

SFCA's position on plans to expand selective education

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Yesterday, the government published [*Schools that work for everyone*](#) a consultation paper aimed at *increasing the number of good school places for all children*. The Secretary of State for Education Justine Greening made a statement on the consultation shortly afterwards. The statement, and the debate that followed, can be found [here](#). The government's plans include:

- expecting independent schools to support existing or open new state schools, or offer funded places to children whose families can't afford to pay fees
- asking universities to commit to sponsoring or setting up new schools in exchange for the ability to charge higher fees
- allowing selective schools to expand, or new ones to open, while making sure they support non-selective schools
- allowing new faith free schools to select up to 100% of pupils based on their faith, and introducing new requirements to make sure that faith schools include pupils from different backgrounds

SFCA shares the government's ambition to create an education system that works for everyone, not just the privileged few. We agree that it is important to deliver a diverse school system that gives all children, whatever their background, the opportunity to help them achieve their potential. Sixth Form Colleges are ideally placed to help the government to meet these objectives: the sector outperforms school and academy sixth forms while educating more disadvantaged students and receiving less funding. They also offer superior value for money by delivering better outcomes than schools and academies at a lower cost to the public purse. The plans unveiled yesterday have potentially far reaching implications for Sixth Form Colleges, so each proposal is explored in more detail below.

On the first proposal, the government should look beyond the independent sector and consider how greater investment in Sixth Form Colleges could ensure they, rather than just independent schools, *can bring their considerable expertise and impressive ethos to bear on the state sector to ensure more children can be taught at good schools*. For example, one suggestion for improving

schools in the state sector is *to provide sixth-form scholarships to a proportion of pupils in each year 11 at a local school; assisting with their teaching; or helping them with university applications*. Sixth Form Colleges are ideally placed to engage in these sort of activities, and have far greater experience of dealing with the diverse range of students that are educated in the state sector. Data from HESA indicates that on average, students from Sixth Form Colleges do better than their peers from independent schools when they reach university - securing better degree classifications for example.

Much of the above is also relevant to the government's second proposal – encouraging universities to engage more closely with the schools system. If the government is serious about improving the *quality and diversity* of sixth form students who go on to study at higher education institutions, it should look to Sixth Form Colleges. The sector has far greater reach than independent schools and greater expertise than both independent schools and universities in this area. The [SFCA Manifesto 2015](#) emphasised the quality of Sixth Form Colleges, coupled with the diversity of their intake (all at a lower cost to the public purse). And while just 3.7% of grammar school students were eligible for free school meals at the age of 15, that number rises to 11.3% in Sixth Form Colleges. So universities must do more, but this should be in partnership with other sectors and not in return for an increase in fees. Tuition fees of £9,000 per year are high enough – twice as much as the average amount of funding received by 16-19 institutions that typically offer more taught hours and greater one to one support. Greater investment in sixth form education to address this funding disparity is urgently required, and the impact of underinvestment in this phase of education is [stark](#).

Understandably, much of the public, political and media attention has focused on the government's third proposal. Some numbers may be useful here. There are currently 163 grammar schools in England with a total of 167,000 pupils. Every grammar school has a sixth form – there are around 50,000 16-18 year olds enrolled at a grammar school compared to 161,000 in Sixth Form Colleges. Grammar school sixth forms tend to be larger than non-selective school or academies (302 students compared to 201), but are much smaller than Sixth Form Colleges that have an average of 1,716 students.

The arguments for and against grammar schools are well rehearsed and do not bear repeating in full here. A familiar refrain from opponents is that the proposals to increase and expand grammar schools are 'politically-driven' rather than 'evidence based'. But the real issue is the selective use of evidence to justify a preferred policy direction. For example, the consultation document cites a 2008 report by the Sutton Trust to support the contention that the high performance of grammars *does not merely reflect the higher ability intakes of selective schools* and confidently reports the same study found *no adverse effects of existing grammar schools on GCSE results for pupils in other schools*. Perhaps unsurprisingly, it does not refer to the conclusion of a [related Sutton Trust](#)

[study](#), also published in 2008, that *England's remaining grammar schools are enrolling half as many academically able children from disadvantaged backgrounds as they could do*, or a [Sutton Trust report from 2013](#) that identified more than four times as many grammar school entrants were from the independent sector than were eligible for free school meals. This led Chair Sir Peter Lampl to make clear in his foreword to the report that *this picture is one that most grammar schools and supporters of grammar schools should not be happy about*.

If the government proceeds with plans to allow existing grammar schools to expand, and permits the establishment of new selective schools, it is highly likely that this will result in an increase in the number of selective school or academy sixth forms. The [Spens Report](#) on secondary education published in 1938 concluded that *there is general agreement that much of what is most valuable in the grammar school tradition depends on the existence of a sixth form*, and given that all existing grammar schools have a sixth form it is very possible that this 80 year old shibboleth will continue to influence the government's thinking in this area. SFCA will assemble the evidence to ensure that it does not, and will instead emphasise the role that Sixth Form Colleges (large, comprehensive, diverse, high performing, efficient) already play in *making Britain a country that works for everyone, not just the privileged few*. We will also highlight what more could be done with greater investment. The consultation repeats a theme that has been present in education policy for many years, particularly since 2010 – *the need to deliver a diverse school system*. To date, this diversity has not included the creation of more Sixth Form Colleges, and that has been a huge missed opportunity.

Many Sixth Form Colleges are former grammar schools, and have retained the high quality ethos shared by institutions across the sector. And all sixth form providers (colleges, schools, academies) are 'selective' in the sense that they have entry requirements to ensure that students are equipped to meet the demands of 16-19 education in all its diversity. But this is very different to selection by ability at age 11, something that evidence reveals is a barrier to social mobility, and the expansion of which is very unlikely to help realise the Prime Minister's [ambition](#) of *a country that works not for a privileged few, but for every one of us*.

The government's fourth proposal relates to faith schools, and in particular to removing the cap on faith based admissions. This will be of particular interest to the 15 Catholic Sixth Form Colleges in England and Wales, all of which are SFCA members. SFCA will work closely with ACVIC, the Association of Catholic Sixth Form Colleges, in developing our response to these proposals. The deadline for responses to the [government's consultation](#) is 12th December and SFCA will develop a response on behalf of all its members. Our overriding message will be – don't forget Sixth Form Colleges.