



ECARDA

On Grammar Schools

The Ecarda response

There is a difference between a statistical inference and a point of view. Presenting pictures of data and seeking patterns and relationships within and across datasets is a significant part of Ecarda's work. If Grammar schools are such a good idea, then local authorities with most of them should be at the top of the tables. They are not. This is a copy of our letter to the Secretary of State.

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The Rt Hon Justine Greening MP
House of Commons
London
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Dear Secretary of State

Thank you for the invitation in your Green Paper to respond to your proposals to expand the number of grammar schools. In order to keep my response based on evidence rather than sentiment or opinion, I have three points to make on this matter.

The first point, similar to the evidence on the density of academies, is that there is no relationship between local authority-wide attainment and the proportion of grammar schools in those local authorities. The extract below illustrates this point:

I have chosen the attainment measure as the percentage of pupils who attain five or more GCSEs at grades A*-C including English and mathematics

Lincolnshire	(high incidence of grammars)	56.1%	92 nd out of 150 LAs
East Riding	(no grammars)	56.3%	90 th out of 150 LAs
Kent	(high incidence of grammars)	57.3%	75 th out of 150 LAs
North Lincolnshire	(no grammars)	57.6%	69 th out of 150 LAs
York	(no grammars)	63.7%	20 th out of 150 LAs
Tower Hamlets	(no grammars)	64.7%	17 th out of 150 LAs

Notice that Lincolnshire is in the bottom half and Kent is in the middle. Surely, we are not planning for all local authorities to aspire to such modest performance. Notice also, the high ranking Tower Hamlets with its high incidence of disadvantage and zero incidence of grammar schools.

The second point is that in most local authorities there are some comprehensive schools that serve their highest attaining 11 year olds as well as any grammar schools. I have looked at some schools close to where I live.

Again, for the purpose of illustration, taking the cohort of the highest attaining 11-year-old pupils starting at the following schools:

Humberston Academy in N. E. Lincolnshire, 98% attain 5+A*-C with English + Mathematics at age 16
Tollbar Academy in N. E. Lincolnshire, 97% attain 5+A*-C with English + Mathematics at age 16
Kelvin Hall School in Hull, 100% attain 5+A*-C with English + Mathematics at age 16
St Mary's RC School in Hull, 99% attain 5+A*-C with English + Mathematics at age 16

If high attaining 11 year olds are already being well served in comprehensive schools, and they are in some, then the issue is to tackle those schools where this is not the case – and we know who they are by their published data, even if Ofsted is not always picking up on this. “Going Grammar” risks distracting from the urgent business of universal school improvement.

My third point looks at the national profile of attainment at age 11. Let us assume that a pupil reaching the higher standard (old National Curriculum level 5 or higher) would qualify for grammar school entry. By this age, only 13% of disadvantaged pupils are reaching this standard across Reading, Writing and Mathematics compared with 29% of those not disadvantaged. Thus, at the point of selection for secondary school, disadvantaged children are less than half as likely as those not to gain access. They are already disadvantaged. Unless, of course the “pass mark” for disadvantaged 11 year olds is lowered to the point at which equal proportions of disadvantaged and not disadvantaged gain access to the grammar schools. But this begins to be contentious if not nonsensical.

A selection system based on educational attainment AND socio-economic status is contradictory because the two criteria are not mutually exclusive.

What we do know is that by the age of 5 years, based on Foundation Stage 2 assessments, only 58% of the children from the 10% of the most deprived areas reach a good level of development, compared with 77% from the 10% least deprived areas. Close to where I live, teachers and early years' practitioners report disadvantaged children starting their reception year with significant developmental deficits across the range of physical, social, emotional and conceptual aspects. Primary schools work hard to address these inequalities but the 11-year-old gap quoted above shows there is more to be done.

Initiatives to tackle inequalities in education should address matters at source. Grammar schools are to do with post 11-year-old education. By then it is too late. If improvement initiatives are to be introduced, then they should be directed towards the younger in the education system, not the older.

That concludes my three points.

The core business of Ecarda is educational measurement and the drawing of inferences. We call this edometrics. We leave judgement to others. That said, we share a passion and urgency to see all educational provision continue to improve to benefit personal fulfilment, community development, environmental sustainability and economic growth. The purpose of this letter is to connect together pieces of evidence in the public domain to illuminate the debate on grammar schools rather than to prejudge it. All data is from published DfE sources and refers to 2015 outcomes.

Other evidence suggests that systemic improvement initiatives may have more impact on educational outcomes than structural initiatives. A good example was the London Challenge where the DfE enabled successful school leaders and educational experts to share their experience and expertise with those in struggling and underperforming schools. Initially working with secondary schools, the project extended into the primary phase. The effect of this collaborative venture was transformational.

I ask that your decision on whether or not to expand grammar school provision is informed by evidence that relates to improving educational outcomes and consequent life chances for all learners in the English state education system. What may be popular with those who, by virtue of age are no longer at school, may not necessarily be right for those who are.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Peter Lacey". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, sweeping initial "P". A horizontal line is drawn underneath the name.

Peter Lacey
Managing Director
Ecarda Ltd