British schools

The S-word
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An elite education should be open to all who can benefit, not just those who can pay

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NO exam question is as perplexing as how to organise schools to suit the huge variety of pupils they serve: rich and poor, clever and dim, early developers and late starters. Every country does it differently. Some try to spot talent early. Others winnow out the academic-minded only at 18. Some believe in parent-power. Others trust the state. Finland has state-run uniform comprehensives; Sweden, another good performer, has vouchers and lots of private schools.

The British system produces some world-class high-flyers, mainly in its private schools and the 164 selective state “grammar” schools that survived the cull in the 1960s and 1970s when the country moved to a non-selective system. But it serves neither its poor children nor its most troublesome ones well. The best state schools, especially the grammar schools, are colonised by the middle classes, and the whole system is disfigured by a long straggling tail of non-achievers.

Last week David Willetts, the Conservative education spokesman, set out what the Tories would do to rectify these failings. He said a lot of sensible things about freeing up the supply side in education and opening lots more independent state schools in poor areas. But the headlines came from his announcement that if the Tories came to power, they would open no more of their cherished grammar schools: in his view, they are no longer a ladder for the poor but bright.
In political terms, the move seemed an odd mixture of bravery (reacting to statistical evidence, caring about social mobility) and cynicism (despite now thinking that selection is a bad idea, the Tories will keep the existing grammar schools and their middle-class votes). Either way, it was a mistake: selection—and, yes, even elitism—are useful.

This paper has long argued that competition and freedom in education, as elsewhere, are the way to encourage innovation and raise standards for all. Parents should choose schools, and money follow the student, with more cash following the poorest and those who are hardest to teach. As for schools, they should have as much freedom as possible to decide what sort of school they want to be. The government should set some standards, measure exam results and so on; but parents, not bureaucrats, should decide which schools survive.

However, if parents choose schools, then schools must choose pupils, at least when too many apply to the same ones. Selection is not just inevitable in a system that fosters choice; it also has benefits. Grammar-school pupils do better in exams by half a grade on average—and a full grade if they come from poor families. Such a leg-up is good not just for the children enjoying those benefits but also for the country. Britain needs an elite—brilliant linguists, mathematicians, scientists, engineers—to compete with countries that focus more on excellence than egalitarianism. Restricting excellence just to those whose parents can afford to pay for it cannot make sense.

**Free up supply, don’t limit demand**

The old argument against the grammar-school system was that by selecting the brightest it condemned the masses to the scrapheap. But the point of a market is that competition brings innovation. If decisions on how to select pupils were really delegated to schools, some would undoubtedly offer a highly academic education to those with the ability to thrive on it. Others would specialise in music, or fine arts, or technical subjects—or, indeed, children who are hard to teach (especially if the latter came with the most state money). This point helps answer another longstanding concern—that, by creaming off the brightest, grammar schools are short-changing the average child, who loses the benefit of their company. That would be less of a worry if the alternatives to a highly academic education also become more attractive.

The new concern, rightly raised by the Tories, is that grammar schools no longer help enough clever poor children. Mr Willetts worries about meritocracy. Here his diagnosis seems right, but his remedy wrong. With richer parents coaching their children furiously, the few grammar schools that remain are largely middle-class enclaves: only 2% of their students are entitled to free school meals, compared with 12% in their local areas. This is indeed a shocking figure. But it is surely an argument for better early teaching for poor children or building more selective secondary schools, not an argument to abandon even that 2% by banning academic selection.

Social mobility is a good thing, and the Tories are right to want to foster it. But so is an elite. After all, there's not much point in moving upwards if there's nowhere to go.