

# A Tale of Two Counties



Reflections on  
Secondary  
Education 50 years  
after Circular 10/65

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## A Tale of Two Counties

That this House, conscious of the need to raise educational standards at all levels, and regretting that the realisation of this objective is impeded by the separation of children into different types of secondary schools, notes with approval the efforts of local authorities to reorganise secondary education on comprehensive lines which will preserve all that is valuable in grammar school education for those children who now receive it and make it available to more children ...

*Circular 10/66 (1966), School building programmes,*  
Department of Education and Science

It is now half a century since Harold Wilson's Labour government issued its Circular 10/65 requesting education authorities to start 'reorganising' their secondary schools 'along comprehensive lines'. However, with the then Department of Education and Science's (DES) power over education authorities considerably weaker in the 1960s than Government control over state education today, comprehensivisation could not be enforced. The *Guardian* characterised Circular 10/65 as 'an amiably toothless tiger'.<sup>1</sup> A year later, Circular 10/66, designed to put pressure on the waverers, stated that the Minister of Education would only approve funding for new secondary school buildings if they were for the purpose of non-selective education.<sup>2</sup> Most education authorities did not need any further persuasion. They seized the opportunity to dismantle the divisive and unpopular bi-partite system of grammars and secondary moderns, and welcomed comprehensivisation. However, some areas clung on to selective education. Counties such as Buckinghamshire, Kent and Lincolnshire, and some metropolitan boroughs, as in Greater London and the city of Birmingham, retained their grammar schools. Thatcher's 1988 Education Reform Act introduced market forces and competition between schools into state-funded education. The next few years saw the introduction of Ofsted, league tables, open admissions, the valorising of *parental choice*, and the diminishing powers of local education authorities. The further liberalisation of the educational market place, implemented by the 2010 Coalition, brought about an extension of the academy programme and free schools. It was only a short step before those in favour of selective education would find a way to navigate New Labour's 1998 ban on grammar schools. Barely nine months had passed between the approval of England's first-ever grammar school 'extension' and a new Conservative Prime Minister announcing plans for the expansion of grammar schools.

In the context of the freshly re-energised grammar school debate, it would seem timely to examine the impact of Circulars 10/65 and 10/66 on two specific counties, Buckinghamshire and Hampshire. They are interesting today because they responded very differently to Labour's request, all those years ago. What makes a comparison of Buckinghamshire and Hampshire so interesting is that they share a long-standing tradition of Conservative run councils; and, as any league table will testify, both counties score highly on school performance. Where these counties differ is the way in which

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<sup>1</sup> The *Guardian*, 14<sup>th</sup> July 1965

<sup>2</sup> Full text of Circulars 10/65 and 10/66 are available on Derek Gillard's site, *Education in England*  
<http://www.educationengland.org.uk/history/index.html>

they responded to Circulars 10/65. Although Hampshire embraced comprehensivisation, Buckinghamshire retained its 13 grammar schools.

Arguments for and against the current Government's expansion of grammars schools have been well-rehearsed, and particularly recently. There is no need to re-visit them all here. The purpose of this piece is rather to give an insight into how two Tory counties responded to Circular 10/65, in particular, fifty years ago, and how their schools are performing today. I have based my account on a series of interviews with parents and educators, some of whom had a role to play when Circulars 10/65 and 10/66 were issued, as they describe their experiences of Buckinghamshire and Hampshire's education systems. I also spoke to the Leader of Hampshire County Council and a member of Buckinghamshire County Council's Education and Children's Services Committee. The stories I have been told offer a unique insight into the emotional and practical experiences of two widely different education systems. The reader may compare for themselves the dubious ease with which Buckinghamshire rejected comprehensivisation and chose to retain selective education, and the passion and commitment to the comprehensive ethos which convinced Hampshire to convert all its schools.

### **The current context – a new Grammar School Debate**

In some corners of South East England, the current grammar school debate has been bubbling along for some time. When former Education Secretary, Nicky Morgan, agreed to the logistically and geographically impossible 'expansion' of Tonbridge Grammar to a site some 10 miles away, in Sevenoaks, other areas saw an opportunity. Campaigners fighting plans for an extension/satellite/annexe (call it what you like) of Bucks' grammar, Sir William Borlase, in Theresa May's own constituency, Maidenhead, felt a new urgency. Jo Smith, of Maidenhead campaign group, *Excellent Education for Everyone* (EE4E), explained that there was little parental demand for a grammar school in Maidenhead. She pointed to a poll conducted by a local newspaper to which 58% of respondents said they were against the idea. EE4E had been hopeful that the Royal Borough of Windsor and Maidenhead's £20,000 feasibility study into a grammar might be shelved. However, if Government plans become a reality, it is quite possible that Maidenhead's very own grammar school could be built without any need for a feasibility study to sell it to the wider public.

It is worth mentioning here that Theresa May's Oxford grammar, Holton Park Girls' Grammar School, amalgamated with Shotover Secondary Modern, in 1971, to become a successful comprehensive, Wheatley Park School. A quick calculation of dates suggests Mrs May was approaching her 15<sup>th</sup> birthday when the amalgamation occurred. Technically, therefore, the majority of the Prime Minister's education was at a comprehensive school. It seems likely that Mrs May was taught in Wheatley Park's 'top' or 'grammar' stream. Nonetheless, just as with many comprehensives today, Mrs May will have enjoyed all the privileges of being a top set girl, in a school that was becoming increasingly more inclusive and representative of her local community. In an interview with the TES, Wheatley Park's current Head, Kate Curtis, said she was

astonished that Theresa May, having made some bold and optimistic statements about privilege, is considering selection of children at age 11 as a way of promoting social mobility.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Ward, H. 'Don't bring back grammar schools, says headteacher of Theresa May's alma mater', TES, 15.08.16

Although Justine Greening, our first, truly, comprehensive-educated education minister, declared herself initially 'open minded' about grammar schools, she has increasingly reproduced erroneous arguments in their favour. Among them, the baffling suggestion that increasing the numbers of grammar schools would provide greater parental choice. It is worth repeating that in a selective system, only schools do the choosing. No-one *chooses* a grammar school, *it chooses you*. Greening has also made some dubious promises that things could be juggled to allow more pupil premium places at grammar schools. She seems ignorant of all the evidence demonstrating that testing and selection of children at 11 is intrinsically unfair and unnecessarily traumatic. Token quotas to allow more poor children does nothing to remedy this. Indeed, Ms Greening's 'open mindedness' about grammar schools lay heavy in the air as news of 2016's GCSE figures, based on numbers of pupils who obtained five or more A\*-C grades, were lower than last year. Apparently, the answer to the wholly predictable and politically engineered drop in GCSEs results, (the introduction of new curricula and mark schemes; the cutting back on coursework, and an increase in written exams) has been to turn up the heat on schools and kids: more selection, stiffer exams, compulsory re-sits, and a greater focus on traditional academic subjects. For some, grammar schools are exactly the type of school to deliver this punitive approach to education. Dickens' 'Hard Times' illustrated magnificently the cruelty of an education system devoid of nurture and support, and which focuses entirely on rote learning and testing. Dickens' infamous schoolmaster, Mr Gradgrind, opens the novel with these words:

Now what I want is, Facts. Teach these boys and girls nothing but Facts. Facts alone are wanted in life. Plant nothing else, and root out everything else. You can only form the minds of reasoning animals upon Facts: nothing else will ever be of any service to them. This is the principle on which I bring up my own children, and this is the principle on which I bring up these children.

Dickens meant his 'Hard Times' as satire - have we forgotten this?

### **Historical arguments**

Perhaps Dickens seems an unfair and exaggerated example when writing about moves afoot in present day schooling. However, we do seem hell bent on repeating, rather than learning from, mistakes in our educational history. You only have to flip through academic papers, books and archival material of the 1950s and 1960s - indeed ask anyone who went to school before the introduction of comprehensives - to have a sum of all the arguments against selection by 11+.

For anyone from Mars, the arguments against testing children at 11 are, in brief: you cannot measure 'intelligence' at 11 (or any age), children develop at different rates, and a less privileged socio-economic background and lack of parental education, all impact negatively on children's learning, and therefore their chances in any test situation. Importantly, also, the 11+ has been shown to be unfair to those children whose first language is not English, and who are otherwise academically able. There are now well-known, convincingly-argued, reasons for protesting against the unfairness of testing children at 11. More importantly still has been conclusive academic research which explodes the myth that grammar schools serve as engines of social mobility for working class children. (see, for example, Boliver and Swift's 2011 longitudinal study of

schoolchildren born in 1958).<sup>4</sup> Comprehensive schools are in a far better position to flash the social mobility card. As Fiona Millar has pointed out, at the height of the so-called 'golden age' of grammar schools, only 9% of all school pupils left school with 5 'O' levels. Nowadays, latest figures show that just under 60% of all state school pupils attain five or more A\*-C grades at GCSE. Further, Government figures show that only 5% of all state educated pupils attend England's 163 grammar schools. Comprehensive schools, not grammars, are therefore largely responsible for that figure of 60%.

