other state-funded provision.

4.3 Social Mobility

Proponents of grammar schools often claim that grammar schools promote social mobility. This idea rests on the view that grammar schools are accessible on the basis of aptitude rather than other criteria such as parental income or neighbourhood location. As a result, poor but able pupils will be able to attend grammar schools and will perform better than would be the case at their local comprehensive school. Given the evidence reviewed above, this seems doubtful on both counts: first, attendance does not seem to be solely the result of aptitude and poor pupils are markedly under-represented in grammar schools; second, the performance advantage is small and uncertain.

The lack of disadvantaged children attending grammar schools has been a cause for concern for grammar school supporters and opponents alike: a number of grammar school head teachers have expressed concern about both the lack of high-ability, disadvantaged pupils that are attending and the unfairness of using tests that pupils can be intensively coached to pass (Cribb et al. 2013). In response, a number of measures have been introduced to try and encourage more socioeconomically balanced intakes within grammar schools. First, new 'tutor proof' tests have been developed and are currently being used by a number of selective LAs and individual grammar schools across the country (Reidy 2014). Second, a number of grammar schools have been successful in applying to amend their admissions policies in order to give priority to those eligible for the Pupil Premium (Adams 2014). In Birmingham, for example, the King Edwards grammar schools have chosen to prioritise between 20-25% of their places for pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds. A recent analysis suggests that 55 grammar schools (34% of the total 163) have included some provision for Pupil Premium children in their admissions policies for the 2016-2017 academic year (Dracup 2015). The extent to which this will achieve more balanced intakes is yet to be seen.

There are several studies which have examined the effect on social mobility of English LEAs adopting a comprehensive system in the 1960s and onwards by tracking the outcomes of grammar school (versus comprehensive or secondary modern) pupils or comparing the performance of different local education authorities in relation to their level of selectivity. Boliver and Swift (2011), for example, investigated the movement between income and occupational groups, controlling for pupil difference where possible. The comparison of grammar school and statistically-matched pupils suggest that grammar schools do not make upward social-mobility more likely but may increase its extent where it is taking place. They then widened the analysis to consider grammar schools *and* secondary modern schools against comprehensive schools (i.e. the overall effects of a selective system):

"Once we include secondary moderns in the analysis, our findings are simple and unambiguous.

Comparing relevantly similar children, selective-system schools were no more conducive to mobility, whether upward or downward, whether between income quartiles or class categories, than were comprehensives. Any mobility advantage accruing to children from low-income or working-class origins who attended grammar schools was cancelled out by an equivalent mobility disadvantage suffered by those who went to secondary moderns."

(Boliver and Swift 2011, 102)

Other recent studies have found that grammar schools conferred no advantage in terms of the likelihood of getting a degree for the 1970 grammar school cohort, despite data suggesting some advantages in terms of O-level performance (Sullivan et al. 2014). Where positive effects are found for grammar school pupils, negative effects are found for pupils elsewhere in the selective system or local authority. Burgess, Dickson and Macmillan (2014), for example, found that selective school increases income inequality with pupils educated in selective areas having a larger range of incomes than comparable pupils in a comprehensive system. This finding is in line with the effects on the performance of selective systems, discussed above. Whether a greater dispersion of incomes (or academic performances) is desirable will depend on political preferences and the underlying cause of the inequalities. If, for example, greater inequality stemmed from more advantaged families being able to compound their advantages in a selective system through paying for tuition and giving their children a good 'head start', this seems less just than the difference being due to able pupils being held back by lower-performing peers in a comprehensive system. Woessmann (2009, 33), who found that systems which track early (before age 16) have more unequal academic results (above), also found that the more unequal the system outcomes, the 'greater the impact of family background on educational success.'

Finally, it is worth mentioning an ongoing narrative in the public debate which holds that mobility is falling due to the shift away from the tripartite system. Crisis narratives have considerable resonance in some areas of the media but appear to be a product of media and public imagination rather than any available evidence either that mobility is low by international standards or that this has any link with the move to comprehensivisation (Gorard 2008; Boliver and Swift 2011; Goldthorpe 2013). The evidence suggests that the public perception of a crisis in UK social mobility is largely misplaced (Bukodi et al. 2015). The most recent international comparisons for inter-generational income mobility, for example, place the UK 19th out of 37 countries (Jerrim 2015).

5. Rethinking the Grammar Schools Debate

5.1 Evaluating the Evidence

As this paper has documented, the tripartite system in which grammar schools had their heyday is worlds apart from the current educational system in terms of its structural organisation. Old debates have lingered on

throughout decades of reforms which have, on one hand, made the wholesale reintroduction of grammar schools by central government very unlikely yet, on the other hand, have created opportunities for remaining grammar schools to take on new roles within the system and expand selective provision. Having reviewed the evidence on the performance of grammar schools and their social and systemic effects, we are now in a position to evaluate these developments.

