

## Consultation response

### Reform's submission to the Government's consultation: 'Schools that work for everyone'

December 2016

#### About Reform

*Reform* is an independent, non-party think tank whose mission is to set out a better way to deliver public services and economic prosperity. Our aim is to produce research of outstanding quality on the core issues of the economy, health, education, welfare, and criminal justice, and on the right balance between government and the individual. We are determinedly independent and strictly non-party in our approach.

*Reform* is a registered charity, the Reform Research Trust, charity no.1103739. This publication is the property of the Reform Research Trust.

#### Overall view of proposals

*Reform* recognises the need to create more additional school places, but believes that demand should be met by expanding non-selective provision only. Non-selective provision means schools that have no ability or faith entry requirements. We alternatively recommend that local authorities be required to widen or remove catchment areas and that other restrictions on school entry are removed. This simplification of the school admissions code would widen access to the best schools by the poorest pupils and, if implemented alongside random allocation for oversubscribed schools, would create a fairer system than the current or proposed ones.

*Reform* believes that, while universities, faith and grammar schools wish to expand their provision, enabling them to do so is not in the best interests of all pupils. By design, grammar schools reduce consumer choice over which school to attend. In addition, it will particularly reduce the choice of those from disadvantaged backgrounds because attainment at age 11 is highly associated with parental income. *Reform* believes that the demand for new school places should instead be met wholly through an expansion of the free school programme and a review of the regulation surrounding non-selective school expansion.

*Reform* acknowledges that the current system for allocating pupils to schools restricts access to the best schools by the poorest. It is largely based on proximity to the schools, which is linked to the affordability of housing in the area. This is why *Reform* recommends widening or removing catchment areas. Evidence suggests that expanding selective provision would exacerbate rather than improve the situation.

There is evidence that pupils from low-income backgrounds (measured by FSM eligibility) make more progress in grammar schools than non-selective schools, but at the expense of pupils from low-income backgrounds that do not attend grammars. While it is a legitimate policy goal to further stretch academic attainment among the already-high-attaining, *Reform* believes it is not the most pressing issue facing the education system. Instead, the Government should focus on policies to reduce the attainment gap between pupils from high

and low-income families. If an expansion of selective education is pursued, the public should be aware that any benefit to pupils with higher attainment would likely be at the expense of pupils with low prior attainment.

### **Key points:**

#### **Social segregation**

#### **1. The English state school system is already socially selective, but evidence suggests selection by ability – in its current form – will make it even more so.**

- a. *Reform* acknowledges and laments that England's state-funded comprehensive schools are already socially selective. Evidence suggests that this is because of the following:
  - **Catchment areas.** Research by [Burgess et al \(2014\)](#) suggests that 20 per cent of pupils are prevented from accessing a good school within a reasonable travel distance because of the use of catchment areas to select pupils when schools are oversubscribed.
  - **Complicated admissions arrangements.** Research by the [Sutton Trust \(2016\)](#) identified the most and least socially selective comprehensive primary schools by comparing the percentage of disadvantaged pupils in non-selective primary schools to a neighbourhood of likely choosers of that school ("recruitment neighbourhood"). They found that the 100 most selective comprehensive schools had complicated admissions arrangements, with as many as 18 different criteria for who is admitted when the school is oversubscribed.
  - **Meet and greet sessions:** Anecdotal evidence suggests 'meet and greet' sessions for parents (a way to circumvent the ban on parent interviews), may discourage parents and pupils from disadvantaged areas from applying to the best schools.
- b. *Reform* believes that there is no current evidence that expanding academic selection will make the school system less socially selective in its current form of grammar schools. Evidence suggests this is because of the following:
  - The current 163 grammar schools have an average of 3 per cent of pupils on free school meals, whereas both free schools (the current means of providing new school places) and fully state-funded schools have an average of around 15 per cent.
  - Current grammar schools are located in home neighbourhoods that are skewed towards the least deprived quintile on the IDACI index.

#### **Academic performance**

#### **2. Pupils from low-income backgrounds make more progress in grammar schools, but less progress in secondary moderns than they would have had in a non-selective school in a non-selective area.**

- c. Research by [Education Datalab \(2016\)](#) shows that pupils that attend a grammar school make more progress than they would have in a non-selective school. However, those that attend non-selective schools in selective areas make less

progress. More research is needed to examine whether this performance disparity is systematically higher or lower in selective or non-selective areas.

- d. The attainment gap between those eligible for free school meals (FSM) and all other pupils is higher in non-selective schools than grammar schools. This is not surprising because [research shows](#) grammar schools have a lower proportion of pupils with FSM and, particularly, lower proportions of pupils that are long-term disadvantaged.
- e. There is a [stronger association](#) between deprivation and GCSE performance in some selective areas (e.g. Kent) than on average across the country. This does not imply a causal effect of grammar schools on attainment disparities but does, however, suggest that grammar schools are not the answer to addressing the attainment gap.