For anyone in need of facts but preferring something more accessible than academic papers, Buckinghamshire's campaign group, *Local Equal Excellent* (LEE) has produced an impressive, and thoroughly readable, report, 'Who benefits? Buckinghamshire's 11+ exam and outcomes for children' which debunks a newer 11+ myth – that of Buckinghamshire's 'tutor-proof' test, introduced in 2013.<sup>5</sup> LEE comprises a small but powerful group of campaigners, made up of Bucks parents and residents:

We argue that, basically, the 11+ is an unfair exam and that if it's unfair, it should be abandoned.

(Derek Berry, *Local Equal Excellent*)

More positively, LEE 'care about creating a fair education system in Bucks' (Rebecca Hickman, LEE). The group includes some formidable amateur statisticians, Derek Berry, Rebecca Hickman and Neal Skipper, who have done a lot of work analysing figures for pupils sitting Buckinghamshire's new 11+ over a two-year period. As a father and grandfather with first hand knowledge of grammar schools in High Wycombe, Derek Berry's own interest in the unfairness that riddles Buckinghamshire's education system preceded his involvement with LEE:

Many, many years ago, I became really interested in the 11+ pass rates in High Wycombe. I thought it was very peculiar that you could almost divide a line through High Wycombe and say, the kids on this side don't go to grammar schools and the kids on that side, do. Basically, it wasn't fair... you could tell that there was a strong bias, why would certain schools get children through the 11+, and why would certain schools not? Obviously, it was economic ...

(Derek Berry, *Local Equal Excellent*)

Derek admits that as a one-man band, his campaigning was not taken seriously until he met up with fellow Bucks residents, Rebecca Hickman and Katy Simmons, and campaigning took on a more organised and professional approach. Together, they formed *Local Equal Excellent*, in 2014. Much of LEE's work has focused on original claims made by Durham University's Centre for Evaluation and Monitoring's (CEM), that their 11+ tested 'natural ability and achievement without the need for excessive preparation'. LEE's work included protracted and often dispiriting Freedom of Information requests from CEM and the Department of Education. Nonetheless, eventually, their findings meant the group were in a good position to challenge CEM's claims for their 'tutor-proof' 11+. It seems

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<sup>4</sup> Boliver, V and Sift, A., (2011), 'Do comprehensive schools reduce social mobility?', *The British Journal of Sociology*, Volume 62:1; See also Social historian, Professor Selina Todd's, 2012 Caroline Benn Memorial lecture, 'The Golden Age of the Grammar School', available online, which presents magnificently the arguments which 'explode the myth' that grammar schools ever promoted social mobility.  
[https://sosedassoc.files.wordpress.com/2014/09/cbml\\_2014.pdf](https://sosedassoc.files.wordpress.com/2014/09/cbml_2014.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> <https://en-gb.facebook.com/LocalEqualExcellent/>

highly likely that LEE's figures, which reveal vast differences in the success rates of children from different socio-economic groups, and which were sent to CEM, have been instrumental in CEM's decision to withdraw some of the claims they made for their 11+.

Compiled by Rebecca Hickman, the figures in 'Who Benefits?' point conclusively to the huge variance in pass rates amongst groups of children from different socio-economic backgrounds, and the 'considerable and growing advantage of the 11+ test to children from better-off backgrounds' (p.5). The percentage of privately educated pupils who pass the 11+ is consistently more than double that of state educated pupils, and the gap is widening. LEE's figures also show that a disproportionately low number of children on free school meals and children with English as a second language pass the Bucks 11+. There were outcries in the local and national media when the figures were released, and especially over LEE's figures which showed the racial bias of the new 11+, with the pass rate for Pakistani children, the largest ethnic minority group in Buckinghamshire, easily half that of their white British peers. More significantly, Pakistani primary children whose KS2 results classified them as 'high attainers' were less likely to pass the Bucks 11+ than white British 'high attainers'.<sup>6</sup> Even without LEE's impressive work, the bias for the 11+ is clear. A scan of the government's own school performance figures for Buckinghamshire reveals a shockingly tiny percentage of disadvantaged children attending the county's grammar schools. Figures for 2015 show that numbers ranged from 10 in a grammar school of 1,212 pupils, to just *one* in a grammar school of 1,065 pupils. It is a wonder any self-respecting middle class parent would be complicit in a testing system so stacked against disadvantaged children.

### **'It's like a nuclear arms race' – Bucks and its tutor industry**

Adam, a newly arrived parent in Buckinghamshire, described the horror of discovering what getting into a Buckinghamshire secondary school entailed.<sup>7</sup> Adam's initiation was during a long drive between business meetings, when a colleague outlined what he and his wife, Emma, would have to do if they wanted to ensure that their academically able daughter got into one of Bucks' 'better' schools. Adam said he could not believe what he was hearing. In that car journey, he was introduced to the competitive culture of tutoring, the buying of practice papers, and the ways in which a parent might successfully convert a borderline pass into a grammar school place through appeal. Adam explained that if your child passes, the next round of the competition entails a race to get your first choice grammar school. 'It's horrible!' he told me, with real alarm in his voice:

But it was too late! We'd bought a house in Bucks... had we but known....I mean it would have been just as easy for us, for our work, to have chosen to live in Oxfordshire. I just couldn't believe what was I was hearing, what was expected...

Talking to Buckinghamshire parents reveals that what is *expected*, or assumed, is that every middle class child will be tutored for the 11+. Furthermore, that a really caring parent will ensure their child

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<sup>6</sup> My information for LEE's findings on the racial bias of the Buckinghamshire 11+ were supplied by LEE, and have also been cited by Fiona Millar, The Guardian (12.09.16) <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2016/sep/12/tutor-11plus-test-grammar-schools-disadvantaged-pupils>, Cahal Milmo, I News, (12.06.16) <https://inews.co.uk/essentials/news/education/ethnic-minority-children-missing-grammar-school-places-rationally-biased-11-plus/> and Shruti Sheth Trivedi, Bucks Free Press (17.06.16) [http://www.bucksfreepress.co.uk/news/14561645.11 Plus\\_exam\\_accused\\_of\\_being\\_racially\\_biased/?ref=mrb&lp=11](http://www.bucksfreepress.co.uk/news/14561645.11 Plus_exam_accused_of_being_racially_biased/?ref=mrb&lp=11)

<sup>7</sup> All parents' names have been changed.

attends one of the best tutors, or tutor centres. Competition for certain tutors and centres is so stiff that there are waiting lists, and there exists a covert league table for tutors, as well as for Buckinghamshire's schools.

Everybody we know paid for tuition, except us, and in our daughter's class, everybody who passed was tutored. There were three who were tutored who didn't pass, and there was our daughter who wasn't tutored and passed. Our daughter's best friend, and she's equally bright, was tutored for a good year before she sat the test. But she was going to pass anyway, quite frankly. On average, I'd say kids get tutored for a year before they take the test. But we know some kids in our son's year who are being tutored now, and they aren't sitting the test for another two years.

(Emma, Buckinghamshire parent)

It is common practice for middle class Bucks children to spend the whole of the summer holidays in the run-up to their 11+, swotting for the test. While every other child in the country is messing about enjoying the freedom of a well-deserved break from school, Buckinghamshire becomes a hive of industry focused on 11+ preparation. Some parents pay for intensive summer courses at specialised tutor centres, while others book regular slots with a preferred tutor. Only a handful of the very brave go it alone, creating kitchen classrooms with an allocated amount of time set aside every day for swotting and practice papers. Adam pinpoints the pressure everybody feels:

That's what it's like here, the whole 11+ process ... it's like a nuclear arms race, *everybody* gets their kids tutored. And when you ask them why, they say *everybody else is doing it. I'm only doing it to level the playing field.*

(Adam, Buckinghamshire parent)

After much debate, Adam and Emma, decided that their daughter would sit the 11+ but they would have nothing to do with tutoring. Adam felt this was a necessary compromise since he was uncomfortable with 'buying advantage'. However, as Adam ruefully pointed out, he was not exposed to most of the background noise to which Emma was subjected when she collected their two children from school.

