

Grammar schools

Natural selection

The government doesn't want schools to select by ability. Some parents do

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MICHAEL GOVE, the education secretary, wants to offer parents who send their kids to state schools the same choice and quality that is available in the private sector. He has introduced reforms to allow popular state schools to expand and sink schools to shut. His new academies, which are largely free from local-authority control, are mostly popular. But in west Kent, parental demand has led to a potentially troubling development for Mr Gove: the prospect of the first new grammar school to be created for 50 years.

Some 164 grammar schools remain in England, remnants of a once-universal system of selection at the age of 11 that shunted most children into secondary moderns, and which was mostly abolished in the 1960s and 1970s. Grammars are the only state schools that can select which children to admit on academic grounds.

Getting into grammar school has become increasingly difficult. Nowadays it is not always enough for a child to pass the 11-plus entrance test. The most selective schools rank applicants according to their test scores, admitting only the best performers. Schools close to London have recruited ever more children from the capital, as ambitious parents

seek a quality education for their children on the cheap. West Kent's grammar schools are so competitive and so good that several fee-paying primary schools have sprung up to prepare pupils for the tests—a phenomenon vanishingly rare elsewhere.

Now a group of parents in Sevenoaks has collected 2,200 signatures, forcing Kent County Council to take seriously their campaign for a new grammar school. The town is currently served by a large, mixed-ability academy that has replaced two struggling comprehensives and by the private Sevenoaks School, which charges boarders some £28,600 (\$45,200) a year. Several hundred children depart every morning for selective schools in neighbouring Tonbridge and Tunbridge Wells. Their parents naturally want them to study closer to home.

Mike Whiting, Kent's lead councillor for education, is trying to work out whether it is possible to grant the parents' wishes. New grammar schools are banned, so the school would have to be a satellite campus of an existing one. They would have to use the same entrance criteria, which would be straightforward if students were admitted according to their exam results. But parents would prefer a community grammar school that serves local kids who have passed a floor standard in the entrance tests. Matters are complicated by a second group of parents, which plans to bid for a non-selective free school to be established on the same site as the proposed new grammar.

The prospect of a new grammar school is likely to unsettle the coalition. It is a touchy subject for the Tories: in 2007 David Cameron promised not to expand the grammar-school system, as part of his attempt to detoxify the party's image. David Willetts, the universities minister, argues that grammar schools entrench privilege because middle-class parents now prepare their children so well for the entrance exams that clever children who have not been coached do not pass. But Mr Gove has been less willing to criticise them. Such divisions delight Stephen Twigg, the shadow education secretary, who accuses the government of “expanding selection at 11 by the back door”. Expect more ragging.