

The Benefits of Grammar Schools

The national performance tables at GCSE and A-level provide compelling evidence that the Local Education Authorities which operate a system with grammar schools outperform areas where there are just comprehensive schools. There are those (including, apparently, members of Gloucestershire County Council) who maintain that the presence of grammar schools has a damaging impact on other schools in the area, lowering their performance capabilities, and thus adversely affecting the education of their pupils. Yet a government report published last December concludes that the presence of grammar schools does not have any detrimental effect on the performance of other schools in the area. However, I would now go even further, and say that the presence of grammar schools has a positively beneficial effect on other schools, the most likely explanation being that this enables pupils in all schools to receive an education which is better suited to their abilities and needs.

Of course, detractors of grammar schools might say that they only survive in predominantly Conservative areas, which tend to be more affluent, and so ought to get better results. However, affluence does not necessarily equal intelligence, and grammar schools exist all around the country, so such a simplistic argument can hardly hold up against all the evidence.

In England, there are 150 LEAs, but City of London just has two independent schools, so there are really 149 authorities to be considered, which vary in size to an astonishing degree from 1 to 100 schools. These tables do not include Wales or Scotland, where there are no grammar schools.

Out of about 3,200 secondary schools in England, only 163 grammar schools survive, which are located in 35 LEAs. In ten of these, grammars account for less than 10% of the schools in the area, and represent either just a single isolated school, or a few schools within a larger authority (for example, Essex has 4 grammar schools, but 75 comprehensives). To be thorough, I have included all 35 authorities in Table 1, although the 10 with a small percentage of grammar schools (many of which appear relatively low down in the table) can hardly be said to have their overall performance influenced greatly by the grammars; they are indicated by square brackets in the table.

I should stress that the percentage of grammar schools does not represent precisely the percentage of pupils in these schools; this is usually lower, because, in general, comprehensive schools are larger. For example, in Gloucestershire, 16.7% of the 42 schools are grammars, but the percentage of pupils in the whole county attending them is less than 14%.

The primary consideration in this survey is the GCSE results table, for which more exhaustive information is available. I do look at the A-level tables, but in less detail. I have not taken any account of the value added table, because, although this can be a helpful addition to the Key Stage 3 tables, at GCSE it is the results that matter most. After all, universities and employers are not interested in how much a person might have improved at school, they want to know the qualifications that person has.

The league tables do seem to be designed to conceal the grammar schools as much as possible, by listing them as 'selective' along with the independents, so it is necessary to look for schools which are selective but not independent. This can make it difficult to avoid errors; however, I have checked with the National Grammar Schools Association that 163 is the correct number. If I have made any other mistakes, the effect will be minimal.

I did not realize that 17 LEAs still have secondary modern schools (for pupils who fail the local 11-plus exam), although in four (North Yorkshire, Wiltshire, Lancashire and Cumbria) there are only between one and four such schools in a relatively large authority. These seem to be linked specifically with grammar schools in a particular town, and so cannot be considered a distinctive feature of the make-up of schools in the authority. Of the 13 remaining LEAs, just three have a system with only grammar and secondary modern schools, and two (Bournemouth and Slough) have merely a single comprehensive, whilst the rest also have comprehensives in relatively equal proportions.

Of the 163 grammar schools, 40 are mixed rather than single-sex. Since it is often said that pupils perform better academically in single-sex schools, I have included figures for the mixed schools in