Buckinghamshire goes bonkers over the 11+ ... people fall out over the school gate over it, it's just ridiculous. But then again, what happens is you begin to doubt your own decision... at the end of the summer holidays, we did do some familiarisation papers with our daughter, just the books you can buy from W H Smith. We went through some of those with her ... but when you hear what everyone's been doing, all summer, you start to doubt ... what if she doesn't pass? What if we haven't done enough? And what if she doesn't pass and we failed her by not tutoring her?... And it gets to you.

(Emma, Buckinghamshire parent)

Adam, a busy NHS hospital consultant in highly pressurised area of medicine is, nonetheless, as conversant with the whole process of taking the 11+ in Bucks as his wife, Emma, an NHS trainer. It seems that when a child takes the 11+ in Bucks, it becomes a whole-family project. Adam describes one father he knows,

who drives his daughter every Thursday evening to a tutor who lives in another village. I mean, we're talking a good 25 minute journey, after a hard day at school, and then back again ... he tells me *O, she loves it!* Well, fair enough, maybe she does, but...

When Adam and Emma's daughter passed the 11+ without tutoring, Adam's relief was enormous: 'I feel like we gambled and it paid off'. Had his daughter failed the 11+, Adam admits he would have felt 'really guilty' that he had not paid for the tutoring many believe their child needs if they are to have an *equal chance*. With a sharp intake of breath, Adam confessed that he is less confident about letting his son sit the test without tutoring. Emma was resolute: 'For boys, especially,' she said, 'a test like the 11+ is something they have to be prepared for, they need the practice, to familiarise themselves with the layout of the papers'.

Debbie also describes the shock of first discovering the truth of Buckinghamshire's unique education system where every state-educated child, unless a parent formally withdraws them, is entered for the 11+:

I was like, what do you mean there's an 11+? I couldn't believe it! I went to a great comp and simply couldn't believe what went on Bucks ... I was *horrified* that I was going to have to become part of this culture, with everyone tutoring their child. But I realised pretty quickly that I needed to *level the playing field*, if my daughters were to be in with a chance. I just had to join the whole process.

Debbie explained further,

Very, very few people in Bucks don't tutor. You feel as a parent under a lot of pressure and there's a real fear that if your child doesn't pass the 11+, they'll end up (*pause*) ...well, you know, at one of the secondary moderns.

Debbie's older daughter was tutored and passed the 11+. However, things were less straight forward with her second daughter. Firstly, it was clear to Debbie how unhappy intensive professional tutoring was making her younger daughter.

So, I decided I'd do it. But it wasn't easy, and then she just missed it...she only just failed. We think it might have been better if she *had* been tutored, now, to be honest. She was so upset when she opened the envelope ....and then girls that used to be her friends, who'd passed, started to form their own group in the playground. They lost interest in her. It was awful...there were two distinct groups in the playground: the kids who'd passed and the ones who'd failed.... and only 20 out of the 60 children who took the test passed it.

(Debbie, Buckinghamshire parent)

### **Take a good look – this is where you'll be going if you don't pass**

Debbie describes the social stigma of secondary moderns in Buckinghamshire, with people avoiding the term and incorrectly referring to them as comprehensives. She says even her Head Teacher told her not to use the words 'secondary modern' in the strap line for some publicity she was creating for the school. In another incident, Debbie overheard a mother telling her son during a school open day:

Take a good look – this is where you'll be going if you don't pass.



Derek Berry of LEE confirms that for some Buckinghamshire parents, it would be 'a social shame to send your child to a secondary modern school'. Hampshire Head, Matthew Leeming, observes:

Some of the people who want grammar schools, I'm sorry but I believe this to be true, they want them so that their children don't have to mix with the great unwashed.

(Matthew Leeming, Head of Hampshire Comprehensive)

Matthew adds that such parents never imagine their children might not be among the *chosen few*. Indeed, as Derek Berry, and others, also point out, the solution for middle class parents whose children fail the 11+ is simply to pay for a private education. Derek's own analysis of statistics for Bucks secondary shows their unfairness:

First of all it's the attainment gap between free school meal children and all other, non free school meal kids. It's either 40%, 42%, 39% ... I think the lowest it's ever been is 37%, but that was a few years ago. But what's really interesting, is that the gap for middle and low attainers in Bucks, compared to areas with comprehensive schools, is very poor indeed. I've calculated that in 2015, something like 250 more children in Buckinghamshire *would* have got five GCSEs A\*-C, including Maths and English, if they had gone to a comprehensive. And what we also have, as an indirect consequence of a selective system, is the number of failing secondary modern schools in the county. In the last year that a full report was carried out, 13 out of 23 secondary moderns were rated as being below 'Good'. This year, the number is 11. Now, that means 10,000 children going to a secondary school in Buckinghamshire that is rated 'requires improvement'.

(Derek Berry, *Local Equal Excellent*)

Derek's alarm over such figures extends to criticism of Buckinghamshire MP, Dominic Grieve, who supports grammar schools and to whom Derek has written to point out:

A child living in Beaconsfield, a town in his *own constituency*, who fails the 11+, has *no chance* of going to a school rated as 'Good'. All three secondary moderns in Beaconsfield have been rated 'requires improvement'. They are all in his constituency, and yet he is capable of saying the expansion of grammar schools is a good policy because it allows every child to go to a good school!

As a mother with a daughter in a grammar and another in a secondary modern, Debbie has seen first hand the hard work secondary moderns do with their diverse intake. She, like Derek, sees secondary moderns as the *victims* of selective education system. Like Derek also, she believes it is unfair to blame secondary moderns for failing in a system where the odds are stacked against them:

There's an assumption that these children all end up in rubbish schools if they fail, well, actually, they don't! Some of these secondary moderns do an incredible job. For a start, the children's confidence has got to be boosted back up having gone through the horrible process of the whole 11+ ...

(Debbie, Buckinghamshire parent)

Buckinghamshire's only Labour Councillor, Robin Stuchbury, who also sits on the Education and Children's Services Committee, feels Buckinghamshire's secondary moderns do a 'fantastic' job, given the circumstances of the county's selective system:

The *real* success story of Buckinghamshire's education system is not the results for the grammar schools but what all the *other* schools in the county manage to get when all the most academically able kids have been taken out. But here in Buckinghamshire, if you speak out against grammar schools, in any way whatsoever, you're accused of being against 'excellence'.

Secondary moderns face an ongoing, uphill struggle to compete in selective counties. Grammar schools tend to attract more experienced, and better qualified, teachers. For example, it is far more common for secondary modern teachers to teach a subject for which they do not have a first degree. In addition, and as Derek's own figures confirm, lower and middle attaining children in secondary moderns fare much worse than their peers in comprehensive schools. Under such difficult circumstances, the Head of a Buckinghamshire secondary moderns rated 'Good' by Ofsted, describes the pride he takes in his pupils' achievements. His school offers a diverse range of subjects, and the mix of traditional and non-traditional subjects means children are able to choose subjects that play to their individual strengths. It is with some trepidation that he is awaiting the results of the Department of Education's new performance measure, Progress 8.<sup>8</sup> He points to the academic weighting towards more 'traditional', (academic), subjects that pupils study for the EBacc, on which Progress 8 is assessed. There is little opportunity for popular vocational subjects, or drama or music. Further, the emphasis on *value added* in the Ebacc subjects, means Progress 8 is likely to impact unfairly on children in secondary moderns who study a spread of traditional and modern subjects.

Nicola, who works as a teaching assistant in one of Buckinghamshire's secondary moderns, also points out that any failings of secondary modern schools are the fault of a selective system which segregates children. She knows first-hand the challenges that her secondary modern faces, and points out that grammar schools 'don't face *any* of the difficulties' that secondary moderns have:

New children come in to our school on a weekly basis, from overseas. For example, they might be from newly immigrant or refugee families, asylum seekers ... children like that are dropping into classes all the time. Of course, grammar schools don't have that issue at all. Some of these children come in at Year 9, without speaking a word of English. It's just completely different .... and these kids show real progress with us.

### **Middle class advantage (it's not all about money)**

When Adam confessed to feeling squeamish about the fact that middle class parents can 'buy advantage' in Buckinghamshire's education system, he was echoing sentiments expressed by Professor Frank Furedi, writing for the TES. In his article, Furedi warns of the very different character of present day grammars, arguing that any proposed expansion of the grammar school system:

would simply reward those pupils whose parents have the resources to finance private tutoring and penalise those able children whose families do not have the cash for this purpose.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> As from September 2016, school performance will be assessed on the 'headline indicator' of a value added score calculated on a pupil's average attainment in their best 8 subjects. Students will have to study eight, key GCSE subjects (including Maths, English and six others from two separate 'baskets' of choices), to make up the EBacc.

