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Academic selection: a brief overview

1 Introduction

This Briefing Note considers academic selection in Northern Ireland. It is prepared to support Committee for Education consideration of inquiry topics, and is not intended to be comprehensive.

2 A brief history of academic selection in Northern Ireland

Academic selection was introduced in 1947 and there was little interest in change at a policy level until 1997, when the Labour government asked for research on its effects.

Figure 1: Key events relating to academic selection 1998-2004¹



¹ Adapted from: Department of Education *A timeline of the development of transfer policy* [online] Available at: <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/articles/timeline-development-transfer-policy>

Subsequently, the then Minister for Education, Martin McGuinness MLA, established a Post-Primary Review Body (chaired by Gerry Burns) to consider potential options.² Its recommendations included:³

- **Ending transfer tests**; instead prioritising parental choice; and
- **Developing a pupil profile** to provide information on progress and help inform parental choice.

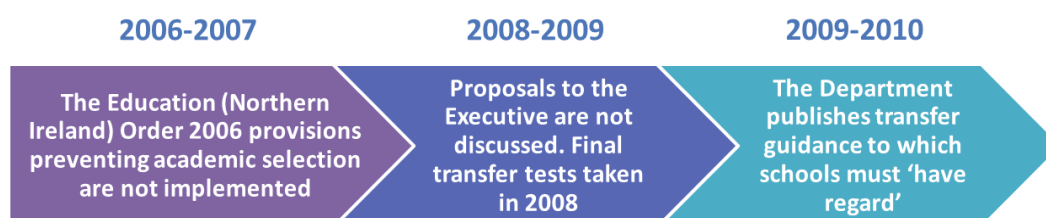
During a period of suspension of devolution, Jane Kennedy MP set up the Post-Primary Review Working Group in April 2003 (chaired by Steve Costello) to provide advice on potential options. The group submitted their report in November 2003, and Jane Kennedy MP accepted the recommendations in full.⁴ They included:⁵

- **Ending transfer tests** (with the last tests in 2008), with transfer instead based on parental and pupil choice, informed by the Pupil Profile; and
- **Introducing an Entitlement Framework** offering a broader curriculum.

With suspension continuing, the Labour government brought forward the Education (Northern Ireland) Order 2006 with provisions to prevent Boards of Governors from including academic ability when drawing up admissions criteria.⁶

However, in the negotiations leading to the St Andrew's Agreement, Prime Minister Tony Blair amended the provisions relating to academic selection so that the new devolved administration would decide whether or not to continue selection.⁷

Figure 2: Key events relating to academic selection 2006-2010⁸



Following the restoration of devolution, in May 2008 the then Education Minister Caitríona Ruane MLA submitted proposals to the Executive aiming to end academic

² Gallagher, T., Smith, A. (2003) *Research update: Attitudes to Academic Selection in Northern Ireland* Belfast: Ark

³ Burns (2001) *Report of the Review Body on Post-Primary Education* Bangor: Department of Education

⁴ Department of Education *A timeline of the development of transfer policy* [online] Available at: <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/articles/timeline-development-transfer-policy>

⁵ Costello (2004) *Future Post-Primary Arrangements in Northern Ireland: Advice from the Post-Primary Review Working Group* Bangor: Department of Education

⁶ Legislation.gov.uk *The Education (Northern Ireland) Order 2006* [online] Available at: <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/nisi/2006/1915/article/28/made>

⁷ Walker, A. (2010) *Selection challenged: The case against selection for 11+ Newtownards*: Colourpoint Books

⁸ Adapted from: Department of Education *A timeline of the development of transfer policy* [online] Available at: <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/articles/timeline-development-transfer-policy> and Walker, A. (2010) *Selection challenged: The case against selection for 11+ Newtownards*: Colourpoint Books

selection; the Executive did not discuss them. The last state-sponsored tests took place in November 2008.⁹

In the absence of a regulated approach, the Department of Education published guidance and policy for transfer in 2009 and 2010, to which schools were required to 'have regard,'¹⁰ with an updated policy published in September 2015. Key features of the policy included:¹¹

