

Prydain

*The Welsh Policy Centre
Canolfan Polisi Cymru*

Producing the Meritocracy:

The case for
selective education
in Wales



About the Author

Dr Ewan Lawry

Ewan is an academic who has recently secured a doctorate at Aberystwyth University after successfully defending his doctoral thesis on the anti-appeasers in Britain during the interwar period. He is also Chairman of Mid and West Wales Area Conservatives and sits on the Welsh Party Board.



About the Prydain Centre

The Prydain Centre, also known as the Welsh Policy Centre is a new thinktank established to shape the centre-right agenda in Wales. With a new political landscape emerging as we head into the 2026 Senedd Election, and as we continue to understand what a UK Labour Government means for the country, Prydain strongly believes the centre-right needs to engage in the policy space, to have the well-defined and researched ideas to challenge the progressive left's hegemony in Welsh politics.

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Producing the Meritocracy: The case for selective education in Wales

'...the advance of human development depends entirely on the right to think, to speak and to use reason, and allow what I call the upsurge to come from the bottom to reach the top'.

-Ernest Bevin¹

'...every child from Bricktown Secondary School who secures a commission, or a position in the administrative civil service, or a controlling place in industry or commerce, is a portent of an immense social change, the slow creation of an elite of merit, a transfer of power to those whose qualifications for wielding it is neither birth nor wealth, but talent'.

-Eric James, High Master of Manchester Grammar School²

'The grammar schools realised quite suddenly... that they could get as many boys in Oxford and Cambridge as were clever enough, and that made things far more competitive. Ten years ago half the boys at Eton went to Oxford and Cambridge: now its only a third.'

-Robert Birley, Head Master of Eton College³

Wales is suffering from a prolonged educational crisis.⁴ Whilst the UK is experiencing a growth in homeschooling, persistent absence, and low teacher recruitment/retention rates, Wales's 2022 Programme of International Student Assessment (PISA) scores show pupils, especially the poorest, continuing the trend since 2006 of falling far behind English, Scottish, and Northern Irish contemporaries.⁵ One could point to any number of causes, the ongoing social damage of Covid-19 lockdowns, the debunked teaching methods leaving pupils functionally illiterate, the dopamine hit of mindless TikTok scrolling, funding deficiencies, overstretched teachers, the loss of discipline. However, such dire circumstances present a unique opportunity to radically

¹ A. Bullock, *Ernest Bevin: Foreign Secretary 1945-51* (London: William Heinemann, 1960), p.92

² E. James, *Education and Leadership* (London: Harrap, 1951), p.38

³ A. Sampson, *The Anatomy of Britain* (Hodder and Stoughton: London, 1962), p.190

⁴ 'Children's reading standards "a lottery" in Wales', BBC News, 18th July 2024, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cn051y04e4qo>; 'Inside the reading crisis leaving thousands of children in Wales unable to read', ITV News, 25th Sept. 2024, <https://www.itv.com/news/2024-09-25/inside-the-reading-crisis-leaving-thousands-of-children-in-wales-unable-to-read>;

⁵ 'The school system is broken': Why more parents are home-educating their children', BBC InDepth, 16th Dec. 2024, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/czr3le77plro>; 'Number of children "severely absent from school in England rises-figures', *Independent*, 17th Oct. 2024, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/england-data-government-department-for-education-dfe-b2630909.html>; 'Teacher recruitment and retention crisis shows no sign of abating, new report reveals', National Foundation for Educational Research, 20th March 2024, <https://www.nfer.ac.uk/press-releases/teacher-recruitment-and-retention-crisis-shows-no-signs-of-abating-new-report-reveals/>; PISA 2022: National Report for Wales (Dec. 2023), <https://www.gov.wales/sites/default/files/statistics-and-research/2023-12/pisa-2022-national-report-wales-059.pdf>; 'Poorest pupils in Wales "significantly" behind their peers, study says', *WalesOnline*, 18th July 2022, <https://www.walesonline.co.uk/news/poorest-pupils-wales-significantly-behind-24514064>; 'Schools in Wales: Testing times as pupil gaps widen', *BBC News*, 11th Dec. 2023, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-wales-67456134>

rethink education in Wales, free of shibboleths and sacred cows, and to place the needs and abilities of every pupil at the heart of a meritocratic system of academic selection.