<sup>9</sup> Furedi F, 'The meritocratic ethos associated with grammar schools in the 1960s is today subverted by the hard cash of tutoring' TES 26.08.16

Derek Berry says tutoring is being carried out on an 'industrial scale' in Buckinghamshire. In addition, as LEE figures demonstrate, the number of privately educated children taking up grammar school places has been increasing ever since Buckinghamshire introduced its 'tutor-proof' 11+. Unlike, state primary schools, who are not permitted to run more than one practice test for their pupils, there are no restrictions on the amount of preparation private schools may carry out for the 11+. In 2016, pass rates were the highest ever for privately educated children. Of those who took the 11+, 60% passed. This compares with a pass rate of only 22% for the much larger number of state school children who took the test. Derek explains that an analysis of 11+ pass rates shows a 'massive bias in favour of children from more prosperous families', which is reflected in the significantly higher number of passes among children from more affluent parts of Buckinghamshire every year.

The inconsistencies that underpin the arguments of those who support Buckinghamshire's selective system, and its intrinsic unfairness, are things about which Councillor Robin Sutchbury, feels strongly:

If people really believe selection is the best way to provide the best education for every child, and that it improves attainment chances, then you shouldn't have a system in place which is rigged against our most disadvantaged kids.

Jenny, a primary school teacher and former tutor for the 11+, confesses she has only ever tutored middle class children. Some of parents she came across as a tutor were privately educated and clearly very affluent. Jenny was not alone in suspecting that some parents view grammar schools as providing a 'state-funded private education' for their children. In addition to having the spare income to pay for tutoring, she points out that middle class parents know the necessary strategies if their child is a borderline fail, or if they have 'a bad test'. She describes how wily middle class parents prepare for every eventuality. Jenny explains that it is not uncommon for parents to log every single test result and school report of a child's primary school years, in case of an appeal.

If a pupil who was expected to pass, fails, parents can appeal. But they need to know what to do and the Head of the child's primary has to support the appeal. So parents often will have all this evidence ready to submit – you know, a record of the pupil's attainments with scores for yearly tests, and that sort of thing. Of course, it's only going to be middle class parents who are that dedicated, and who know how to go about it.

(Jenny, primary school teacher and former tutor for the 11+)

Jenny also questioned the fairness of the Buckinghamshire's new 'tutor proof' test, pointing out that the 11+ is now held two weeks after state primary schools start their autumn term. She explained that the move to an earlier date was meant to reduce levels of anxiety in primary schools. However, some private prep schools, whose marketing, like tutor centres, rest on their ability to get pupils through the 11+, have responded to this by starting the new school year earlier than state schools, in order to have time to better prepare their pupils. Bucks mother Emma confirmed this with a story about a local prep school which not only opens a week earlier than state primary schools but which was also open in the summer holidays, with the specific intention of coaching pupils for the 11+.

Jenny declared, 'I, myself, don't agree with tutoring. In a perfect world, I wouldn't agree with it but I've bought into it'. Jenny has enrolled one of her children with one of Bucks leading 11+ tutors defending herself by saying 'you go with what works for your child'. A recent article in The Guardian,

focused on children describing their experiences of the 11+.<sup>10</sup> What 'works' for these children is unclear. Far easier to detect from their words is what 'works' for parents. Even allowing for some inevitable editing, these children's comments about what it means to gain a place at a grammar school, and all that it implies for their future, are suspiciously adult. To the children's credit, the piece also includes comments where, with touching honesty, some describe the test as 'stressful', and some talk about the unfairness of a test which leads to the breaking up of primary school friendships. One child puzzles over the fact that his friend failed the 11+ when 'he was cleverer than me at primary school, and he's in top sets in his secondary school'. The Guardian article is important, if for no other reason than it is the only place in the 2016 summer furore over grammar school where *children*, not parents, talk about their experiences of the 11+.

### **What kind of test is this?**

Jenny's experience as an 11+ tutor means she has more insight than most into the kind of skills being tested by Bucks' new 'tutor-proof' 11+. She explained that while the greater emphasis on Maths suggests that certain groups of children, and quite possibly boys, are likely to benefit, she believes the English grammar questions are unfair on children for whom English is a second language. In particular, she cited skills necessary for the 'cloze' questions, for which pupils select the appropriate word in the context of a sentence, such as 'their', 'there' and 'they're'. Similar arguments would apply to the cultural references in the English comprehension, or in some of the Maths problems. For example, it is less likely that disadvantaged children would be familiar with the words 'embroidery', 'gorse' or 'prow', or that their parents ever measured a 'patio'. While these are small examples, a reading of the text choices on the one practice paper available on CEM's website does not inspire confidence. A section from a Vietnamese legend feels like a tokenistic gesture towards inclusivity and balance. The second text is taken from Frances Hodgson Burnett's 1910 'The Secret Garden', which points to certain assumptions about what the average 11 year old might read. Certainly, it is a text with which middle class children are far more likely to be familiar. Jenny questioned the fairness of any test which includes whole sections which are likely to put certain groups of children at a disadvantage. She felt that questions centred on pattern recognition might be a fairer way to assess aptitude, and pointed out also that pattern recognition is a skill for which it would be far harder to tutor. However, most interviewed shared Adam's view when he said,

I really don't believe you could do a tutor-proof test. You can *bet* parents would find a way round it.

Another problem with Buckinghamshire's 11+ system is that it can be sat by children who live outside the county. In 2016, 46% of the 1,682 out of county children who sat the test, passed. An FOI request for numbers of year 11 pupils attending Buckinghamshire state schools living outside the county suggest a rise in pupil numbers over the last four years. Current figures show that around 30% of all Buckinghamshire's year 11 pupils come from outside the county and the greater majority are concentrated in the county's grammar schools. In addition to pupils travelling daily from neighbouring non-selective counties such as Berkshire, Bedfordshire and Oxfordshire, some families move from further afield to secure a place at one of the Buckinghamshire's 13 grammar schools. Bucks father, Adam, tells the story of a someone he met in the course of his work:

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<sup>10</sup> 'Unfair, stressful or 'a good idea'? What pupils think of the 11-plus exam Children tell', Kim Thomas, 15.08.16 <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2016/aug/15/what-pupils-think-11-plus-exam-grammar-schools-children>

A bloke I'm working with at the moment moved here from *Scarborough*. In Scarborough, he put his kid through the Buckinghamshire 11+! And when she succeeded, the whole family moved down to Buckinghamshire ... and he didn't even have a job: he arrived in Buckinghamshire with no job....just because his kid has passed the 11+...

Inevitably, increasing numbers of high attaining, out of county pupils sitting the 11+ has increased the competition for grammar school places. In addition, a rise in the number of children passing the test means the *raw test score* needed to achieve the standardised pass mark of 121, has also risen. As Rebecca Hickman, of LEE, points out:

there has been a year on year inflation in the raw score needed to pass, which makes a nonsense of the idea of there being any kind of fixed 'grammar school standard'.

Local children who, in past years, would have passed the Bucks 11+, are finding themselves increasingly squeezed out of Buckinghamshire's grammar school picture.

### **Bucks' skewed GCSE performance figures?**

Further down the educational line, the number of higher attaining pupils entering Bucks grammars from neighbouring counties is inflating Buckinghamshire's school performance figures. Buckinghamshire boasts some of the best GCSE results in the country: in 2015, 68.9% of its pupils gained five or more A\*-C grades at GCSE, compared to a national average of 57.1%. As many parents and educationalists point out, the county's attainment figures are also helped by its status as one of the most socio-economically advantaged counties in England. The figure of 68.9% is therefore hardly surprising. It goes without saying that an above average quota of high attaining students will have a significant impact on the county's overall GCSE attainment.

Interestingly, also, a close scrutiny of the 2015 GCSE figures for all Buckinghamshire state-maintained grammars and secondary moderns (where complete sets of figures are available), reveals a rise in pupil numbers at some point between the end of KS3 and the end of KS4. In 2015, there were 438 more pupils recorded at the end of KS4 (Year 11) than those recorded at the start of the same cohort's KS4 (which, depending on the school, may start in Year 9 or 10). When broken down by type of school, most of the increase, 278 pupils, is found to have occurred in Buckinghamshire's 13 grammar schools. The figure amounts to a 15% rise in pupils in Bucks grammar schools compared to a 5% rise across the 22 other secondary moderns with comparable figures. Since there is no corresponding drop in pupil numbers in the secondary schools, this suggests that high attaining pupils are entering Bucks' grammar schools from either private schools or from other counties. There is anecdotal evidence which points to some of the 15% rise being explained by a small number of secondary modern pupils passing a 12+ or 13+ and entering grammar schools in time to take GCSEs. However, these numbers do not appear to explain the bulk of the 15% increase. There does seem to be some evidence that performance figures for Bucks grammar schools, and specifically those for GCSE results, are being further inflated by a 'top up' of high attainers, but where they come from needs further research. In 2015, one Bucks grammar school had gained no less than 44 pupils (a 33% rise) by the end of KS4. This particular grammar is one of Buckinghamshire's two highest performing schools. Outstanding results produced by specially selected, able children in well-resourced grammar schools, should come as no surprise. As any teacher will tell you, this is hardly a challenge. As a really good teacher will tell you, this is not what education is about.