- Schools must **admit applicants to all available places** (statutory duty);
- Decisions on **admissions should not relate to academic ability**;
- Recommendations include **giving priority to pupils entitled to free school meals**, with other criteria relating to applicants with a sibling at the school, applicants coming from a named primary schools and applicants residing in a defined catchment area; and
- Primary schools must not depart from their statutory obligations to deliver the curriculum, and **should not facilitate unregulated tests in any way**.¹²

3 Where are we now?

On the 7th September 2016 the Minister for Education, Peter Weir MLA, released revised guidance on transfer, reversing the previous policy on preventing primary schools from facilitating unregulated tests. It allows schools to:¹³

- Supply support materials;
- Carry out preparation for tests during core teaching hours;
- Coach pupils in exam technique;
- Provide a location for testing; and
- Provide familiarisation with a testing environment.

The guidance also removes the provision within the previous guidance that decisions on admissions should not relate to academic ability, instead stating that it "supports the right of those schools wishing to use academic selection as the basis for admission." It

⁹ Department of Education *A timeline of the development of transfer policy* [online] Available at: <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/articles/timeline-development-transfer-policy>

¹⁰ Department of Education *A timeline of the development of transfer policy* [online] Available at: <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/articles/timeline-development-transfer-policy>

¹¹ Department of Education (2015) *Post-primary transfer policy* Bangor: DE

¹² Including by supplying support materials, carrying out preparation for unregulated tests during core teaching hours, offering afternoon school coaching or providing familiarisation with a testing environment.

¹³ Department of Education (2016) *Guidance to primary school principals, post-primary schools' Boards of Governors and principals, and the Education Authority on the process of transfer from primary to post-primary school from September 2016* Bangor: Department of Education

notes that the Department believes that academic selection can “enable social mobility”.

Two consortia offer the commercial, unregulated ‘transfer’ tests in Northern Ireland: the Post-Primary Transfer Consortium (PPTC) and the Association for Quality Education (AQE). Broadly, pupils from Catholic maintained schools take the PPTC tests, while those from controlled schools use the AQE test.

While both claim to be based on Key Stage 2 maths and English, they lack regulation and the tests differ in structure, style and format.¹⁴ The OECD states that the commercial tests are “driving and possibly distorting the curriculum,”¹⁵ while Elwood suggests that they are of dubious validity, reliability or comparability.¹⁶

4 Distribution of students to grammars and non-grammars

In 2015/16, of all students transferring to post-primary, the majority, 13,235 (60%) attended a non-grammar, while 8,964 (40%) attended a grammar.¹⁷

Socio-economic background is one of the key predictors of academic performance at school.¹⁸ In Northern Ireland there are greater concentrations of disadvantaged students in non-grammar schools than in grammars, using free school meal (FSM) entitlement as a proxy for deprivation).¹⁹

In 2015/16, 17% of all Year 8 pupils entitled to FSM attended a grammar, compared to 79% of their counterparts who attended a non-grammar.

Figure 1 below illustrates the larger concentration of students from disadvantaged backgrounds in non-grammar schools, together with the more socially advantaged intake in grammar schools.²⁰ At over two-thirds of grammar schools, fewer than 15.1% of pupils are entitled to FSM, while no non-selective schools fall into this bracket. At ten non-selective schools, over 60% of pupils have FSM entitlement.

¹⁴ Shewbridge, C., Hulshof, M., Nusche, D., Stenius Staehr, L. (2014) *OECD Reviews of Evaluation and Assessment in Education: Northern Ireland* OECD Publishing

¹⁵ Shewbridge, C., Hulshof, M., Nusche, D., Stenius Staehr, L. (2014) *OECD Reviews of Evaluation and Assessment in Education: Northern Ireland* OECD Publishing