In 1962, Anthony Sampson recorded a headmaster claiming ‘I think we’ve got the Establishment on the run’.⁶ The ‘we’ were the grammar schools in that revolutionary, post-war educational experiment that offered the most able children, regardless of background, the opportunity to flourish. The results were astonishing and, as Wooldridge observes, a meritocratic revolution was underway.⁷ That was until the 1960s and 1970s, when governments of both parties oversaw the destruction of the selective system, making the comforting, but false promise that comprehensive schools would offer everyone the chance to experience the undoubted quality of a grammar school education. Instead, abolishing selection heralded a decline in standards that punishes state school pupils to this day. Fifty years on, all but one of the top 50 state schools are drawn from the remaining rump of grammar schools.⁸

The purpose of this paper is not a nostalgia-driven cry for a long-dead schooling system, but rather to argue for a modern, meritocratic system of selective education. Schools have an integral role in producing an educated, skilled workforce able to participate in the modern, knowledge-based, global economy. Periodically, leading Conservatives propose overturning the 1998 ban on new grammar schools, but these almost never mean more than an eye-catching headline.⁹ However, this paper builds on the history of this transformational approach to education and draws on international comparisons to make the case for the principle of selection by ability, with education that fits the needs of the child, to set out the vision for building a Welsh education system fit for the twenty first century.

The Rise and Fall of Academic Selection

Long before the post-Second World War national system of academic selection was implemented, Wales was widely respected for its high educational standards. Rooted in the 1889 Welsh Intermediate Education Act, which established intermediate (between primary and secondary) and technical education and long predating an English equivalent, by 1914 a greater proportion of Welsh pupils were

⁶ Sampson, *Anatomy of Britain*, p.191

⁷ A. Wooldridge, *The Aristocracy of Talent: How Meritocracy Made the Modern World* (London: Allan Lane, 2021), p.234

⁸ ‘School League tables 2024: the best UK secondary schools revealed’, <https://www.thetimes.com/schools-league-table>

⁹ For instance, see ‘Theresa May to end ban on new grammar schools’, *The Guardian*, 9th Sept. 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2016/sep/09/theresa-may-to-end-ban-on-new-grammar-schools>; ‘Grammar schools back on the agenda as Liz Truss becomes PM’, *Schools Week*, 5th Sept. 2022, <https://schoolsweek.co.uk/grammar-schools-back-on-the-agenda-as-liz-truss-becomes-pm/>; R. Long, S. Danechi, A. Maisuria, ‘Grammar schools in England’ research briefing, House of Commons Library, 13th March 2023, <https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/SN07070/SN07070.pdf>.

going on to secondary and higher education than anywhere in Western Europe, except Scotland.¹⁰ This advanced ladder of social mobility continued to be enhanced in the interwar period. The 1926 Hadow Report, which proposed dividing education at 11 and laying the groundwork for the selective system, recognised that there ‘are diversities of gifts, and for that reason there must be diversity of educational provision’ that did not ‘press different types of character and intelligence into a single mould’.¹¹ Until 1944, however, British secondary education continued to be an ad hoc creation, provided by local government, charity, and churches, with geographically variable access and uneven resourcing.

The 1944 Education Act sought to provide universal, free secondary education in England and Wales (Northern Ireland followed in 1947, whilst Scotland had begun this transition in 1918) appropriate to the abilities of pupils, regardless of background. In the post-war world, with vast swathes of the economy nationalised and centrally planned, the education system was to tackle the great social evil of Ignorance as ‘no community can afford to waste any of its talent’, with none ‘employed below their capacity’.¹² This resulted in the tripartite system of state-funded or direct grant grammar schools (providing a highly academic education), secondary moderns (less academically demanding, with a greater practical skills focus), and technical schools (for those adept in mechanical and scientific subjects).¹³ Each was intended to have parity of esteem, with pupils placed based on an examination in their final year of primary school (the 11 plus). The promise of social mobility, disregarding wealth and background, meant that the system enjoyed widespread, cross-party support in its early years. This was particularly so in the Labour Party where selective education had been championed as a means of helping the poorest access the ‘ladder of opportunity’ by the Fabians Sidney and Beatrice Webb and, later, the left-wing firebrands Aneurin Bevan and Minister of Education Ellen Wilkinson.

However, despite the laudable aims and theoretical parity of esteem, the tripartite system was infamously alleged to have produced a ‘left behind’ culture with ‘sink schools’ suffering from an imbalance in resourcing, less able teachers, and a lack of social prestige, while the technical schools never appeared in the envisaged quantities. In July 1958, the Labour Party, in a fit of egalitarian dogma, promised an undeliverable ‘grammar-school education for all’.¹⁴ By this point, proponents of a comprehensive system within Labour’s ranks were in the ascendancy, finding their champion in

¹⁰ Welsh Intermediate Education Act 1889, <https://education-uk.org/documents/acts/1889-welsh-intermediate-education-act.html>; G.E. Jones, G.W. Roderick, *A History of Education in Wales* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2003), p.90

¹¹ Report of the Consultative Committee on the Education of the Adolescent (London: HM Stationery Office, 1926), pp.78-79

¹² W. Beveridge, *The Pillars of Security and Other War-Time Essays and Addresses* (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd, 1943), p.84

¹³ The basis of this system lay in the 1938 Spens and 1943 Norwood reports, see Report of the Consultative Committee on Secondary Education with Special Reference to Grammar Schools and Technical High Schools (London: HM Stationery Office, 1938); Curriculum and Examinations in Secondary Schools: Report of the Committee of the Secondary School Examinations Council appointed by the President of the Board of Education in 1941 (London: HM Stationery Office, 1943)

¹⁴ ‘A Grammar School Education for All’, *The Times*, 7th July 1958, p.5

Education Secretary Anthony Crosland, whose self-declared aim in the mid-1960s was to ‘destroy every last f***** grammar school in England. And Wales. And Northern Ireland’.¹⁵ Several local authorities were already shifting away from the tripartite system, but Crosland oversaw a more sustained assault. Over the following decade, many of the old grammar schools closed or merged with nearby secondary moderns, peaking during the premiership of Conservative grammar schoolboy Edward Heath, with grammar schoolgirl Margaret Thatcher as education secretary.¹⁶ Harold Wilson’s second government formally abolished selection by ability in 1976, a move repealed once Thatcher became prime minister three years later. However, there were only the smallest steps back in the 1980s, with Wales’s last selective state school, Whitland Grammar School in Carmarthenshire, closing in 1988, and any new grammar schools banned by law in 1998.¹⁷

As of 2025, there are 163 state-run grammar schools left in England, Northern Ireland continues to operate a selective system, whilst Wales and Scotland are fully comprehensive. One could cite any number of examples of a deliberate watering down of the curriculum and GCSE and A-level examinations to make the comprehensives, and therefore successive governments, look successful.¹⁸ But more instructive is that fact that Northern Ireland continues to outperform the rest of the UK in both GCSEs and A-Levels.¹⁹ At the same time private and homeschooling is booming. The principle of selection, if not the 11 plus model, remains popular, offering the opportunity to obtain quality education without the vast private sector costs.²⁰ No one has offered the tailored opportunities available in successful countries. Instead of ‘elite grammar schools’ versus ‘under-resourced sink schools’, other countries have developed streaming throughout (the Netherlands) or enabling parents to make informed decisions on four types of school based on the child’s abilities (Germany). No one can credibly claim that Welsh education is even a shadow of its former self, but the 1889 Welsh Intermediate Education

¹⁵ S. Crosland, *Tony Crosland* (London: Cape, 1982), p.148

¹⁶ S. Danechi, *Grammar School Statistics* (London: House of Commons Library, 2020), p.4

¹⁷ R. Long, S. Danechi, A. Maisuria, *Grammar schools in England* (London: House of Commons Library, 2023), pp.21-23

¹⁸ ‘Eh Level? Government’s pledge to toughen up GCSEs and A-Levels in tatters as marks needed for top grades are lowered to prevent massive fall in results this summer’, *The Sun*, 13th Aug. 2017,

<https://www.thesun.co.uk/news/4233767/governments-pledge-to-toughen-up-gcses-and-a-levels-in-tatters-as-marks-needed-for-top-grades-are-lowered-to-prevent-massive-fall-in-results-this-summer/>; ‘Why is Ofqual trying to dumb down English exams?’, *The Spectator*, 3rd Nov. 2021, <https://www.spectator.co.uk/article/why-is-ofqual-trying-to-dumb-down-english-exams/>; ‘90% of schools rated “good” or “outstanding” is “nonsense”, ex-Ofsted boss says’, *Daily Mirror*, 25th Oct. 2023, <https://www.mirror.co.uk/news/uk-news/90-schools-rated-good-outstanding-31273501>