The reputation for excellence enjoyed by Buckinghamshire's grammars is questionable also because it comes at such a cost to other schools, whose pupil population has been cream skimmed. It is left to Bucks' secondary moderns to educate the majority of the county's pupils, comprised mostly of middle and low attainers. GCSE attainment for these pupils, measured in 2015 by the Government as 'an average capped GCSE score', reveals a very different side to Buckinghamshire's educational success story.<sup>11</sup> An analysis of Government performance figures for Bucks schools reveals that middle and low attainers fare far worse in their GCSEs, for example, than middle and low attainers in Hampshire, a non-selective county. While in Hampshire, the 2015 average capped GCSE score of middle attainers was 298, in Bucks it was 293. With low attainers, the difference is more marked, with Hampshire's low attainers achieving 188 to Buckinghamshire's 167.

In a speech given in June 2016, Sir Michael Wilshaw, while still in position as Ofsted Chief Inspector, drew attention to Buckinghamshire's current attainment gap of 39% and Kent's of 40%.<sup>12</sup> Describing these figures as an 'appalling injustice' and 'inexcusable waste of potential', he pointed out that the figures were 'far in excess of the national gap of 28%'. As one of England's wealthiest counties, Buckinghamshire's annual GCSE figures feel rather less spectacular when viewed through the lens of social justice.

### **We don't have anything like that here!**

Hampshire is some distance from Buckinghamshire but its education system makes it feel like another country. Ever since the late 1960s and the 1970s, all state educated Hampshire children have attended mixed, comprehensives from the ages of 11 to 16, from where they go on to one of the county's many sixth forms or FE colleges. It is a testament to the success of Hampshire's comprehensive system also, that one of its Sixth Form Colleges regularly boasts the highest number of state-educated students who go on to Oxbridge.

Talk to anyone on a Hampshire bus or in the supermarket checkout and they are baffled by the media storm over grammar schools. Some confess that they had no idea children were still tested at 11, anywhere in the country, and cannot understand 'the point of it'. Hayley, who came forward to talk about her experiences, both as a former pupil and mother of two children in her local Hampshire comprehensive, did not know what the 11+ was. When it was explained that children sat a test in year 6 of primary school and, dependent on whether they passed or failed, they went on to either a grammar school or a secondary modern, she was incredulous:

So, what, you're telling me they do the 11+ as well as their SATS? Well, we don't have anything like that here!

(Hayley, Hampshire mother)

Hayley's last comment sounded almost proud that her home county knew better than to subject 11 year olds to further testing. Although her two children attend a Hampshire comprehensive which was rated as 'requires improvement' in its last Ofsted, and which was recently taken under the wing

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<sup>11</sup> At the time of writing, the only available Government figures for school performance followed the old system of recording numbers of pupils with five or more A\*-C grades at GCSE and the 'average capped GCSE score', a figure calculated on the best 8 GCSEs, or equivalent. In September 2016, Progress 8 was introduced with a new headline indicator of a school performance being based value added scores.

<sup>12</sup> Sir Michael Wilshaw, speech to the Festival of Education, 23.06.16, <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/sir-michael-wilshaws-speech-to-the-festival-of-education>

of another, more successful school, Hayley's children enjoy school and get on well with their teachers. Her son is delighted that one of the Deputy Heads taught his mother when she was at school. Unlike the underlying anxiety which colours much of the accounts from Buckinghamshire parents' experiences of the 11+ and secondary schooling, the Hampshire parents I have spoken to fall over themselves to champion their county's comprehensive system.

Roy Perry, Conservative Leader of Hampshire County Council is justifiably proud of his county's comprehensive schools. Roy's pride rests in the fact that 59.7% of the pupils in Hampshire's 71 comprehensive schools gained five or more A\*-C GCES in 2015. Not only was this above the national average of 57.1%, but higher also than Kent, a county which shares a similar catchment to Hampshire but which, like Bucks, has grammar schools. As the largest, and one of the most socially diverse, counties in south east England, Hampshire is responsible for educating 2% of all England's school children. Roy explains the significance of Hampshire's achievements further:

We pay a lot of attention to all the figures: 2% of the nation's children is a very large number and so, to deviate from the national norm, Hampshire's got to be doing something pretty special. [...] I think what the Bucks figure is doing, is showing the socio-economic demography of Buckinghamshire. Buckinghamshire is something like 5,000,000 – 6,000,000 population, whereas we're 1.3 million, and with much greater diversity.

### **Veterans of Circular 10/65**

Comparisons between Hampshire and Buckinghamshire are worth making. While the two counties share a long history of Tory Councils, and can boast excellent performance figures, they could not have approached the education of children more differently. Sir Tim Brighouse, who remains one of England's leading educationalists, was actively involved in Buckinghamshire County Council, and the city of Oxford and Birmingham's education authorities at the time comprehensivisation was being brought in. He swears that decisions about whether or not an education authority decided to convert to comprehensivisation rested in 'force of character'. Sir Tim's account of how counties responded to Circulars 10/65 and 10/66 reveal momentous decisions being made almost entirely by a few powerful men in each county. In Buckinghamshire, these men came in the form of influential and highly traditional school governors and county councillors, some of whom were landed gentry. In Hampshire, as in Oxfordshire, the county was blessed with education officers, backed by powerful education committees, who were strongly in favour of Circular 10/65. Sir Tim cites Alan Chorlton, Chief Education Officer of Oxfordshire, as well as educators such as Eric MacFarlane, a newly-arrived Head of Queen Mary's College, in Basingstoke, as examples of people who supported the comprehensive system and who were instrumental in seeing its implementation in their area. In turn, Eric MacFarlane recalls Heads of schools in other major Hampshire towns, such as Brockenhurst and Southampton, who shared his vision for comprehensivisation. He recalls how they all played their part in persuading their local communities of the benefits of an education system from which all children, not just a selected elite, could benefit.

### **Buckinghamshire's golfers**

In Buckinghamshire, nothing could convert a core group of *old schoolers* to the comprehensivisation of the country's schools. Sir Tim's sadness and frustration at failing to win over the county to the benefits of a comprehensive system can still be felt, almost 50 years later. Sir Tim recalls that Buckinghamshire's then Education Officer, Roy Harding, was 'very pro-comprehensive' but too new in his post to wield much influence among the county's grammar school Heads. At the time, Sir Tim,

although young, bore the impossibly grand title and responsibility of Buckinghamshire County Council's Senior Assistant of Education in Development and Buildings. He was also known as a charmer and so he was tasked to go out and convince grammar schools Heads of the benefits of converting to the comprehensive system:

I was in charge of buildings, so I went everywhere, and I knew *everybody*, and I was thought to be a bit of a persuader ... so I was sent off to talk to the Head of the Royal Grammar and then on to the Head of William Borlase School. And what I did was, I flattered them, you know, took along some bottles of wine and said look you two, how about *this*...

Sir Tim's ploy was to suggest that each man got his own, brand new bi-lateral school. The promise of spanking new school buildings and larger empires to run, appeared to work like a charm. The Heads dutifully agreed to taking over and running two brand new, comprehensive schools, and Sir Tim reported back with delight: 'I told Roy, *I think they've bought it!*'. However, it was not to be so easy:

But then what happened was that both those Heads, when they told their Chair of Governors and the Chair of the County Council, well, they bloody exploded with them for accepting my proposal ... and then everybody blamed me. So I said, 'Fine, mea culpa ... young and inexperienced, that sort of thing. But I had to back off....

Sir Tim explains the rather *ad hoc* way of doing things in Bucks meant that decisions were actually made by a few powerful Heads and their friends on the Council:

In those days, it was all down to force of character ... and who you knew. Everything happened on the golf course: grammar school Heads would play a round or two of golf with local education authority members and they had it all stitched up between them. Really, I should have played golf.