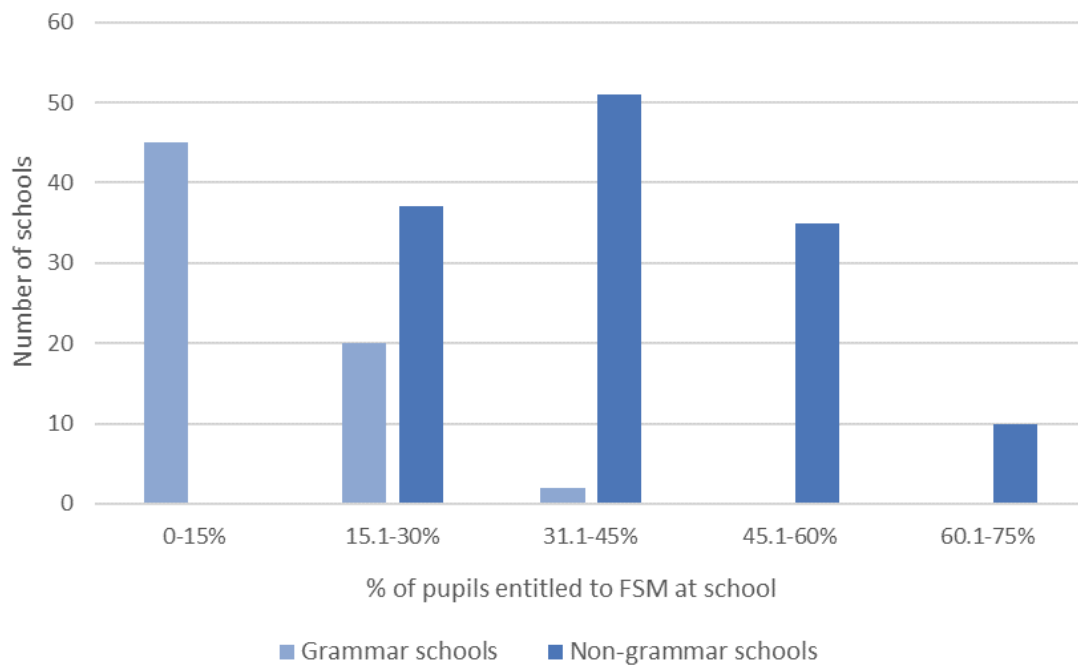
¹⁶ Elwood, J. (2011) *Assessment and Opportunity to Learn in the context of Northern Ireland: Assessment and Examination policy and practice development – for what and for whom?* Keynote address to the Association of Educational Assessment Europe 12th Annual Conference, Belfast, November 2011

¹⁷ Data provided by the Department of Education, June 2016

¹⁸ OECD (2011) *Against the Odds: Disadvantaged Students Who Succeed in School* Paris: OECD Publishing

¹⁹ Shewbridge, C., Hulshof, M., Nusche, D., Stenius Staehr, L. (2014) *OECD Reviews of Evaluation and Assessment in Education: Northern Ireland* OECD Publishing

²⁰ Data from the Department of Education (2015) *School enrolments - 2015/16 statistical bulletins* [online] Available at: <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/publications/school-enrolments-201516-statistical-bulletins> (Analysis by RaiSe)

Figure 1: Distribution of students entitled to FSM, 2015/16

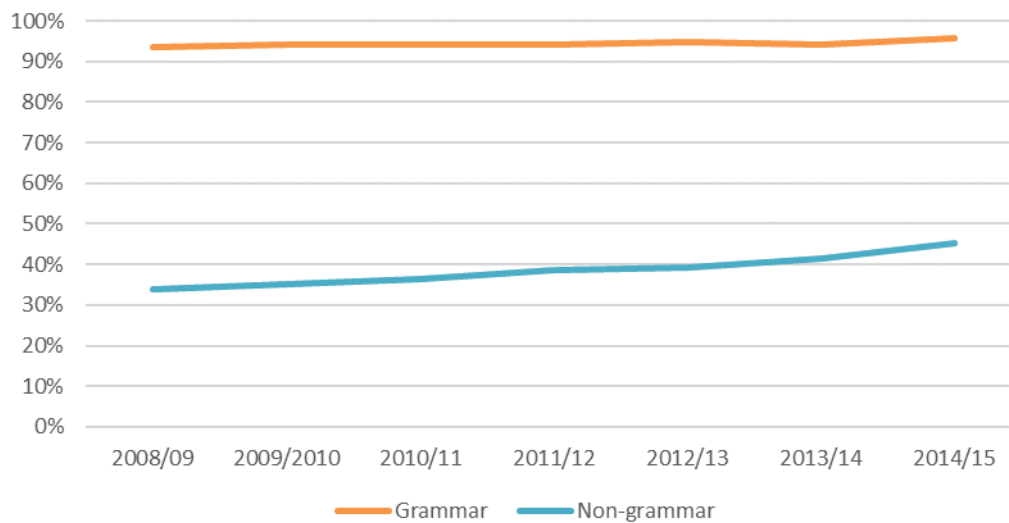
5 Academic outcomes at selective and non-selective schools

Data from the Department shows that around 95% of students at grammar schools achieve the GCSE threshold measure of five GCSEs at grades A*-C including English and maths, and that this has remained relatively static over the past seven years.

