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Kent sets up Select Committee to Reduce Social Inequality in Grammar School Admission.

Kent County Council has set up a Select Committee of County Councillors to explore social mobility in its Grammar Schools, adopting the principle that children from all backgrounds must have the same opportunities to flourish and succeed within the education system.

A Kent Messenger [report](#) on the first day’s proceedings, notes that: Mr Patrick Leeson, Kent’s Education Director talking about the achievement gap between poorer pupils and those without disadvantage, stated: *“We have seen some movement in narrowing the gap but it is minute. Greater social mobility will only come about if the whole school system does better for children on free school meals.”*

Of the 1,435 children on free school meals who sat the eleven plus in 2014, just 292 - about 8% - passed. The number of children on free school meals attending Kent grammar schools remains low at 3%, compared with 13% in non-selective schools, according to KCC data, although see further detail below.

However, the really good news was that those children from less well-off backgrounds who went to a grammar school did almost as well in their GCSE exams as others, with a gap of just 2% in the 5 A-C* plus maths and English success rate....

The Select Committee will: *“examine whether disadvantaged children and their parents face barriers in accessing Grammar school education, what KCC and partners are already doing to tackle these barriers, and how the County Council with its partners can go further in encouraging more parents from disadvantaged backgrounds to enter their children into the Kent Test. It will also examine the role the Council plays to ensure young people that have the potential for a grammar school education, irrespective of class or background, get the necessary support to access a school that matches their academic ability”.*

The Department for Education supplies figures of the number of pupils at each school, eligible for Free School Meals or who are Looked After (FSM for convenience as Looked after Children are a very small proportion of these), over the past six years who were in the 2015 GCSE cohort.

For grammar schools, according to 2015 data, the fewest are: Tunbridge Wells Girls 1%; Skinners & Tonbridge 2%; Cranbrook, Invicta and Judd, 3%, it being no coincidence that all but one of these are in the more prosperous West Kent area. At the other end of the scale are: Chatham and Clarendon Grammar 14%; Dane Court, Dover Boys and Folkestone Girls on 12%; Borden on 11%; Dover Girls on 10%; and Harvey on 9%, all unsurprisingly being in the East of the county.

By comparison: the lowest Non-selectives school at 6%, are Bennett Memorial and the Duke of Yorks, Kent's only full boarding school; Archbishop's School at 11%; Mascalls at 12%; High Weald at 13%; and St Gregory's Catholic at 15%. Two other Catholic schools, St Anselm's and St Simon Stock come in the top 12, suggesting that selection by faith also plays its part in decreasing social mobility.

I believe it is no coincidence that the two Dover and two Folkestone grammars, who admit additional pupils through their own tests have amongst the highest % of FSM. They have now been joined by Mayfield Grammar School, with Highsted Grammar introducing their own test next year.

KCC has produced for the Committee a mass of data relating to the performance of FSM pupils, both those in primary schools taking and passing the 2015 Kent Test and those in grammar schools achieving 5 A*-Cs including English and maths in the 2015 GCSE assessments. You will find overall figures [here](#), and data by school [here](#).

One statistic that stands out is the low proportion of FSMs in the recent Kent grammar school GCSE cohort, that the KCC figures put at 3.0%, although higher in the youngest year groups. This is less than half the DfE figure using the formula above, that comes out at 6.2%, with a county average of 22.4% and is a warning about statistics. The KCC formula only considers children who CLAIMED free school meals in Year 11, whilst the DfE takes into account all those children on free school meals at some time in previous years back to primary school. Part of the difference will be from those choosing not to claim as they grew older. There is a similar pattern with primary school FSM numbers.

There is also data about the relationship between Level 5 at KS2 and success in the Kent Test. This shows a correlation between the two, with 141 FSM pupils earning Level 5 in Reading, Writing and Maths of whom 55% passed, compared with the 482 who did not reach this level, of whom just 5% passed. We know that of the 9539 children from Kent primary schools who sat the Test, 41% overall passed, but unfortunately, the breakdown of KS2 Level 5 success at the Kent Test is not provided for a comparison. Nevertheless, there is a reasonable assumption that success at Level 5 across the board should show a child is of a grammar school standard, so it begs the question why 45% of the FSM children who reached this standard and took the Kent Test were not judged to be of standard. Would many of these have been successful if they had been offered preparation for the Kent Test, to balance the coaching enjoyed by so many with the resources to pay for it?

Unfortunately, the documentation does not make it clear if '*success in the Kent Test*' includes success in Headteacher Assessment or in Appeal, which account for 6% and appeals which add around 4% of those who qualify for grammar school places to the 21% of the state school population found selective school through the automatic test process. Whatever, making up around a third of the total grammar school population these two processes play an important part and I suspect both mitigate against FSM children who sometimes lack the support or high quality class work to succeed against different criteria. I hope the Committee is able to look at the effect of these important aspects of selection.

Since September 2010, when there were 4475 grammar school places available in Kent, through to allocation for 2015 admission when there were 4930, there has been an increase of 455 places, before many grammar schools expanded further through appeals with an increase of 200 successful appeals over the period to 652.

Amongst the many challenges and questions the Committee will have to face are:

1. Sophisticated presentations and other actions by grammar schools to prospective parents, that inhibit FSM applicants, not necessarily deliberately.
2. The thorny issues of reducing the effect of coaching, or else neutralising it by supporting disadvantaged pupils in preparation for the Kent Test.
3. What changes can or should be made to the Kent grammar school assessment process to minimise the acknowledged disadvantage to FSM children?
4. The current ban on schools preparing children for the Kent Test which disadvantages those whose families do not have the resources, or understanding to engage in coaching.
5. Tackling primary schools that have an anti-grammar school ethos, although this is the part of the system of secondary education through the county.
6. Ensure there is a good understanding in relevant primary schools of the reality that grammar schools are not just for the middle classes.
7. Establishing why children who ought to be in grammar school by virtue of their ability but are not, have missed the opportunity to be appropriately placed
8. With some 700 additional grammar school places added since 2011, has there been a proportionate increase in FSM children, and if not, what can be done further.

I am in no doubt that the work of this Committee will be criticised by two groups: those who are opposed to Kent's Selective system, and those who rightly fear that increasing opportunities for FSM children will decrease their own.

With regard to the first group, it is a given that Kent will retain its selective system for better or worse, and the aim of this committee is surely to reduce inequality within that framework, not further increase the proportion of grammar school places across the county.

With regard to the second, no child has a right to a grammar school place by virtue of parental circumstances, a not uncommon phenomenon.

None of the above is an endorsement or criticism of the Kent selective system, although it is certainly creaking as the tutoring culture becomes more pervasive and more grammar schools place their own interpretation through admission rules, own tests and application of the appeals system.

<http://www.kentadvice.co.uk/peters-blog/news-a-comments/item/875-kent-sets-up-select-committee-to-reduce-social-inequality-in-grammar-school-admission.html>