### **Hampshire's proselytisers**

Sir Tim is wistful about the comparative ease with which Hampshire achieved its still very successful education system by converting all its secondary moderns into comprehensives and all the grammar schools into sixth form colleges. With the focus on A levels, Hampshire grammars were able to preserve their academic ethos and, as Eric MacFarlane, a former head of Queen Mary's in Basingstoke, points out, 'Everyone was happy'. Eric explains he was won around to the benefits of comprehensive schooling after his own experiences as a teacher:

I'd seen what a system of secondary mods and grammar schools was like first hand, as a teacher, and, on balance, my commitment to converting school to comprehensives was more strongly aroused by my horror at what it did to the grammar school kids than those in secondary mods. Having taught in both grammar schools and secondary moderns, I quickly realised that if you swapped the lower stream of the grammar with the top end of secondary modern kids, there was no difference. This ridiculous division essential to the bi-partite system did an enormous disservice to a large number who were just on the edge of one or the other. In the intensively competitive environment of the grammars also, you create winners and losers ... this mad desire to win all the time: if you come second in the 100 metres, you're a failure. It's absurd!

Ironically, it was the crippling sense of failure felt by large numbers of pupils in the pressure cooker atmosphere of grammar schools that converted Eric to the wisdom of a system in which all children,



of all abilities, might learn together. In sentiments that echo Eric's, a former grammar school Head, in a phone call to Radio 4's *Any Answers*, said, 'The bottom stream in the grammar school is a rotten place to be'. Looking back, Eric believes the system was equally damaging for the so-called *high fliers*:

Some of the grammar schools in those days were arid institutions, over-occupied with exam results, competition, grooming and elites ... all the stuff that makes us mad.

Eric's description of grammar schools in the 1960s and 1970s sounds horribly reminiscent of the very practices taking place in many of our contemporary 'outstanding' schools. If current plans to expand grammars come to fruition, we are likely to see far more of the very schools Eric, Sir Tim, and other great champions of comprehensives such as educationalist, Caroline Benn, and Sociologist, A. H. Halsey, famously fought so hard to eradicate.

Eric's vision for a more inclusive education took shape as the Head of a very happy and successful sixth form college in Basingstoke. Eric explains that in those days, once education officers had made their appointments, Heads were given 'a lot of freedom to develop the comprehensive education system'. With a curriculum which sounds positively utopian today, Eric insisted that all students took part in a curriculum that was far broader in educational scope than exam subjects. Students studying for 'O' levels and later on, GCSEs, and commercial subjects (such as typing and book keeping qualifications) as well as those studying for A levels, all took part in 'Main Studies'. Eric's system, and he was able to cite other Hampshire Heads who did exactly the same in their comprehensives, or 'open access', sixth form colleges, gave Main Studies and exam subjects equal importance in terms of timetabling. In addition, students of all abilities, and from both Lower and Upper Sixth, studied Main Studies together. Main Studies might involve a piece of theatre, an environmental research project conducted locally, or an invention, designed and built by students in the college workshop. Each project lasted a year and pupils had to have something to present or exhibit at the end of their work. Eric explained that as well as being completely committed to the very broad curriculum, he encouraged Main Studies as a

... symbol, a way, of impressing upon people that there is a world apart from exam courses. If there hadn't been a technical college in the town, I would have gone big on vocational subjects also, and I would have really established, and I mean really established, that they were just as important as academic subjects.

When describing his role as the new Head of Queen Mary's College with the responsibility of recruiting staff for his new school, Eric confounded expectations by employing teachers from both the former grammar schools and the secondary moderns and, even more revolutionary for the times, an equal number of men and women. He describes using 'a combination of clever strategies and a sensible playing to strengths and people's feelings' so that the very best teachers for the range of traditional and more modern subjects were recruited to teach at St Mary's. Viewed from the outside, Eric's approach to leading a school was that it should be a place that played to *everyone's* strength, pupils and teachers alike.

### **All the opportunities and expectations of a grammar**

Fifty years on, Eric remains convinced of the value of comprehensive schooling and it would seem that Eric, and the many Heads like him responsible for introducing and growing Hampshire comprehensive schools, have been proved right. Hampshire boasts some of the best performing

state schools in the country. This year, 84% of Kings School GCSE pupils attained five or more A\*-C grades. The school's energetic and popular Head, Matthew Leeming, explains that Kings has a catchment which includes affluent Winchester as well as less socio-economically advantaged areas outside the city. Matthew is passionate about comprehensive education, pointing out that behind the headline figure of their GCSE results is the true value of what a comprehensive education provides:

I mean we've been excited today by our threshold measure of 84%, but what does it say to the 16% who have not got that? What about the 40% across the country who do not get that? Essentially, this is the day when society brands those people on their forehead with 'fail' - except that comprehensive schools *don't* do that because, behind our 84%, we have all our progress and value added scores, which actually is what Ofsted hangs us for, so we have a powerful incentive to move every E to a D and to move every B to an A - and that accountability system is really quite powerful: it means that we have jolly good reasons to get good outcomes for *all* children [...] when *every grade counts*, and you get as much credit for moving an E to a D as you do and A to and A\*, it's a much better arrangement.

(Matthew Leeming, Head of Kings School, Hampshire)

Matthew stresses the value of the inclusivity provided by a comprehensive education. He is proud of Kings record as one of Hampshire's consistently highest performing comprehensives while educating a broad social mix of pupils. Importantly, and especially in light of the current debate over expanding England's grammars, Matthew points out that Kings can offer any academically able child exactly what a grammar school offers its highest attainers:

If Theresa May was here, and it was all, you know, *you've got to have grammar schools*, my response is this: you can have King's, which is a comprehensive school but which feels a bit like a grammar school, and gives you all of the advantages that a grammar school would give you. If you believe that you must stretch the academically able children and put them with other academically able children, and they must all study highly challenging curriculum...well, we do that! For example, I was in a top set year 11 History class the other day and the intellectual energy in the room was tangible....We offer the same opportunities, and have the same expectations, as you would find in any grammar school.

At the same time, Matthew explains, Kings is inclusive. There are mixed ability classes for some GCSE subjects such as PE and Design Technology, where he feels it is important that high attaining pupils learn 'what it feels to be nearer the bottom'. Other opportunities, such taking part in a school production or when kicking a football around in the playground, also allow pupils with different abilities to mix with others from their community. As Matthew points out, pupils might be of completely different academic abilities and interests but living in the same community, perhaps in the same street. This social mixing is 'the huge advantage', Matthew says, of 'what the comprehensive system offers'.

It is little wonder that Kings boasts consistently excellent results with Ofsted - Kings has never slipped below 'Outstanding'. The school balances enviable GCSE results with recognisable achievement for value added and inclusivity. The school's reputation for academic excellence is so strong that many assume the school selects, or in some way 'games' with its admissions. The school does nothing of the sort, as Mathew explains:

We are not the admissions authority - the local authority handles all admissions and admissions here are completely done according to the transparent rules the county has. We have a published admissions number of 336 – and there are only about 180 children in our catchment in any particular year group, so we take everybody from our catchment, and while our catchment is Winchester, it is not as affluent as you might think, and certainly not as affluent as some of the other schools are around here, we've got some housing estates ... so we take everyone from our catchment. And then that leaves us with about 150 more spaces and they are allocated on the basis of siblings, looked-after children, medical need and distance... as long as you live within about five miles, you can get in.

Although a comprehensive, King's has always been run along very traditional lines; it even has a small boarding house for children from the Falklands and children whose parents are in the forces. Leader of Hampshire Council, Roy Perry, insists that the Kings School carol concert is so beautifully executed that it is comparable to that of one of the county's leading independent schools. In an honest moment, Roy he admitted that he could not see why any parent would want to pay for a private education when you could have your child educated at a school like Kings.