The best available evidence suggests a small advantage of attending a grammar school. This evidence is far from robust, however, and it is likely that the grammar school effect will be slowly eroded as the quality and availability of data used to form value-added comparisons improves. It is also important to consider grammar school performance alongside that of the resultant secondary modern schools nearby. Overall, the evidence suggests that a considerable expansion of grammar schools (in number or size) is unlikely to have substantial effects on the overall academic performance of the system but may lead to a greater spread of academic and other outcomes such as future income. Whether this is desirable will depend on the extent to which (in)equality is a political priority.

Grammar schools are playing a role in new organisational structures such as federations or multi-academy trusts. They appear to be in a good position to provide a leadership role, given their local support, stable leadership and high standards (in terms of raw results). This should not be over-stated though. The assumption that their performance is markedly superior to other schools and that grammar school teaching or leadership can be transplanted into schools in highly dissimilar contexts is questionable. The potential value of these roles also rests on the effectiveness of these collaborative improvement strategies, on which there is currently very little robust evidence. The available evidence suggests collaboration between schools may have small positive effects (Chapman and Muijs 2013) but the role of grammar schools as sponsors is a new one, and it is too early to draw firm conclusions about the effectiveness of these partnerships.

This review has also considered the wider impact of selective education. The broader social consequences of maintaining (and potentially expanding) a partially selective system should also be considered within the debate. Concerns about the equity of access to grammar schools continue. Proponents contest that admission based on ability provides a fair chance for pupils from all socioeconomic backgrounds to gain access. The evidence shows, however, that children from poorer backgrounds are considerably less likely to attend grammar schools than their more affluent peers. In short, grammar schools are not currently serving the students that they claim to be offering opportunities and social mobility to. The low proportion of disadvantaged pupils attending grammar schools means that the main social effect of grammar schools is to increase segregation by social background in the areas surrounding grammar schools.

5.2 New Debates for a New System

The evidence reviewed has suggested both opportunities and problems and raises many important questions about standards, fairness and social mobility. For debates around selective education to be productive, public

and political discourse must catch up with the current system rather than reliving long-past and simplistic arguments about the reintroduction or abolition of grammar schools. To this end, this paper closes by considering the debate itself, arguing that reframing the issues in light of the current system and best available evidence is long-overdue. There are several points which need to be understood more widely:

First, school type is not the key organising feature of the current system. The overall system is a complex landscape shaped by mechanisms such as accountability and admissions practices (see below). Labels used to describe school structures hide more than they reveal and tend to neglect the large degree of overlap in terms of how schools are categorised. For instance, many grammar schools are also academies, some are voluntary-aided schools and some are working in close partnership with non-selective schools. Unfortunately, much public and political discourse continues to be side-tracked into contesting the relative performance of idealised ‘brands’ of school, old and new. The debate is largely based on conjecture and sustained by dubious uses of performance data (see next point). There is currently no robust evidence that any ‘type’ of school, or indeed any organisational structure, is appreciably superior to any other and so little basis in the evidence to support any major structural reforms.

Second, comparing schools on the basis of raw outcomes is almost meaningless. The grammar school debate provides a particularly stark example of the more general point that raw outcomes alone reveal almost nothing about school performance: It should not be necessary to point out that highest achieving children at age 11 will often go on to become amongst the most successful adults in the future. This says almost nothing about the effectiveness of grammar schools. The most basic starting point for any sensible and informed debate about differences in school effectiveness is to take differences in intake into account and examine whether the system benefits some groups at the expense of others. Yet, too many media commentators and politicians either do not understand this point or choose to ignore it (Gorard 2010).

Third, it is important to separate the issue of selection from other issues. Grammar schools are popular because of the widespread perception that they have high academic standards and a strong ethos. It is important to ask, however, whether such characteristics stem from ability selection itself. If not, such points are arguments for emulating the characteristics of grammar schools more widely rather than arguments in favour of greater selection. Some Free Schools and academies, for example, have opted to try and emulate the ethos and curriculum found in selective schools but without the use of ability-based admissions criteria (Fowler 2011; Morris 2016). Moreover, any advantage held by grammar schools which can also be had through within-school tracking means that any benefits of ability grouping can be had without the more general segregation that selection at age 11 entails; although, as was noted earlier, the case for ability grouping and tracking is poor (EEF 2016).