¹⁹ ‘Almost a third of Northern Ireland students achieve top A-Level grades’, *UTV*, 15th Aug. 2024, <https://www.itv.com/news/utv/2024-08-15/ni-punching-above-its-weight-with-a-level-results-says-education-minister>; ‘GCSE 2024 results in Northern Ireland as “pandemic awarding arrangements” end’, *BelfastLive*, 22nd Aug. 2024, <https://www.belfastlive.co.uk/news/northern-ireland/gcse-2024-results-northern-ireland-29788555>; ‘Northern Ireland comes out top in GCSE pass rates yet again in 82.7%, compared to 67% in England and 62% in Wales’, *Belfast News Letter*, 22nd Aug. 2024, <https://www.newsletter.co.uk/education/northern-ireland-comes-out-top-in-gcse-pass-rates-yet-again-with-827-compared-to-67-in-england-and-62-in-wales-4752654>

²⁰ W. Tanner, ‘What do voters think of grammar schools?’, *Onward*, 1st Aug. 2022, <https://www.ukonward.com/reports/what-do-voters-think-of-grammar-schools/>

Act began a process that produced a confident, educated nation able to play its part in the world. Over a century later, that spirit has long since seeped away.

The case for selection

At the heart of selective education is a simple principle: that it is preferable to provide an education catered to the child's abilities and needs, rather than the wealth of their parents. The comprehensive system has not produced the promised 'grammar school education for all'. It has entrenched selection by wealth, becoming, in the words of New Labour's Andrew Adonis, 'a force for rigorous segregation', with the ability to pay fees, buy a house in a certain catchment area, or feigning religious belief as the only ways to access a 'good' education.²¹ Often, comprehensives seek to recreate the environment and culture of the selective system through streaming but, as sociologist Frank Musgrove pointed out in 1979, 'the upper classes kept their Public Schools; the working classes lost theirs'.²² The remaining rump of grammar schools are besieged by those who can afford the expensive tutoring industry (entirely a product of the limited number of places).²³ It is now the duty of policymakers to ensure that this is put right and that poorer children are empowered to access the educational pathways in which they will flourish.

One common argument deployed by opponents of academic selection is that grammar schools tend to have a lower number of pupils on free school meals, but as the Sutton Trust, no advocate of selection, acknowledges, that patterns gleaned from the current crop of grammar schools cannot be applied to a national system.²⁴ More can be productively gleaned from the old tripartite system since, as former Chief Inspector of Schools Chris Woodhead remarked when faced with the claim that grammar schools hark back to the 1950s, 'So what? Maybe the 50s had it right'.²⁵ Then, as he further noted, the grammar schools were 'working class institutions'. The 1954 Gurney-Dixon Report recorded 64.4 percent of grammar school pupils coming from working-class backgrounds and, in time, Sampson described a

²¹ A. Adonis, S. Pollard, *A Class Act: The Myth of Britain's Classless Society* (London: Penguin Books, 1998), p.55

²² F. Musgrove, *School and the Social Order* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, Ltd, 1979), p.92

²³ For instance, 'Grammar schools: Some still failing to let in poorer pupils', BBC News, 21st Feb. 2023, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-64714201>; M. Dickson, L. Macmillan, 'Briefing note: Inequality in access to grammar schools', Centre for Education Policy & Equalising Opportunities, University College London, April 2020, <https://repec-cepeo.ucl.ac.uk/cepeob/cepeobn3.pdf>

²⁴ R. Coe, K. Jones, J. Searle, D. Kokotsaki, A. Mohd Kosnin, P. Skinner, 'Evidence on the effects of selective educational systems: A report for the Sutton Trust', CEM Centre, Durham University, Oct. 2008, p.236. For an example of this nonsense argument, see 'The Labour Party should complete its unfinished revolution', *SchoolsWeek*, 8th July 2024, <https://schoolsweek.co.uk/the-labour-party-should-complete-its-unfinished-revolution/>.

²⁵ C. Woodhead, 'The Virtues of Grammar Schools', 8th Jan. 2015, <https://www.buckingham.ac.uk/news/sir-chris-woodhead-blog-the-virtues-of-grammar-schools/>

‘flood’ then going up to Oxford and Cambridge.²⁶ Between 1955 and 1967, the hitherto public school-dominated Oxbridge found the proportion of their privately educated intake declining from 55 to 38 percent, replaced almost entirely by the products of grammar schools.²⁷ As significant was the challenge that the grammar schools presented to public school dominance. As early as 1945, the headmaster of Winchester College speculated that parents would no longer be willing to pay the high costs of the public schools system ‘when they can get State-aided education of a rapidly improving quality... for nothing’.²⁸ By 1963, an internal Westminster School report revealed that average marks in several subjects were below the national average, whilst a survey published in *The Times* a year later put the most famous public schools, including Eton, Harrow, and Charterhouse, in the ‘high fees, low A-levels’ category.²⁹ Accordingly, between 1955 and 1978, the proportion of children attending public schools fell from 6.7 percent to 4.5, whilst one prominent headmaster subsequently speculated that ‘sixty per cent of the public schools would have gone under if the grammar schools had remained’.³⁰ Put simply, the public schools could not compete with the grammar schools and, rather than tinkering with VAT on private schools fees, it was high-quality state education that delivered what successive generations of Labour politicians have vainly grasped after.

The success of grammar school pupils was replicated in other spheres, from painter and decorator’s son Alan Rickman, the engineer’s daughter Joan Bakewell, and the Co-op butcher’s son Alan Bennett. Of course, not every grammar school child went on to such heady heights, but, in 1962, half of civil service permanent secretaries, the chairmen of the National Coal Board, ICI, and Unilever were the products of grammar schools.³¹ Now consider how these professions, journalism, the arts, politics and broadcasting, continue to be dominated by the privately educated. In 2016, the Sutton Trust found that 61% of top doctors, 48% of senior civil servants, 51% of leading journalists, 67% of British main Oscars winners, and 42% of British main BAFTAs winners attended independent schools.³² Inequality is inevitable, but clearly, the comprehensive system is unable to mediate it in any substantive way.

For less academic pupils, it cannot be denied that the old tripartite system did not live up to the promised parity of esteem in secondary moderns. This left, so the tale usually goes, disappointed ‘also ran’ 11-year olds facing further social ignominy and bad teaching by attending what were often seen as

²⁶ These were recorded as being the children of those in skilled, semi-skilled, or unskilled work, against the 25% from professional and managerial homes and 10.3% from clerical homes (Ministry of Education, *Early Leaving: A Report of the Central Advisory Council for Education (England)* (London, HM Stationery Office, 1954), p.17, <https://education-uk.org/documents/gurneydixon/gurneydixon.html#01>); A. Sampson, *The New Anatomy of Britain*, (Hodder and Stoughton: London, 1971), p.140

²⁷ F. Green, D. Kynaston, *Engines of Privilege: Britain’s Private School Problem* (London: Bloomsbury, 2019), pp.85-86

²⁸ Wooldridge, *Aristocracy of Talent*, p.237

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid, p.238; A. Sampson, *The Changing Anatomy of Britain* (London: Hodder & Stourton, 1982), p.122

³¹ Sampson, *Anatomy*, p.193

³² P. Kirby, ‘Leading People 2016: The education backgrounds of the UK professional elite’, The Sutton Trust, Feb. 2016, p.2

‘sink schools’. Any proposals for a modernised selective system, as set out below, would inevitably have to challenge this perception since a major part of the proposed system would have to deliver a valuable education for the less academic pupils. However, it is also worth recognising that the old secondary moderns were in large part unfairly maligned if we are to make real progress in developing a multi-tiered, selective system.

Turning first to the question of ‘failures’ (a retrospective term applied by opponents of selection), this unevidenced, emotive claim hardly stands up to scrutiny. Most obviously, the millions who passed through the old secondary moderns did so without having lives recognisably scarred by being written off as ‘failures’ (it is unclear who assigned this label). However, as former Conservative MP Graham Brady points out, we already accept selection for A-levels at 16 and university at 18.³³ Selecting earlier (how and at what age is not fixed with the 11 plus model) would actually enable a greater tailoring of education at a stage when it can do more good. That principle is already accepted with the increasingly common use of streaming within comprehensives, without the disparity in social respect or resourcing. Likewise, when one considers the Dutch practice of streaming throughout secondary school or the German approach (see Appendix) the alleged social disparities simply do not feature in any major way.

Likewise, the suggestion that secondary moderns offered only poor outcomes is not backed up by the evidence. Despite initially not putting pupils through examinations, the number of secondary modern pupils entered for GCEs in the 1950s rose sharply, so that, by 1960, 39.4 percent were entered for GCE papers, with around a third obtaining three or more passes.³⁴ This was far behind the grammar schools, but that is not unexpected in the circumstances and was a significant improvement on the ‘left behind’ horror stories. As one commentator correctly asks, given that the majority of English and Welsh pupils went to secondary moderns from 1944 to 1965, are those cohorts particularly distinguished for their illiteracy, innumeracy, and unemployability?³⁵ That has been left to succeeding generations of comprehensive school children in Wales. In fact, as a 1983 study of 1,897 schools showed, whilst grammar school pupils continued to obtain more GCE O-levels, those in the remaining few secondary moderns were not significantly disadvantaged compared to their far more numerous comprehensive contemporaries (which now included some who would previously have attended grammars).³⁶ As a *Times* editorial railed in response:

³³ Graham Brady, ‘The Twenty-First Century Case for Selection’ in G. Barton et al, *The Ins and Outs of Selective Secondary Schools: A Debate* (London: Civitas: The Institute for the Study of Civil Society, 1st March 2015), p.38

³⁴ P. Hitchens, *A Revolution Betrayed: How Egalitarians Wrecked the British Education System* (London: Bloomsbury, 2022), p.122

³⁵ *Ibid*, p.123

³⁶ J. Marks, C. Cox, M. Pomian-Szednicki, *Standards in English Schools: An Analysis of the Examination Results of Secondary Schools in England for 1981* (London: National Council for Educational Standards, 1983); J. Marks, C. Cox, ‘Educational Attainment in Secondary Schools’, *Oxford Review of Education*, vol.10 no.1, Comprehensive and Selective Schooling (1984), p. 11

there are growing misgivings about the quality and relevance of the secondary education which is now available to many of our children. By far the greatest number leave school without any qualification because the only qualifications they are invited to submit themselves are of a kind that this majority cannot obtain. Far too few go on to further non-academic education compared with the numbers in comparable European countries, and for that the secondary system must in part be blameworthy.³⁷

However, this does not preclude the ambition today to ensure that less academic students are able to access an education that, with adequate resourcing, meets their abilities and places them on a viable career path. In this way, a selective system would ensure that every pupil, regardless of social background, has the best, tailored educational opportunities, without having to buy them. Anything less is a failure of vision and ambition.

Wales and the selection debate

Despite various initiatives, such as the Curriculum for Wales, the Welsh Government has failed to make progress on the scale required and it is hard to disagree with those who accuse it of ‘going round... in circles’ in education policy.³⁸ Consistently performing below the OECD average, Wales’s schools have a ‘disadvantage gap’, leaving poorer pupils around 22-23 months behind their better off peers.³⁹ There has been some improvement in the narrowing the attainment gap between poorer and wealthier pupils in recent years (declining from 32% to 28% between 2022 and 2024), but this continues to be the largest in the UK.⁴⁰ Given the considerable failings in the Welsh education system, with the lifelong costs that imposes on successive generations, it is perhaps unsurprising that the debate around academic selection has been livelier in Wales in the last decade than anywhere else in the UK.

The selection debate in Wales was kickstarted in 2013 by then Welsh Conservative Shadow Education Minister Angela Burns, who proposed two ‘equitable streams’ from age 14 to enhance opportunities for those who would benefit from either a greater academic or vocational focus.⁴¹ These

³⁷ ‘No Closed Book at the DES’, *The Times*, 1st Dec. 1983, p.15

³⁸ ‘Wales “going round in circles” on schools improvement’, *South Wales Argus*, 7th Nov. 2024, <https://www.southwalesargus.co.uk/news/24704063.wales-going-round-circles-school-improvement/>

³⁹ C. Farquharson, S. McNally, I. Tahir, ‘Education inequalities’, *Inequality: The IFS Deaton Review* (Aug. 2022), p.39

⁴⁰ ‘UK Poverty 2022’, Joseph Rowntree Foundation (Jan. 2022), pp.90-91; ‘UK Poverty 2024’, Joseph Rowntree Foundation (Jan. 2024), pp.136-138

⁴¹ ‘Conservatives must have the confidence to bring back grammar schools’, *Daily Telegraph*, 6th Aug. 2013, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/politics/10226304/Conservatives-must-have-the-confidence-to-bring-back-grammar-schools.html?msocid=3b4a704447f069b61d756221461068fb>

undetailed proposals met with hostility from the Welsh Government, who reaffirmed their commitment to delivering ‘the best possible education system... for the future, not looking to the past’, the Liberal Democrats, NAHT (National Association of Head Teachers) Cymru, and parts of the media.⁴² Clearly proposing policy in a single newspaper article, with just a few lines given to elaboration, was inadequate, but the responses of opponents were telling for their own lack of vision about how to tackle Wales’s deep-rooted educational problems. Though the policy did not feature in the Conservative’s 2016 Welsh Assembly election manifesto, the debate was renewed with Ukip’s proposals for actually reintroducing grammar schools, with minimum intake requirements for those from low income homes, and University Technical Colleges offering industry-backed professional and vocational courses.⁴³ Ukip’s case rested on the argument that grammar schools are ‘for the academically elite, not the financial elite’, but were opposed, inexplicably, by the Welsh Conservatives, making another vague demand for ‘extending parental and pupil choice’, as well as the usual suspects in Labour, the Liberal Democrats, and Plaid Cymru.⁴⁴ Most egregiously, Labour MS Rhiannon Passmore praised the 1965 Ministry of Education circular 10/65 (beginning the comprehensivisation process) for its transparently false promise to ‘raise educational standards at all levels’.⁴⁵

There the debate stalled, with Ukip drifting into irrelevance in the succeeding years, but Wales’s educational problems have only worsened in the meantime. It is ironic that the Welsh Government has made a virtue of being ‘guided by evidence, not dogma’ in opposing grammar schools since its ideological devotion to the comprehensive system, to encourage social mixing, is harming those at the bottom of the pile.⁴⁶ In a country where 30 percent of children live in poverty, academic selection could be transformative for those who, as former First Minister Carwyn Jones wrongly claimed of grammar schools, will otherwise be left on the ‘scrapheap’.⁴⁷

⁴² ‘Welsh Govt: no return to “divisive” grammar schools’, *ITV News*, 7th Aug. 2013, <https://www.itv.com/news/wales/update/2013-08-07/welsh-govt-no-return-to-divisive-grammar-schools/>; ‘Unions criticise Conservative calls for return to grammar school system in Wales’, *WalesOnline*, 7th Aug. 2013, <https://www.walesonline.co.uk/news/wales-news/unions-criticise-conservative-calls-return-5672449/>; ‘There’ll be no return to grammar schools but we need to debate why the current system isn’t working for our children’, *WalesOnline*, 12th Aug. 2013, <https://www.walesonline.co.uk/news/news-opinion/therell-no-return-grammar-schools-5689226/>; ‘Hard to imagine return to grammar schools ever winning favour in Wales’, *WalesOnline*, 7th Aug. 2013, <https://www.walesonline.co.uk/news/wales-news/analysis-hard-imagine-return-grammar-5673529/>

⁴³ ‘Why UKIP would bring back Grammar Schools’, Institute of Welsh Affairs, 2nd May 2016, <https://www.iwa.wales/agenda/2016/05/why-ukip-would-bring-back-grammar-schools/>

⁴⁴ UKIP Wales Debate: Grammar Schools, Plenary, Fifth Senedd, 21st Sept. 2016, 16:56:00; ‘UKIP’s grammar schools call opposed by Conservative AMs’, *BBC News*, 21st Sept. 2016, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-wales-politics-37429527>

⁴⁵ UKIP Wales Debate: Grammar Schools, Plenary, Fifth Senedd, 21st Sept. 2016, 17:21:00

⁴⁶ ‘No return to grammar schools in Wales’, *South Wales Argus*, 10th Aug. 2016, <https://www.southwalesargus.co.uk/news/14673867.no-return-to-grammar-schools-in-wales/>

⁴⁷ <https://www.childcomwales.org.uk/our-work/policy-positions/child-poverty/>; Questions to the First Minister, Plenary, Fifth Senedd, 24th Jan. 2017, 13:54:00

Proposals

Responding to Theresa May's 2017 proposal for overturning the 1998 ban on new grammar schools, the Centre for Social Justice published a report arguing that the comprehensive system's entrenchment of privilege could be overcome by targeting selective education at the most deprived.⁴⁸ It is these people who most need a schooling system that does as much as possible to level the playing field and who suffer most when that fails. With that in mind and given Wales's acute issues, the opportunity to radically rethink the secondary education system must be grasped if we are to produce a workforce able to play a full part in a globalised economy. Therefore, a modern selective system must aim to provide a tailored education, with clear career pipelines, to enable pupils to flourish, rather than continuing to force them into a mould that is no longer fit for purpose. Such a system would not be a mere reversion to the past, though drawing on the same ideals and principles which underpinned the old tripartite system, but would be shaped by experience both in the UK and internationally.

Accordingly, a system that draws on the best aspects of the old tripartite system, as well as the German and Dutch approaches to educational delivery needs to be devised. In the first place, it must be recognised that the Dutch streaming system is attractive for enabling a degree of continuity with the current use of streaming within comprehensives and the 2013 Welsh Conservative proposals. That would further remove the requirement for building separate institutions to accommodate each stream, which would be particularly difficult in rural areas, and enable the social mixing prized in the comprehensive system outside of the classroom. On the other hand, the importance of a culture requisite to the aims and approach of each stream would be better homed in separate facilities, whilst the dire state of Welsh education demands a significant shock to the attitudes that lead to the persistence with a failing system.