In 2014/15 at non-grammars, less than half (45%) of students achieved this measure, representing an increase of 11.4% since 2008/09.²¹ These findings are illustrated in Figure 2 overleaf.

²¹ Department of Education *School Leavers* [online] Available at: <https://www.deni.gov.uk/articles/school-leavers>

Figure 2: Proportion of school leavers with at least 5 GCSEs at grades A*-C including English and maths



6 Arguments around academic selection

Academic selection is a contentious subject with many stakeholders arguing for and against. Proponents of the system often suggest that grammar schools offer a direct route to higher education, and that grammars result in pupils in Northern Ireland accumulating higher grades than their counterparts in other jurisdictions.²²

There is evidence that many parents deem entry to grammar schools as prestigious, while others may oppose selection but feel bound to enter their children to the unregulated tests in order to gain access to certain high-performing schools.²³

However, the evidence indicates that the higher concentrations of disadvantaged students in non-grammars have a significant impact on academic outcomes, as well as on other contributing factors such as school attendance.²⁴

In addition, the high results among the top performers in Northern Ireland mask a long tail of underachievement.²⁵ The OECD notes that the selective system presents “clear structural challenges to equity.”²⁶

²² Gardner, J. (2016) “Education in Northern Ireland since the Good Friday Agreement: Kabuki theatre meets the danse macabre” *Oxford Review of Education* Vol.42, No.3, pp. 346-361

²³ Shewbridge, C., Hulshof, M., Nusche, D., Stenius Staehr, L. (2014) *OECD Reviews of Evaluation and Assessment in Education: Northern Ireland* OECD Publishing

²⁴ Shewbridge, C., Hulshof, M., Nusche, D., Stenius Staehr, L. (2014) *OECD Reviews of Evaluation and Assessment in Education: Northern Ireland* OECD Publishing

²⁵ Walker, A. (2010) *Selection challenged: The case against selection for 11+ Newtownards*: Colourpoint Books

²⁶ Shewbridge, C., Hulshof, M., Nusche, D., Stenius Staehr, L. (2014) *OECD Reviews of Evaluation and Assessment in Education: Northern Ireland* OECD Publishing

Other arguments against academic selection include the stress many children experience when sitting the test, implications for their self-esteem if they do not pass²⁷ and the perceived “stigma” associated with failing the transfer test.²⁸

7 Conclusion

The last state-sponsored transfer tests in Northern Ireland took place in 2008, and since then a system of unregulated tests has operated. New guidance allows primary schools to facilitate these tests.

Academic selection remains a contentious subject, with proponents arguing in favour of the high grades many students in Northern Ireland achieve in comparison to other jurisdictions. However, there is clear evidence that non-selective schools have much higher concentrations of disadvantaged pupils, with a range of implications, including for academic outcomes. Areas for consideration could include:

- The reliability and comparability of the unregulated system of tests;
- The implications of the unregulated tests for students, parents and schools;
- The high proportion of students who do not attend grammar schools;
- The concentration of disadvantaged students in non-selective schools, and the implications of this;
- The differences in academic outcomes for students from grammars and non-grammars;
- The implications of the selective school system for equity; and
- The implications of the selective system for other departmental objectives, for example, in relation to the departmental objective to close the performance gap and increase access and equality, and the Programme for Government indicator on reducing educational inequality.

²⁷ Walker, A. (2010) *Selection challenged: The case against selection for 11+ Newtownards*: Colourpoint Books

²⁸ Gardner, J. (2016) “Education in Northern Ireland since the Good Friday Agreement: Kabuki theatre meets the danse macabre” *Oxford Review of Education* Vol.42, No.3, pp. 346-361