### **We're informal not casual ...**

Thornden, another of Hampshire's 'Outstanding' comprehensives, is quite the opposite to Kings and is an example of a very different model of comprehensiveness. One Hampshire parent suggested Thornden's informality might make it more like 'the stereotype of the comprehensive school' in people's imagination. Thornden's results make it far from 'typical', and in this way only, it is similar to Kings. In every other respect, the two schools feel very different. Kings is a very traditional school. It has had a reputation for strictness and formality which is easing under Matthew Leeming's modernising influence, but which still holds in the imagination of Hampshire parents. Kings has a compulsory uniform, which requires girls to wear a pleated tartan skirt of a certain length and 'sensible' shoes. Blazers are worn at all times and the burgundy and gold tie must be worn with six stripes showing. Thornden's pupils sport polo shirts and do not wear blazers or ties. While Kings sets in all its subjects, save for drama, PE and design technology, Thornden's recently retired Head of 25 years, Rob Sykes, describes a much more flexible or 'loose' approach to grouping pupils. While Head, Rob encouraged grouping by attainment in some years and some subjects but not necessarily every year and in every subject, pointing out that the character and needs of classes are not all the same. One of the approaches to setting he also favours, is the use of parallel sets, to allow for the sideways moving of students to avoid unnecessary demotion, if a behavioural issue necessitated the breaking up of certain peer groups. At Thornden also, GCSE subjects are taught in mixed ability groups of just over 20 pupils. However, higher attaining pupils in English work in a group of around 30, the philosophy being to focus resources on pupils who need them most. Both Matthew Leeming and Rob enjoy the healthy competition between their two high attaining schools, but approach the practical implementation of the comprehensive ethos differently. Rob insists that his approach to running Thornden was not casual. He explains:

Thornden has been quite liberal in its attitudes for a long time ... things like uniform, and small scale, but socially significant things. For instance, unlike some schools, where all the kids stop what they're doing and stand up when senior management enter a room, we don't do that here. The kids carry on, and that's the way we like it. We believe that you ought to

explain why rules are needed and then we expect them to keep those rules. 'Because I told you so', isn't it good enough. If a rule has got a real reason to exist, we should be able to explain it in a logical manner to a kid. We deal with discipline in ways you would call traditional – we have a pastoral system, we do have detentions, and we exclude, but it's rare. Basically, we will try and work *with* the kids, but discipline is non-negotiable: you can't disrupt a lesson with bad behaviour and expect to get away with it.

I put it to Rob that Thornden is in Chandlers Ford, a particularly nice area of Eastleigh, in Hampshire. Arguably, the school's outstanding results may say more about its middle class catchment and pupils who are more comfortable with, and sufficiently self-disciplined, to handle the informality of Thornden. Rob responded by saying,

Well, you can turn it the other way: in such an area wouldn't you *have* to have blazers and so on, to meet parental expectations? People come to see us and look around the school and are surprised at the informal atmosphere. As the Head, I would use the catch phrase: *We're informal, but we're not casual.*

Rob cites his experience teaching in a successful comprehensive in a deprived area of London before coming to Thornden which was run along similar lines. He believes passionately in,

encouraging children to take responsibility for their own learning, rather it all being *done to them*, improves results. You have a querulous people outside. You've got to start with your results, and we're saying this from the position where, typically, we've topped the league table out of 70 schools in Hampshire.

Rob pulls on examples from some of England's leading public schools to show how 'informal not casual' can work:

We track pupils and expect them to do their best; we're certainly not casual with them ...what we are is informal. And many of the most successful public schools are relatively informal and stress extra-curricular learning that we stress, and aim to foster a sense of pupils taking responsibility for their own learning, as we do.

Toynbee tells the story of a different kind of Hampshire comprehensive again. A school, which has recently pulled itself up from 'requires improvement' to 'good', it was at one time a school which some might have pointed to as being 'typical' of the comprehensive system. Like Kings and Thornden, Toynbee enjoys the leadership of a serious educationalist who inspires not only confidence but real affection among parents. One of the reasons Angela chose Toynbee was because of the ease with which her children could come and go to school. It is something which figures highly in the choices made by Hampshire's parents and the county's free bus service for children travelling to schools in their catchment area is huge incentive to encourage children to go to their local school. However, more important than the practicalities for Angela, was Toynbee's ethos of inclusivity and pastoral care.

### **Championing Hampshire's comprehensives**

As a grammar-school educated mother of three children, two of which are old enough to attend Toynbee, Angela's passion for the kind of education provided by a comprehensive school is clear:

I'm a *real* advocate of comprehensive education. My children are getting a better education than I had - a much better, more rounded, one.

Angela stresses the abundance of extra-curricular activities on offer at her children's school, rattling off all the activities the school provides, free of charge, and with any sports equipment or musical instrument, children need to take part all provided:

I was just blown away by all the extra curricular stuff they do and that's the key ... it made me think *this is the school I want my kids to go to*. It's local, so they can walk there and back within half an hour ... they do sports including things like Badminton and rugby - even my daughter does rugby! There's IT, there's a club for making things, a robotics club. There's orchestra and band practice, too.

A strong argument in favour of comprehensives is that children learn to mix with pupils from different backgrounds, and with very different needs and abilities. As Angela explains,

What I like about Toynbee is its inclusivity. Because there's a broad range of children at comprehensives, my children have a much wider range of friends, from different economic backgrounds. Some of their friends are in social housing, and some have got some social problems. It makes my children more understanding. And the school has a mixture of children with different abilities...it helps everyone, and it brings up the children that are struggling - they're not labelled as failures.

Another Hampshire mother, Marie, has children at Wyvern College in Eastleigh. She felt it stressed the value of an education which was at the heart of her local community. Like Angela, Marie values a local school where her children could walk to school and had a mix of friends from her community:

I feel here, we're all one community. It's what I like about this area, and you see that in the school. There's a mix around here: there are areas which are not as wealthy, and some areas are very wealthy, and so you get a real mixture of backgrounds in the children. I actually do like that, and it's one of the reasons I picked the school, and the children's primary schools were the same. I think it's great because I think it teaches them about the whole world... if you shelter them from the poorer population, then actually, all you're going to do is bring up little snobs! It does them good to realise they've got more than some of the other kids, and then some kids have more than them. I think a mix of kids is really important.

Many of Hampshire's comprehensives have units which cater for specific physical needs, such as visual and hearing impairment, or learning needs such as dyslexia. Kings has a unit for physically disabled pupils. Luisa explained the first time she had become aware that there were psychically disabled pupils in King's was on an initial school visit when she saw a pupil with a walking frame walking down the school drive with his friends:

What I remember most was being struck by how normal they all looked together - which of course is exactly as it should be! I like the fact that there are some children with disabilities who my kids are friends with - my children have grown up respecting everyone as individuals.

(Luisa, Hampshire mother)

Even a small comprehensive, such as Testbourne, between the towns of Basingstoke, and Andover, can offer specialised support:

There is something for everybody here - we look to be inclusive and one of the things we're actually well known for is that we have several students with Aspergers syndrome. While we don't have a resource provision, we have some really talented teaching assistants who have supported youngsters who have really quite complex needs – and we are actually very, very successful here with type of support – for me, this school is also about *community*.

(Ruth Beasely, Head of Testbourne Community School)

Toynbee has a unit for the visually impaired. Angela believes the VI unit has given her oldest, fully sighted son an invaluable learning experience:

My son is friends with several of the VI students – it's completely normal for him. He has a VI friend who he plays VI basketball with; they encourage the able bodied, fully sighted children to play with the VI students, to assist them in playing. My son's now 14 and has been playing VI basketball since he was 12. It means he's had a whole different group of friends, and he's come away with an understanding of visual impairment. It's made him a lot more patient, a lot *wiser*. That kind of thing is better for the whole community, and he's going to be better as a future adult.

Marie's son has benefited enormously from the support and kindness he has received from the learning support unit at Wyvern:

My son has dyslexia. He was tested as soon as he got to the school, and because he was below where he should have been, they are putting a lot of support into him. He did his CAT tests but he didn't have any help reading the questions and he couldn't really answer the questions, so that really didn't help him. He has support from study assistants and he's got a tablet to carry around if it needs it so that he can type out his work. And the school supplies all that. The study assistance is *amazing*. My son loves being in study support.

Marie explains that although her son is very articulate, he struggles to get his ideas down on paper. She stresses that one important incentive for him has been the kindness of his study support assistants and the strong emphasis Wyvern puts on effort:

What I like is that Wyvern give grades for attention in class and that's the one I like, and he continuously gets the top mark of 1 out of 5. It's *lovely* because he's graded for effort, because actually you get some kids who don't put the effort in but get the grades. Someone like my son, who puts the effort in but he struggles.... his effort grade really shows how *hard* he works. I love that fact that my son gets recognised for his attitude to learning. And getting recognised for putting your heart and soul into things it really works, because his attainment grades have been going up - and I think that's why, the recognition.

(Marie, Hampshire mother)

Mothers also describe the high quality of the pastoral care at the children's comprehensive. Angela felt it was something that was a particularly strong feature of comprehensive schools:

They tend to have great pastoral care in comprehensives – it's a really big difference. I really don't think it's the same in grammars. With comprehensives, you've got pastoral care for

children from a range of backgrounds, and so the school is going to be better, more skilled.  
[...] At my children's school, I feel they know and understand the children really well.

(Angela, Hampshire mother)

Marie describes an incident in which her son was the subject of a vicious attack by a pupil. In another type of school, it is quite possible that the pupil, who already had a notorious reputation for bad behaviour, would have earned a permanent exclusion; some probably believe it was the least he deserved. However, it says something about the ethos of Wyvern, and the parents like Marie who support it, that a far more enlightened approach was taken. Thanks to the support of the school's pastoral team, the boy remained at the school. More importantly, he has been helped to manage his challenging behaviour and, although he and Marie's son will never be close friends, there is no animosity between them, a year on. More importantly, the boy's behaviour has greatly improved during his time at the school.