Table 1

LEAs with Grammar Schools

LEA	G	G(M)	SM	C	Total	% gram	% A-C	points	pos'n
Kingston upon Thames (o Lond)	2		8		10	20.0%	67.0	40.6	2
Buckinghamshire	13	(5)	21		34	38.2%	65.5	40.0	3
Redbridge (outer London)	2			15	17	11.8%	65.5	39.7	4
Sutton (outer London)	5			9	14	35.7%	64.9	40.9	5
Trafford (Altrincham area)	7	(3)	11		18	38.9%	62.1	39.0	8
Gloucestershire	7	(1)		35	42	16.7%	61.2	38.1	9
Barnet (outer London)	3			20	23	13.0%	59.7	38.1	16
Poole	2		3	3	8	25.0%	58.9	37.9	20
Bromley (outer London)	2			15	17	11.8%	58.9	37.4	21
[North Yorkshire]	3	(1)	3	36	42	7.1%	58.7	37.3	24
[Wiltshire]	2		4	22	28	7.1%	57.6	36.8	28
Lincolnshire	15	(7)	32	16	63	23.8%	57.1	36.2	30
Southend-on-Sea	4		4	4	12	33.3%	56.6	36.1	33
Kent	33	(5)	47	20	100	33.0%	55.6	35.9	37
[Essex]	4			75	79	5.1%	55.0	35.4	38
Wirral	6		5	11	22	27.3%	55.0	35.2	39
Bournemouth	2		7	1	10	20.0%	54.6	35.5	44
Bexley (outer London)	4	(2)	5	7	16	25.0%	54.2	35.6	46
Warwickshire	5	(1)	11	21	37	13.5%	54.0	35.3	49
[Lancashire]	4	(2)	2	82	88	4.5%	53.3	35.3	51
Slough	4	(4)	6	1	11	36.4%	53.3	35.0	54
Plymouth	3			14	17	17.6%	53.0	34.6	56
[Cumbria]	1	(1)	1	40	42	2.4%	52.9	34.7	57
Medway (Rochester area)	6	(1)	10	3	19	31.6%	52.7	34.9	59
[Devon]	1			36	37	2.7%	52.6	35.1	61
Calderdale (Halifax area)	2	(2)		13	15	13.3%	52.1	34.3	62
Torbay	3	(1)		5	8	37.5%	51.8	35.8	65
Telford and Wrekin	2			12	14	14.3%	50.4	33.8	76
Birmingham	8	(1)		68	76	10.5%	49.4	32.9	80
[Kirklees (Huddersfield area)]	1	(1)		26	27	3.7%	47.1	33.0	91
[Wolverhampton]	1			17	18	5.6%	46.8	31.8	96
[Stoke-on-Trent]	1	(1)		16	17	5.9%	46.0	31.5	100
Reading	2			5	7	28.6%	45.5	32.9	106
Walsall	2			16	18	11.1%	43.2	30.9	122
[Liverpool]	1	(1)		31	32	3.1%	41.2	29.7	128
Total (35 LEAs)	163	(40)	180	695	1038		52.9	34.8	

National average

KEY: The first column gives the LEA; square brackets indicate that less than 10% of schools are grammar. Then come the number of grammar schools, the number of mixed grammars (in brackets), the number of secondary moderns, comprehensives, and total number of schools. The next column gives the percentage of the total which are grammars. Then come the percentage of pupils achieving 5 or more grades A*-C at GCSE, and the average GCSE point score. Finally, the position in the table for all 149 LEAs.

the table, in case their presence has an obvious influence on the results achieved. However, I have not looked into this aspect in great detail.

In Table 1, all the LEAs with grammar schools are listed in order of performance, with their position in the table of all 149 authorities given at the end. If the presence of grammar schools had no influence on overall performance in the area where they are situated, then the results for authorities with and without grammar schools in comparable areas should be roughly the same: the good results from the grammars and poor results from other schools would balance out to be more or less the same overall as are achieved where there are just comprehensives.

The most obviously striking feature is the number of authorities with grammar schools that appear in the top ten: six in all (including Gloucestershire, in ninth place). Statistically, if grammar schools have no effect on the overall performance of pupils in the area, there should be a maximum of two. If, as some people maintain, the grammar schools have an adverse impact on other schools, then the number should be even less. However, this single observation immediately suggests that results are better in all the schools, not just the grammars. If the detractors claims that their presence means that other schools perform poorly, these LEAs would not dominate the top positions. They can only do so because the other schools also produce relatively good results.

The position of these authorities becomes even more dominant when it is realized that the top LEA is Isles of Scilly, which has a single school, and so can hardly be called representative, and the seventh-placed authority is Rutland, which has just three state schools. If these two are removed, authorities with grammar schools occupy six of the top seven places: the one exception being Wokingham in fifth place. What is even more noteworthy is that three of these places are occupied by the only three authorities which have no comprehensive schools at all: Kingston upon Thames (Outer London), Buckinghamshire, and Trafford (in Greater Manchester). Indeed, the authorities which have secondary modern schools all perform remarkably well. The lowest placed is Medway (the Rochester area in Kent), which is 59th overall in the country, and is the only such authority to be below the national average of 52.9% for pupils achieving five or more grades A* to C, with 52.7%.

It is also revealing to look at other areas with all three types of school. Naturally, one would expect the grammar schools to be at the top on performance results. Broadly speaking, the comprehensives (which are open to children of all abilities) should come in the middle, with the secondary modern schools at the bottom. However, although this does happen in Poole (with 3 comprehensives and 3 secondary moderns) and Bournemouth (with a single Roman Catholic comprehensive), frequently it is not the case. For example, in Wirral (with 5 secondary moderns and 11 comprehensives), the top school after the grammars is a secondary modern (some 12 points ahead of the nearest comprehensive), two more secondary moderns are ahead of six of the comprehensives, and three of the bottom five schools are comprehensive. In Bexley (Outer London) two of its five secondary moderns are ahead of four of its seven comprehensives, and a comprehensive comes bottom.