Fourth, debates should focus on the key mechanisms shaping the system (rather than school types). This paper has described the profound shifts in the organisation of the English education system that have taken place over several decades. Reintroducing grammar schools from the centre is no longer a realistic

prospect. The debate around selection in particular needs to centre on the key mechanism which shapes selectivity of admissions: the admissions code (DfE 2014). Admissions codes may appear a remote, esoteric feature of the administrative framework in which schools operate yet they should be at the centre of the selectivity discussion. The government no longer creates a ‘blue-print’ for school types, to be copied across the nation; instead, it controls the rules which permit what is possible within the system (and where the funding flows). What rules should govern the system? Should schools be allowed to select all or some of their intake by ability? It is valuable to frame the issue of selection more generally than grammar schools and consider a greater range of options beyond either allowing or denying academic selection. There are many interim positions which could be considered relating to the extent of selection, its basis and the age at which it takes place. Moreover, it is possible to stipulate further conditions which accompany freedoms to select by ability, such as enrolling a certain proportion of disadvantaged pupils. As has been noted, selectivity is a far more general issue; if policy-makers wish to create a system which does not segregate children by social class, closing grammar schools will not be enough to achieve this. Grammar schools form a relatively small – albeit rather conspicuous – part of a much larger and persistently segregated schooling system in England (Gorard 2015). Parental choice policies are often in conflict with social mixing as well as each other: satisfying one parent’s demand to choose selective schools undermines another’s demand to choose an all-ability school.

The other key mechanism which is particularly relevant to many of the issues raised is the accountability regime. Neither the official VA measure (or forthcoming Progress 8 measure) nor Ofsted inspection ratings can be credibly said to solely reflect the effectiveness of schools as oppose to the characteristics of their intakes. As a result, the current policy of allowing 'good' schools to expand is, in effect, one that disproportionately allows schools that take able and affluent intakes to expand. Similarly, calls for grammar schools to head multi-academy trusts or sponsor under-performing schools rest on the ability of the accountability system to identify school effectiveness independently of intake characteristics. Distinguishing these is essential for all the quasi-market mechanisms which have been discussed (e.g. parental choice or school expansion) to operate effectively.

Finally, more consideration is needed concerning the level at which decisions should lie. One of the more curious aspects of the English system and how it has developed concerns why certain issues are deemed to be local issues, others school-level issues, others national issues. One suspects that much of this has more to do with politics than any principle of justice or effectiveness. Are the children of Kent different to children elsewhere? Politicians are quick to assert the rights of all children when making the latest reform to the accountability system (another key mechanism shaping the current system), but there seems to be little call for children to have the right to attend a school which allows them to mix with children from a range of backgrounds. Yet, the evidence presented here is clear that one result of selective education is that pupils of different backgrounds are more likely to be educated separately. Arguments that the schooling system should be equitable and socially beneficial have been somewhat side-lined in a national debate focused solely on

pursuing excellence. Yet it is possible to demand and achieve both excellence and equity from a schooling system (Condrón 2011; Sahlberg 2011).

Grammar schools invoke strong feelings and are a symbol of wider political issues underpinned by deeply-held values, aspirations and anxieties. All parents aspire for their children to get a good standard of education and grammar schools are conspicuously high-performing schools. However, the superior effectiveness of grammar schools is grossly over-stated by almost all proponents of grammar schools, leading to highly mistaken public assumptions about the benefits of grammar school attendance. Partisan media reporting, nostalgia and a conflation of intake characteristics with school effectiveness all seem to drive support for grammar schools more than any compelling evidence.

The new grammar school annexe in Sevenoaks has reignited a debate about selective education. A balanced and informed discussion about key mechanisms shaping the system such as the accountability regime and selective admissions practices is highly desirable. There is a danger, however, that the discussion will be side-tracked into reliving debates which were looking dated in 1996, let alone 2016. After many decades of deconstructing organisational structures, it is time for the public discussion to shift towards the ‘rules’ which govern the system to ensure that all pupils have a fair access to a broad and high-standard education. The goal should be to create a set of rules through admissions, funding and accountability which are effective and just.

Notes

1. This adjustment was done by regressing the 2015 official school VA score on the proportion of pupils in the cohort who were identified as disadvantaged on the government’s measure and on the proportion with a statement of special educational needs. The residual of this was saved as an adjusted measure. This approach was done to illustrate the impact of making simple adjustments to the VA score. More efficient approaches would make use of pupil-level data, use a greater number of contextual variables, use more complex model specifications and adjust for prior attainment and contextual factors in a single step. Such an analysis would almost certainly lower the estimated grammar school effect.
2. In the 3 years before becoming King Edward VI Sheldon Heath Academy, Sheldon Heath Community Arts College had 3 positive CVA scores (mean value 1014). It appears to have been judged as underperforming on the basis of the percentage of pupils reaching the 5 or more A*-C benchmark and perhaps earlier CVA scores. Since being sponsored (2010-2015), its average VA score (i.e. without contextual variables) is 1015 and its proportion of pupils on FSM status has dropped from about 38% in 2011 to 34% in 2015.
3. The difference between this and the figure in Table 1 is due to the particular measure of disadvantage used. The current measure of disadvantage using in Table 1 includes looked-after status and looks over a larger time period.

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