Pastoral care and inclusivity are the two main areas that mothers want to stress when talking about Hampshire's comprehensives. Patricia's two sons attended different comprehensives. One chose the tradition of Kings while her older son, now at an FE college, chose Henry Beaufort, a comprehensive which Patricia describes as, 'lovely, with great pastoral care, and a really good reputation for kids with special needs'. Patricia, who used to be a secondary school teacher, has experience of grammar schools and comprehensives. She is adamant about the value of the comprehensive education:

If you live in a very rarefied environment and you never come across anybody in your school life who is of lesser ability than you, say, then you really don't understand some of the difficulties that some people have - and real life just isn't like that! You have to join real life at the end of it all, don't you? And if you don't come across it in school, and you then move on to university, when do you really meet and have an appreciation of the whole world? I think it's really important and I like the fact that even traditional Kings, these days, do mixed ability in some classes and sets for others. It's a system where every child matters, and they get the help in each set tailored to those children's specific needs, and it's the best way, because every child gets to achieve.

Head teacher Ruth is incredulous that at time when schools 'are facing a financial crisis like never before' the current Government could come up with the '*bizarre* view that creating more selective schools will be the answer to everybody's problems'. She points out that the serious shortage of funding meant some Heads were having to make staffing cuts and felt there were more urgent areas where the Government should be focusing its energies:

I just cannot see how creating more grammar schools is going to actually benefit the student population. Where I would say you need to be focusing, is ensuring that in very classroom, what youngsters are getting is the very best possible, for them, and that they're being encouraged for their particular ability or talents, and not de-motivated by being labelled as being at a certain level at a certain age. Every child should have access to an environment in which they can flourish, whatever their starting point.

(Ruth Beasley, Head of Testbourne Community College)

### **A working relationship (that works)**

Kings Head, Matthew Leeming, believes that what makes Hampshire's comprehensive system not just successful, but unique, is the relationships between the county's education authority and its schools. Matthew says Hampshire's local authority feels its responsibility very keenly. He explains,

You simply don't get that kind of relationship anywhere else .... I think both the politicians of Hampshire county and also the education authority's officers have a real sense of moral purpose about education, and I think they *lead* education really very effectively.

A concrete example of Hampshire's education authority's engagement with children's learning was volunteered by Testbourne Head, Ruth Beasley, when describing her school's approach to ability grouping. Ruth explained that, traditionally, children were set in English, Maths and Science, with all other subjects taught in mixed ability groups. A recent change had been made in the teaching of English following recommendations made by Hampshire's education authority. Ruth explained that the authority had been convinced by research which had found that a higher quality of dialogue in mixed ability groups for English improved attainment for *all* abilities. As a result, Testbourne's English department have divided KS4 English into seven mixed ability groups of 15-20 pupils. While GCSE results will be the test of this new approach, Testbourne's English teachers have been impressed with the way pupils are responding to the new approach.

From his position as Leader of Hampshire County Council, Roy Perry confirms the value of his Council's relationship with Hampshire's comprehensives:

We have a council and officers who are interested in kids doing their *best*. That's what we want, and we try to encourage the schools to do that. We have a good relationship with schools. [...] But it's a relationship that's built up over the years. I mean, these things, you don't create them overnight [...] you've got to have a long-term and trusting relationship with schools.

Roy's conviction that time and good relations lie at the heart of Hampshire's successful comprehensives makes him wary of the belief that failing schools can be turned around in one year simply by turning them into academies, and he fails to see the need for grammars. A mild mannered man, Roy feels so strongly about an education system driven by results that he warned former education secretary, Nicky Morgan:

You're operating this like a premier league football club and it's just not like that! And it's dangerous to do that to children.

Roy's comments came just weeks before news of the Government's plans for the expansion of grammars. He had pre-empted the announcement by canvassing opinion on grammar schools from two senior colleagues in Hampshire's Education Authority:

Both of them said, importantly, that if you're bringing back grammar schools you're bringing back secondary moderns, and what you need to do is concentrate on what sort of schools *they* are going to be, and how successful are you going to make *them*. Frankly, that's where you want to concentrate your efforts. And that was the opinion of both of these people, asked independently. They're both good Tory councillors, and they both came out with that view. Were the old secondary moderns doing justice to the children who went there? Frankly many of them weren't....that's the real problem.



Roy Perry is a man with a gift for the long term view. He has had 40 years in public service, and does seem to have what Matthew Leeming, identifies as a 'real sense of moral purpose' about education. It means that while Roy can point to Hampshire's outstanding results as evidence of that a comprehensive education system works, he knows the true value of education runs deeper than headline results. There were some bad news stories about Hampshire's schools. Roy Perry knows the work that needs to be done in areas of social disadvantage where results are not Hampshire's finest examples. In addition, one mother described having to move her child to another school owing to ongoing bullying which she felt was not being dealt with effectively. However, when it is good, Hampshire's education is very good, and for *all* children. The inclusivity of Hampshire's schools is something everyone who came forward to talk about comprehensives wanted to stress. From the elderly woman who spoke for half an hour on a Winchester bus about failing the 11+, to the mothers and educators of some of Hampshire's comprehensives, all felt strongly that grammar schools and selection were neither welcome nor needed in Hampshire.

### **A Comprehensive Future?**

This piece was commissioned by Comprehensive Future to mark the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Circular 10/65. The idea of comparing the impact of Labour's Circulars 10/65 and 10/66 on two counties, Buckinghamshire and Hampshire, seemed relatively straightforward. I was concerned that my desire to contribute to the important work that Comprehensive Future does, in its unflashy and unyielding commitment to fighting any form of selection in our education system, may turn into something a bit pedestrian. I had not expected, and still cannot quite believe, that I ended up writing this article in the context of a brand new grammar school debate. Nor did I ever imagine that I would find myself turning to octogenarians such as Sir Tim Brighouse and Eric MacFarlane for their well informed, and often thoroughly entertaining, first-hand accounts of what it was like to live through the times of Circulars 10/65 and 10/66 and the first moves towards mass comprehensivisation.

The experiences of Sir Tim and Eric are highly relevant, all over again. These men remind us that if we are to fight to keep our comprehensives, it is not enough to offer the dream of a fair education system for all children. If the future is to be comprehensive, we must work out a way to ask those who benefit most from selective education to give it up, without feeling they have *lost out*. What Sir Tim and Eric quickly realised, and we need to grasp, is the need for a universal model, strictly applied, and the necessary tact and willingness to compromise so that all schools come on board. For this, we might look to Hampshire's historically successful system where all children from 11-16 are taught in comprehensives from where they progress to either a sixth form or FE college. However, one of the reasons for the success of Hampshire's comprehensive system is the excellent working relationship between schools and its education authority. As Matthew Leeming, Head of King's, insists also, an 'outstanding' comprehensive such as those found in Hampshire offers all that a grammar schools offers, *and more*. Hampshire is living proof that children of all abilities and talents, whether physically disabled or able bodied, work happily and well together, when given the opportunity. Sometimes, children's learning takes place with children of similar abilities, and sometimes in classes of mixed ability. Whatever the classroom environment, when children attend a comprehensive school, they learn to rub along with people from a rich diversity of backgrounds - and this is the best education of all, because it prepares them for life.

Buckinghamshire is not just another county. When you enter its world of education, it feels like another country. Unlike the pride and enthusiasm that Hampshire mothers take in their schools, the Bucks parents I came across feel anxious and conflicted. Most admit to buying into the Bucks

tutoring system in order to 'level the playing field' for their child, while confessing they do not agree with it. When Derek refers to tutoring being on an 'industrial scale', and Adam describes the whole process of the 11+ as a 'nuclear arms race', they do so to impress on the outsider the intensity and competition that permeates every layer of Buckinghamshire's education system. The *nuclear fallout* (to extend Adam's simile) of Buckinghamshire's selective system is the shocking figure of some 10,000 schoolchildren currently attending a school that 'requires improvement'.

One way to end the 11+ would be to make every single person who advocates its existence to sit down and take the CEM practice paper available online, without being tutored and under timed conditions. I set this challenge for some of those who spoke to me during the course of writing this piece. Between us there is an impressive spread of academic achievement, including several postgraduate degrees and a couple of Oxbridge graduates. Adam does not know it, but he scored the highest of some pretty humiliating results, my own included. However, it was only under protest that Adam let his wife tell me his score was lower than that achieved by their 10 year old daughter.