

UK government pledge to expand grammar schools signals escalation of selective education

Robert Stevens
13 September 2016

Conservative Education Secretary Justine Greening yesterday announced the government's plans to reintroduce grammar schools in England.

This followed a speech Friday by Prime Minister Theresa May, her first focussing on domestic policy. This outlined plans to allow all schools in England, including existing state comprehensives and academies, the right to apply to select pupils by ability. Alongside this, the remaining grammar schools will be allowed to expand.

May's policy overturns that of her predecessor, David Cameron, and that of the 1997-2010 Labour government, which imposed a statutory ban on the expansion of grammar schools in 1998.

Some £50 million is to be allocated to fund expansion. Within days of May's speech, five councils have already drawn up plans to open new grammar schools.

Grammar schools were first introduced following the 1944 Education Act. At that time children sat exams at 11 years of age (the 11 plus) that creamed off the top achievers for grammar schools while the majority of pupils attended secondary moderns. At their height in 1964, 1,300 grammar schools educated a quarter of all pupils.

During the 1960s and 70s, with the advent of the comprehensive state school system, the majority of grammar schools closed. By 1988, no grammars were left in Wales and by 2014, just 163 remained in England (mainly in counties without major urban locations).

The attack on comprehensive education has been proceeding apace, so that the majority of secondary schools are now academies and free schools (state-funded but privately run). But the latest announcement is a decisive shift to selection.

May's grammar school policy is a direct pitch to a section of the middle class—dressed up with claims of a

commitment to a "meritocratic society." She stated that present education policy does not benefit those "who can't afford to move house or pay for a private education," with government, "saying to parents who want a selective education for their child that we won't let them have it."

The wealthiest social layers in Britain send their children to fee-paying "public schools" (private schools, also known as independent schools). However, these 242 schools, which charge fees at an average £23,000 per annum, educate only seven percent of the total number of schoolchildren in England. These schools are well out of the financial reach for large sections of the middle class. May noted in her speech, "Between 2010 and 2015 their fees rose four times faster than average earnings growth, while the percentage of their pupils who come from overseas has gone up by 33 percent since 2008."

"I want to relax the restrictions that stop selective schools from expanding, that deny parents the right to have a new selective school opened where they want one, and that stop existing non-selective schools to become selective in the right circumstances and where there is demand," she said.

After the vote to leave the European Union in June's referendum, "Everything we do will be driven, not by the interests of the privileged few", she claimed. "Not by those with the loudest voices, the special interests, the greatest wealth or the access to influence."

Her speech referenced eight times the struggles and hardship facing the "working class", "who made real sacrifices after the financial crash in 2008, though they were in no way responsible... I want Britain to be the world's great meritocracy – a country where everyone has a fair chance to go as far as their talent and their hard work will allow."

May's cynicism is boundless. A right-wing Thatcherite, she portrays the expansion of selective schools as a means to enhance social mobility—able to take “a proportion of pupils from lower income households, so that selective education is not reserved for those with the means to move into a catchment area or pay for tuition to pass the test.”

In reality this ideologically driven offensive will only reinforce class divisions and social inequality. The claim that grammar schools enable social mobility is a myth. Thanks to their greater opportunities—a more stable home environment, access to the arts, a culture of academic attainment, ability to pay tuition—selection overwhelmingly benefits students from better off families.

It is for this reason that streaming by attainment in the state sector has been the policy of successive governments over the past two decades. By 2011, research published by the Institute of Education has revealed that one in six children is allocated a stream by the age of seven.

There is overwhelming evidence proving that grammar schools from their inception have primarily benefited the more socially privileged layers. Researchers from the University of Bristol, the University of Bath and the Institute of Education, University of London, found that those who failed to pass the 11-plus to enter grammar schools were left at an “immediate disadvantage” in terms of future earnings. Grammars lead to a widening of the income gap between rich and poor.

The survey, based on the average pay of the top and bottom 10 percent of the workforce born between 1961 and 1983, found that in areas with a grammar school system, top earners are likely to earn £16.41 an hour more than those on the lowest incomes (around £30,000 a year based on a 35-hour week). In areas where the education system was fully comprehensive, the salary gap was £12.33—a quarter less.

In a report issued Monday, the Institute for Fiscal Studies noted, “Children from deprived backgrounds are much less likely to attend existing grammar schools than are better off children. Only about three percent of pupils at existing grammar schools are eligible for free school meals (a widely used indicator of poverty in schools), which compares with about 17 percent of pupils in grammar school areas as a whole.”

May announced a series of other reactionary proposals designed to eliminate comprehensive education—including private schools supporting/sponsoring state schools in return for maintaining their charitable status. Universities will be obliged to sponsor a state school or set up a new

Free School. In exchange, they will be encouraged to charge higher tuition fees.

These policies are being introduced under condition in which the vast majority of graduates leave university burdened with tens of thousands of pounds of debt due to sky-high tuition fees.

It is not primarily lack of educational attainment that is having the greatest adverse impact on the young, but a deepening economic crisis. A recent study found that having a degree today in Britain is ever less likely to secure a decent, well-paid job. The Intergenerational Foundation revealed that Britons between ages 15 and 35 are at risk of being the first modern generation to earn less than their predecessors over the course of their working lives. The burden of student debt repayment will wipe out any “graduate premium” for most professions, typically costing in total £282,420 over 30 years.

There are divisions in ruling circles as to the efficacy of expanding the grammar system. One senior minister told the *Sunday Telegraph*: “With such a small majority [of 12 MPs in parliament], now is not the time to be picking a fight like this.”

The *Financial Times* editorialised that grammars were the “wrong solution”, warning, “it is worrying that Mrs May has chosen to begin by reviving such a divisive, totemic policy.”

To avert this danger, the nominally liberal *Guardian* stepped forward to issue words of praise for the government. “England’s school system is at last working pretty well,” it asserted. May was “helping social mobility,” but should not therefore return to a policy “that was abandoned 50 years ago because it had failed.”



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact