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Ideas to end selection and make admissions fairer

- the Comprehensive Future conference 2015

The very well attended conference in November heard from a wide range of speakers. Evidence of the damage done by selection was set out. There were ideas on how admissions could be fairer and the conference ended with speakers in support of comprehensive education from across the political spectrum. At the AGM plans were made to redouble our efforts to lobby for an end to selection.

In the first session parents from selective areas talked about how selection affects local children, schools and communities. Alan Gurbutt, a parent from **Lincolnshire**, talked about how selection there segregates those in his community who have plenty from those who have little, destroying vital opportunities.

Joanne Bartley from **Kent**, whose daughter failed the 11-plus, described the huge difference between the outcomes of grammars and secondary moderns in Kent. Ofsted gradings are as expected when grammar schools take only 5% of children on free school meals and secondary moderns 26%. Comprehensive Future Kent is being set up.

Becks Hickman and Katy Simmons outlined the excellent work done by the Local Equal and Excellent campaign in **Bucks** in analysing information about the 11-plus test taken by Bucks children. A new tutor-proof test has proved to be anything but that. Fewer Bucks children and children on free school meals pass the test; more private school pupils pass the test and there are racial differences. For example, the pass rate for Pakistani children is half that for all Bucks pupils.

Maggie Le Mare from **Birmingham** provided more evidence of the huge social divisions caused by selection. Parents are divided, primary friendship groups destroyed and children are ferried all over the place.

Speakers in the second session on admissions were invited to talk about problems in school admissions and possible solutions. Alan Parker, who has extensive experience in education administration and has been a school adjudicator, outlined how the approach based on choice and the market does not work towards school improvement. He wants to see students able to exercise choice at 14 after a common curriculum, a new 14-19 phase, GCSE abolished and no high-stakes testing until 18. Year 7 transfer could guarantee a place for every child at a local school with the option of out-of-catchment places by random allocation. Local schools would reflect the social mix of their area. Removing the ability of popular schools to manipulate their intake would mean competition between schools would take place on a more level playing field.

Jay Harman of the Fair Admissions Campaign, which wants selection on faith to be ended, showed the degree of selection on faith in this country and how it is discriminatory, creates segregation not only religious and ethnic but socio-economic as well. Fiona Millar, Vice Chair of *Comprehensive Future* and education journalist, called for the system to be policed more proactively as the adjudicator can only respond to com-

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New steering group elected

The following were elected at the November AGM: Chair – Melissa Benn; Vice Chair – Fiona Millar; Vice Chair – John Edmonds. Members – Camilla Child, Adrian Elliott, Marlene Ellis, John Fowler, Alan Gurbutt, Richard Harris, Rebecca Hickman, Margaret Majumdar, Nick Kennard, Ian Mearns MP, Michael Pavey, Katy Simmons, Chris Storr, Richy Thompson.

The next meeting is on January 11th from 1.00pm - 3.00pm; please contact by emailing info@comprehensivefuture.org.uk

Sevenoaks – our thoughts on the story so far

The Government's case for the Weald of Kent grammar annex rests almost exclusively on the assertion that Weald of Kent will continue to operate seamlessly as one school on two sites nine miles apart. In order to forestall a legal challenge, the school has produced extremely detailed documentation to show how this plan will work.

Comprehensive Future believes that such a plan is bound to be unwieldy in practice and over the long term. We do not see how it can be implemented effectively across all year groups and subjects by the senior leadership at Weald of Kent. Nor can we see evidence of how the Department for Education will ensure these arrange-

ments continue in the future. We have asked the DfE to make public details of how the school plans to operate as a single entity on a day-to-day basis. So far, this request has not been allowed. We are also challenging a refusal by the school itself to reveal details of the plan via a Freedom of Information request.

Until this is done, there can be no public scrutiny of the DfE claim that this project will indeed be a single school nor proper discussion of how this is likely to be matched by what happens in practice. *Comprehensive Future* has called on the DfE and the school to produce this information swiftly.

More evidence of the need for a review of admissions

On December 10th, the education newspaper *Schools Week* reported that "pupils from chaotic backgrounds face missing out on school places because they have to attend several secondary schools for fair banding tests". The claim was based on Southwark where nine schools require prospective pupils to take their own banding tests, whereas some local authorities run area-wide tests in primary schools.

The Harris Boys' Academy in East Dulwich issued parents a set date and time for the test that could be

changed only in "exceptional emergency circumstances". Harris Academy Bermondsey splits pupils into nine ability bands, while Harris Academy Peckham uses five. St Saviour's and St Olave's uses banding, but also reserves 18 places for girls who score the highest on the school's general ability test.

The Kingsdale Foundation School uses banding after those who have been given a place for scholarship in music or sport. A parent was quoted as saying the admissions process was "fiendishly complex".

Ideas to end selection and make admissions fairer

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plaints. There also needs to be a local forum, encouragement for schools to work to share information about their intakes and an obligation at a local level to try and seek balanced intakes as far as possible. Rebecca Allen, head of Education Datalab, has been researching the one in five school admissions that take place at a non-standard time. Recently the responsibility for in-year admissions has been taken away from local authorities and given to schools. Schools which are their own admission authority can take responsibility for this, a complex situation for parents that can lead to children being out of school for a long time.

The last session heard from several speakers in support of comprehensive education. Natalie Bennett, Green Party leader, spoke in place of Caroline Lucas MP, who was unable to attend. She spoke against the competition that she said threatens comprehensive education and is having serious consequences for teachers, pupils and local authorities. Jonathon Simons of Policy Exchange spoke up for comprehensive education and competition. A system that allows some schools to choose their intakes is not fair competition and should be ended. Admissions, curriculum and governance, he said, should not be bundled together and campaigners should focus on what they can agree upon, i.e. ending selection. Dame Sue John, previously head of Lampton School, was unfortunately ill but sent her notes. Comprehensive education can combine excellence and equity and many London schools are examples of this.

The last but definitely not least of the speakers was Pat McGuckian, head-teacher of St Patrick's High School in County Armagh, Northern Ireland, who campaigns to end the 11-plus there. Listing all the attempts to end selection there which have so far failed, she showed how her own school's results had improved using mixed-ability teaching. The divisions created by the 11-plus are added to religious divisions. She spoke inspiringly of how schools can encourage all pupils to flourish.

The AGM went on to decide that the focus of attention this year should be at both local level, speaking and encouraging local groups, and at national level, lobbying politicians about ending selection.

There is a full report of the conference on the website with all the speakers' contributions in full.

Help please!

- In 2016 CF is concentrating on lobbying Labour members and representatives in the selective areas, as well as Labour MPs nationally, and we would welcome members' ideas or contacts in this area. If you are a member of the Labour Party, why not invite us to your CLP or GC to talk about the issue of selection?
- Do you live in one of the 36 local authorities with grammar schools? Steering group member Becks Hickman has organised an email link up for supporters living in selective areas to share information and ideas. Email Becks on becks_hickman@hotmail.com
- Fund raising for a paid part-time worker to replace Margaret Tulloch is now fully underway. If you can, please make a donation or take out a standing order. Information about how to donate is on the website.
- During 2016 we hope to shift to an email newsletter. If you are willing to have information by email please let us know. We do send letters occasionally though, so if you have moved house could you let us know!

Sad news

We were sorry to hear recently of the deaths of two stalwart supporters of *Comprehensive Future*. Malcolm Horne, who with Margaret Tulloch and David Chaytor set up *Comprehensive Future*, and Michael Sterne, who has been our treasurer for many years. We have sent our sincere condolences to their families.