

Written evidence submitted by Comprehensive Future

Submission to the Education Select Committee inquiry: The impact of COVID-19 on education and children's services

Comprehensive Future campaigns for fair school admissions and to end 11-plus selection. We are submitting evidence to highlight the problems facing children sitting the 11-plus during this pandemic year, particularly children from disadvantaged backgrounds with limited resources for home schooling.

Background to the 11-plus test

There are 163 grammar schools in England, plus 38 partially selective schools that select a proportion of their pupils on the basis of an attainment test. Around 100,000 children sit the 11-plus exam each year, with 12 local authorities operating fully selective school systems where 25% or more secondary pupils attend grammar schools.

Year 6 primary pupils sit the 11-plus test in September, sometimes as early as the first week back at school. The pandemic means problems with operating the test safely but also significant problems with the equity of this test.

The 11-plus test assesses English and Maths attainment as well as verbal and non-verbal reasoning skills. Importantly, Maths and English skills are taught as part of the primary school curriculum. The 11-plus decides the future of a child's secondary education yet many children will be disadvantaged by circumstances that are not conducive to studying at home. Some children will be disadvantaged by a lack of internet, technology or a suitable place to work, others may have time poor parents, or parents who lack the kind of education and teaching skills needed to help their children with schooling.

The result of the 11-plus test matters. Studies show that attending a grammar school in a selective area can raise exam performance, while attending a non-selective school in a selective area can adversely affect attainment.¹ The gap in educational experience this year suggests that the test will be especially unfair: more reflection of family circumstances than a test of a child's 'ability.'

The impact of lockdown on primary children who sit the 11-plus

Home-based learning has become the norm during lockdown, exposing deep inequalities in children's access to learning resources. Children from the most disadvantaged backgrounds are suffering disproportionately; in particular, lockdown has drawn attention to the wide differences in internet access and the affordability of equipment for poorer and more affluent families.

Research shows:

- Children from better-off households are spending 30% more time each day on educational activities than children from the poorest households.²

¹Social Mobility and Higher Education: Are grammar schools the answer? <https://www.hepi.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/Social-Mobility-and-Higher-Education-Are-grammar-schools-the-answer.pdf>

- 11-plus test tutors are offering video conference lessons to families who can afford coaching. A study showed that fewer than 10% of children from families with below-average incomes received 11-plus coaching, compared with 30% from households in the top quarter. Around 70% of those who received tutoring got into a grammar school, compared with 14% of those who did not.³
- Some headteachers have said that in their school, up to 40% of pupils do not have a home computer, while many pupils have no internet or phone.⁴

Opposition to running the 11-plus in Northern Ireland

In Northern Ireland, a decision to delay the 11-plus by 2 weeks has been met with opposition. A parent is taking legal action against the decision, claiming it is unfair to expect children to sit the test after the disruption to their schooling during lockdown.⁵ Archbishop of Armagh, Eamon Martin, the head of the Catholic Church has called for grammar schools to adopt alternative admissions this year.⁶

Comprehensive Future accepts that there are no easy answers to the problems of the 11-plus this year. However, the impact of the Covid 19 crisis and lockdown has laid bare the inherent inequality and unfairness of selective education. The long term solution is to end all school admission tests and establish a fully comprehensive education.

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² Institute for Fiscal Studies, Learning during the lockdown: real-time data on children's experiences during home learning <https://www.ifs.org.uk/publications/14848>

³ Guardian, 'An education arms race': inside the ultra-competitive world of private tutoring' <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2018/dec/05/an-education-arms-race-inside-the-ultra-competitive-world-of-private-tutoring>

⁴ Guardian, 'The gap will be bigger than ever': grammar school exams still going ahead', <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2020/apr/25/the-gap-will-be-bigger-than-ever-grammar-school-exams-still-going-ahead>

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<http://www.irishnews.com/paywall/tsb/irishnews/irishnews/irishnews//news/northernirelandnews/2020/05/15/news/11-plus-test-delay-to-be-challenged-in-courts-1939003/content.html>

⁶ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-52713062>