In Lincolnshire (with 32 secondary moderns and 16 comprehensives), two of the top six schools after the grammars are secondary moderns. In North Yorkshire, which is mostly comprehensive, two of its grammar and two of its secondary modern schools are in Skipton. Admittedly one of these secondary moderns comes fourth from bottom of the area's 42 schools, but the other is in 16th place, ahead of 25 comprehensives. Southend-on-Sea is particularly interesting because of its similarity to the Gloucester area under review. It has a total of twelve schools, including four single-sex grammars and two single-sex comprehensives, which fill the next two places after the grammars. However, after them come two of the secondary moderns, ahead of the remaining two comprehensives.

Slough is also an interesting case. It comes 54th in the country, with 53.3% of pupils gaining five or more grades A* to C: only just above the national average. It has four mixed grammar schools (a possible suggestion that mixed grammar schools are less successful than single-sex schools), six secondary moderns and a single comprehensive. One school is the fourth worst (in terms of results) in the whole country, but it is not one of the secondary moderns, as might be expected, but the comprehensive school. Obviously, I do not know about any social conditions in this, or any other of the examples, which might influence these results, but the bare facts have massive implications for the concept that the comprehensive system provides the best education for all children. Here is telling evidence that this simply is not true: something that many people have been saying for a very long time.

Table 2

County LEAs with between 29 and 55 schools

	LEA	no. of schools	no. of grammars	% A*-C	overall position
1	Buckinghamshire	34	13	65.5	3
2	Gloucestershire	42	7	61.2	9
3	Cheshire	45		58.9	22
4	North Yorkshire	42	3	58.7	24
5	West Sussex	36		55.7	36
6	Somerset	30		54.9	40
7	Cambridgeshire	29		54.7	42
8	Cornwall	31		54.4	45
9	Warwickshire	37	5	54.0	49
10	Derbyshire	47		53.3	53
11	Cumbria	42	1	52.9	57
12	Devon	37	1	52.6	61
13	Worcestershire	29		52.0	63
14	Staffordshire	55		51.5	66
15	Oxfordshire	34		51.3	67
16	Northamptonshire	39		51.2	68
17	Norfolk	52		50.3	77
18	Nottinghamshire	48		46.6	97
19	Durham	36		44.6	111

Obviously, I am not advocating a return to secondary modern schools for Gloucestershire, but these figures are a salutary reminder that sometimes the old ways have much to commend them.

Of the 25 LEAs where more than 10% of the schools are grammar, 16 come in the top 50 in the country (the top third), whereas statistically, if the presence of grammar schools were to make no difference overall, there should be just eight or maybe nine: half the actual number. If grammar schools had the detrimental effect on other schools which the County Council (and others) imply they do, the number should be even less. All but two of these authorities come in the top 80 (just slightly more than the top half): this figure of 23 contrasts starkly with the statistical expectation of no more than 13 or 14. Significantly, there are four authorities with just a single grammar school appearing lower than 80th place, which is the expected number (six should be above 80th, and four below it). Of the two grammar-school authorities below 80th, Reading is the smallest with just two grammars out of seven schools in total, and Walsall has only just above 10% of grammar schools: two out of eighteen (11.1%). So these are two areas where the beneficial effect of the grammars is perhaps more likely to be lower.

To put things in a different way, 18 of the 25 LEAs are above the national average of pupils gaining five or more grades A* to C (representing nearly three-quarters of the total), with just seven below. Moreover, excluding Reading and Walsall, the lowest is just 2.5% below the national average (the lowest LEA in the country is 19% below it).

One way to compare the results for roughly similar areas, is to consider all the LEAs which comprise whole counties of similar size to Gloucestershire. Table 2 lists the 19 counties with between 29 and 55 schools (Gloucestershire, with 42, sits in the middle of this range). It has to be noted that not all of these LEAs control all the schools in the county (for example, in Derbyshire, Derby has its own LEA). However, all this means is that inner-city areas, which tend to produce lower results, are not included in the County's figures, which is to their benefit (as is the case with Derbyshire).

