

Poor Grammar: Entry Into Grammar Schools Disadvantaged Pupils In England

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Schools

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Report Overview

Research into grammar schools admissions reveals that that 2.7% of entrants to grammar schools are entitled to free school meals, whereas 12.7% of entrants come from outside the state sector, largely from independent schools.

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Key Findings

1. There are 164 grammar schools in England (2011-12), educating 161,000 students.<1> About 4% of all Year 7 pupils attend grammar schools nationally, but this rises to more than 25% in selective authorities, particularly Buckinghamshire, Kent, Slough and Trafford. Stand-alone grammar schools often draw large numbers of their pupils from outside their local authority. Two-thirds of pupils at grammar schools in Stoke-on-Trent and Kingston-upon-Thames live in a different authority area.
2. Less than 3% of entrants to grammar schools are entitled to free school meals – an important indicator of social deprivation – whereas almost 13% of entrants come from outside the state sector, largely believed to be fee-paying preparatory schools. The average proportion of pupils entitled to free school meals in selective areas is 18%, and it is higher on average in other areas where grammar schools are located. By contrast, just over 6% of 10-year olds are enrolled in independent fee-paying schools nationally.
3. The research also shows that in local authorities that operate the grammar system, children who are not eligible for free school meals have a much greater chance of attending a grammar school than similarly high achieving children (as measured by their Key Stage 2 test scores) who are eligible for free school meals. For

4. The proportion of pupils from non-White backgrounds going to grammar schools is higher than in other schools. These are largely pupils from Asian and Chinese backgrounds, but grammar schools have lower proportions of Black pupils than other schools.
5. Pupils are less likely to attend a grammar school if they attend primary schools with a high proportion of pupils from deprived backgrounds. Pupils attending a primary school with a large number of high-achieving pupils are also less likely to go to a grammar school, perhaps because they under-estimate their own ability.
6. Grammar school heads say that parents from disadvantaged backgrounds often associate their schools with tradition, middle class values and elitism, creating a social rather than an educational barrier that makes them reluctant to send their child to the local grammar.
7. Grammar school head teachers believe that children from more affluent, middle class families are coached to pass the entrance exam. Head teachers favour free or subsidised test preparation sessions for academically able primary school children from less privileged backgrounds.
8. Improved primary school teacher awareness is seen by some grammar school head teachers as important, with primary teachers supporting high achieving disadvantaged pupils in their applications and appeals.
9. Some grammar school head teachers spoken to by the researchers believe that the current testing system would benefit from being reformed (as is indeed

10. Some grammar schools say that they are already undertaking activities designed to improve outreach and to prepare higher achieving students in primary schools with targeted lessons. They are also working to overcome perceptions that they are 'posh' or 'elitist'.

Recommendations

1. Ensure the testing system does not disadvantage pupils from low and middle income backgrounds.

Grammar schools should carefully assess their testing system to ensure that the 11+ tests they use for selection do not act as a barrier for high achieving students from some social or ethnic communities. Some grammar schools and local authorities are already trying to develop tests which are regularly changed, less susceptible to coaching, intelligence-based and not culturally biased

2. Provide a minimum ten hours test preparation for all pupils to provide a level playing field.

So long as those who can afford private tutors are paying to ensure their children do well in grammar school tests, it is vital that there is a level playing field for all applicants. There should be a minimum of ten hours test preparation support provided on a free or subsidised basis to all potential grammar school applicants to help level the playing field.

Grammar schools should improve their outreach work, providing support and encouragement to children from low and middle income households who have the ability to benefit from their education. This should include providing assurances on access to transport and other costs, and access to test preparation sessions. Grammar schools should actively encourage parents of Pupil Premium pupils whose pupils are likely to pass the 11+ to apply. Grammar schools should do more to work with local media to dispel the view that some parents may hold of them as elitist and encourage successful students from low or middle income backgrounds to act as ambassadors within their communities.

4. Schools should consider the merits of powers available in the admissions code to attract high achieving students who are entitled to the Pupil Premium.

The new school admissions code now allows academies – and most grammar schools are academies – to give preference to pupils eligible for the Pupil Premium. Where they have a free school meals intake significantly below average, grammar schools could therefore consider giving preference to students from low or middle income households who reach a minimum threshold in the admission test. Some grammar schools are already seeking to allow priority to be given to ‘bright’ pupils applying for admission who are in receipt of the Pupil Premium.

5. Primary schools could do more to encourage their high achieving children to apply to grammar schools in selective areas, and develop partnerships with grammar schools.

misconceptions about the process. Grammar schools could improve their existing links – some of which are good – with primary schools, helping provide courses for high achieving students, especially those entitled to the Pupil Premium, so that stronger links are built.

6. Build new partnerships with non-selective schools to support their high achieving students

Further partnerships between grammar schools and comprehensives or secondary moderns in their areas could be developed to ensure that high achieving students from low and middle income backgrounds have access to good local teachers in their areas.

7. The Sutton Trust will also look at ways that we can support innovation in improved testing, test preparation, outreach, admissions and collaboration.

We will also commission independent analysis of the impact of any such programmes to create an evidence base to enhance fair access to grammar schools.

Related Research

Sutton Trust Cabinet Analysis 2026 (Andy Burnham)

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