

Schools that work for everyone consultation

Response from the Sixth Form Colleges Association

December 2016

In September 2016, the government published *Schools that work for everyone*, a consultation paper aimed at *increasing the number of good school places for all children*. 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

The Sixth Form Colleges Association (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 in the consultation have potentially far reaching implications for Sixth Form Colleges, so we respond to each of the four proposals below.

Independent schools

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.

Universities

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](#).

Selective schools

Understandably, much of the public, political and media attention has focused on the government's third proposal. 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.

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.

Instead, the government should look more closely at 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*. 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*.

Selection, at the start of sixth form, is just another term for information, advice and guidance (IAG). Its specific purpose is to ensure that young people choose a pathway and a small number of subjects that best suit their interests, aptitudes and ability. It is something that has happened successfully for generations in both schools and Sixth Form Colleges. It does not entail the automatic and inevitable creation of secondary modern schools designed to accommodate all the young people who failed their selection tests.

Selection at 16 makes sense. At 16, there are choices to make, different pathways to follow, and expert guidance is essential. Selection at 11 is not the same thing; it is a segregation of children, according not just to ability or merit, but also to socio-economic background and social advantage, who will all follow the same curriculum. The problem with selection at 11 is that many of those aspirational families with above average ability children will be disappointed. Their children will not pass a selection test. And the alternative facing them will not be a comprehensive school; it will be a secondary modern, an environment from which the most able 10-20% have been extracted.

Selection is not always a bad thing. If we are to leverage more social mobility that really makes a difference, we could do worse than look at the benefits of selection where selection is needed and natural – at 16. What we need is more high quality sixth form provision, with specialist experts in Sixth Form Colleges geared up to nurture young people from more disadvantaged backgrounds and prepare them for admission, survival and success at university and beyond. Unlike some smaller school sixth forms, where there may be less experience and expertise and fewer choices for students, Sixth Form Colleges, with their tradition of high quality provision, their curriculum breadth, successful outcomes and aspirational destinations for young people from less well-off families, represent the best alternative to grammar schools

Faith schools

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 inclusive and very high performing. Many are interested in either becoming 16-19 academies, or establishing 16-19 free schools and this proposal could be a helpful step on that journey.

For more information about this submission, please contact James Kewin at SFCA:
james.kewin@sixthformcollege.org