Yet again, the counties with grammar schools do best. Of the three with more than 10% of grammar schools, Buckinghamshire (with the most) is top, Gloucestershire is second, and Warwickshire is ninth. Most significantly, Oxfordshire, which is sandwiched between Gloucestershire and Buckinghamshire geographically, and also borders on to Warwickshire, is a lowly 13th (67th overall in the country), with 51.3% of pupils gaining five or more GCSE grades A* to C, against Buckinghamshire's 65.5 and Gloucestershire's 61.2. Another county also bordering Oxfordshire, Northamptonshire, is just below it. Adding in Worcestershire, which comes a little above Oxfordshire, there are six adjacent counties from the southern Midlands (all roughly comparable areas) of which three have grammar schools, and three do not. In the table, those with grammar schools are all above those without; two of them are way ahead. The similarity in the areas is highlighted by the fact that the three with only comprehensive schools are placed 63rd, 67th and 68th in the whole country, yet none of them can match the counties which have grammar schools.

Whichever way you consider the evidence, at GCSE level, LEAs operating a system which includes grammar schools outperform those which only have comprehensive schools. This can only be because other schools, far from being adversely affected by the grammar schools in the area, are positively assisted by them.

I have not been able to trace a complete table of LEAs for the results at A-level. However, Table 3 gives the top 31 authorities (those scoring more than 260 points). This includes 11 of the 25 LEAs which have a reasonable percentage of grammar schools, when statistically there should only be about five if grammar schools have no effect on other schools. This again shows that at A-level, authorities which have grammar schools outperform those with just comprehensives.

Gloucestershire is again right up at the top in 13th place. There are, in fact, only three areas above Gloucestershire in both the GCSE and the A-level tables, all with a high percentage of grammar schools (between 36% and 39%): Buckinghamshire (3rd & 5th), Sutton (4th & 11th) and Trafford (8th and 12th). This means that, taking the combined results, Gloucestershire is the fourth best LEA in the whole country, out of the 149 authorities. Yet, despite this, the County Council believes that the schools in Gloucester are failing so badly that the whole system is in need of a major overhaul. This does not make any sense. The Gloucester schools play a major part in the excellent overall

Table 3

Top 31 LEAs at A-level

	LEA	points	grammar	GCSE psn
1	Bournemouth	307.6	g	44
2	Darlington	302.3		70
3	Kirklees	298.6	(g)	91
4	Herefordshire	290.9		25
5	Buckinghamshire	282.7	g	3
6	Lincolnshire	282.4	g	30
7	Cambridgeshire	281.4		42
8	North Yorkshire	280.8	(g)	24
9	City of York	280.8		23
10	Shropshire	279.8		15
11	Sutton	277.2	g	5
12	Trafford	276.0	g	8
13	Gloucestershire	275.8	g	9
14	North Somerset	273.4		41
15	Lancashire	272.4	(g)	51
16	Hampshire	271.9		29
17	Brighton & Hove	271.7		90
18	Telford & Wrekin	269.5	g	76
19	Wirral	266.0	g	39
20	Cumbria	265.6	(g)	57
21	Wigan	264.9		74
22	Bexley	264.6	g	46
23	Havering	264.5		10
24	North Lincolnshire	263.8		95
25	Wokingham	262.8		6
26	Derbyshire	262.4		53
27	Warwickshire	262.0	g	49
28	Somerset	261.5		40
29	Oldham	261.4		110
30	West Berkshire	260.6		11
31	Barnet	260.2	g	16

KEY: The 'points' column is the average university entrance points per pupil (based on A-level grades obtained). A 'g' in the 'grammar' column denotes an authority with grammar schools; if it is in brackets, this indicates that less than 10% of the schools are grammars. The final column gives the position for that authority in the GCSE table.

quality of results for the whole county; any alteration will do irreparable damage to these incomparable results.

Here is overwhelming evidence that, on average, areas with grammar schools perform better overall. It is not just the children at the grammar schools who do well; all children receive an education that is best suited to their abilities and needs. The healthy sense of competition that is generated by a selective system may also play its part. Consequently, better results are achieved by all. It is further evidence against the oft-quoted fallacious ideal that mixing up abilities helps in some way to improve those of lesser ability. Whilst this might happen in a few cases, in general it simply is not true: standards drop overall, and the more intelligent children suffer as a result.

As for those who say that it is unfair on children to be categorized at the age of eleven, because some develop more after this age, the answer is simple. Yes, that does happen, but it is relatively rare. To compromise the education of the majority of children just to accommodate a few seems perverse. In the end, life is not always fair, and the best that can be hoped for is a system that gives the greatest benefits to the majority, which is what we currently have in Gloucester.

One final piece of evidence for the beneficial effects of having grammar schools: I have been told by the National Grammar Schools Association that Northern Ireland still has an entirely selective procedure in its schools. Results there overall are about 10% better than in England. No more need be said.

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1/2/04