It is also necessary to acknowledge that a serious flaw in both the Conservative and Ukip proposals was the lack of a formal requirement for any school to transition to a selective system. This would almost certainly mean that the desired revolution in Welsh education would not come in more than a piecemeal way. Instead, the nettle must be grasped on a scale akin to the 1944 Education Act, with a clear, reasoned plan implemented on a national scale, with politicians providing thoughtful, decisive leadership.

Recognising these points, the following proposals are made:

- For the bulk of Wales, given rurality and budgetary pressures, compulsory streaming should be implemented from the age of 13, with the following three streams:

⁴⁸ 'Selective Education and Social Mobility', The Centre for Social Justice, Dec. 2016, p.13, <https://www.centreforsocialjustice.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/161201-Grammar-School-Report.pdf>

- 1) The ‘grammar’ stream would prepare the most academically able for university, with a largely theoretical focus (the sciences, humanities, English, Welsh, computer science, classical or modern foreign languages, social studies, art, additional optional subjects (e.g. music, drama) appropriate to each child’s abilities, interests, and ambitions). Within this, there would be opportunities to specialise in various subjects (e.g. the sciences, languages, humanities) as the pupil progresses, with the intention of preparing them for further study in those areas.
 - 2) The ‘technical’ stream would place greater emphasis on practical learning in a branching pipeline to skilled employment and apprenticeships in, for instance, agricultural management, the sciences, engineering, and software development. This would be combined with a general theoretical education, but in a more limited way than in the grammar stream to enable a focus on engaging industry to assist with the development of a skills-based curriculum in each area.
 - 3) The ‘general’ stream would focus on vocational training, as well as prioritising reading, writing, mathematics, and computer science, for less academically inclined pupils. The intention would be to develop a trained workforce able to carry out the essential tasks that keep the economy and society functioning (e.g. food handling and preparation, construction, bookkeeping). Again, employers would be engaged to help to devise a curriculum tailored to provide a clear pipeline to employment and apprenticeships, with the opportunity for pupils to choose the routes that align with their interests and abilities.
- Admission to each would be based on an aptitude test at the end of primary school, combined with ongoing assessment and reporting by teachers. This would be managed by using primary schools as feeders, with the secondary school making the final decision. There should be opportunities for retesting, to enable greater fluidity to move between pathways (and within them) as appropriate, as well as utilising admission interviews for those just below thresholds.
 - In urban areas, due to the population size and greater availability of potential facilities, it may be appropriate to base each stream in a separate institution, to enable the development of distinct cultures fitting to each. In this instance, there would be a grammar school, a technical school, and a general school. Where possible, this same approach should be taken in rural areas and it should be the ultimate aim to secure funding to develop separate facilities across Wales.
 - A learning culture appropriate to each stream is essential, and something widely commended about the old grammar schools, but which can only be developed by staff actively leaning into the expected outcome of each stream, setting high expectations and standards across all streams, and encouraging every pupil to maximise their potential through the appropriate pathways. Such a culture would also grow organically due to the different subjects being studied, the exams being taken, and expected outcomes.
 - Teachers would necessarily have to be qualified to teach in the stream to which they are assigned, to provide the best, tailored education. This might be thought to risk a creaming off of the most able

by the grammar stream, but there would be no discrepancy in pay and teacher training would need to be geared to providing for each stream.

- All would emerge with a general education, complemented by skills in particular areas best suited to them, and appropriate qualifications. This would, by necessity, not imply a uniform examination process, but the devising of testing and qualifications appropriate to the stream. For instance, those in the grammar stream would look towards academic qualifications such as GCSEs and A-levels, whereas those in the general stream would be put through for certificates and awards relating to the vocational root they have chosen.
- Resourcing parity should be written into legislation.
- Inspections of schools would seek to assess them based on the aims of each stream, rather than comparing between streams, or judging a school to have ‘failed’ because, by needing to cater to a larger number in one stream than another, it does not obtain more qualifications in the other streams.

These proposals will form the basis of the meritocratic education system to prepare Wales’s population to play a full part in the global economy. From the current low point, which punishes thousands of schoolchildren every year and for the rest of their lives, the agenda can be seized to plot out a radical, transformative path. There is no reason that Welsh education cannot retake its once highly respected place, with Welsh children going on to dominate the professions and set the standard for the rest of the UK. Sampson wrote that the job of the grammar schools was the ‘production of the meritocracy’, our challenge, if we want a fair and just society of opportunity for all, is to do the same.⁴⁹

⁴⁹ Sampson, *Anatomy of Britain*, p.189

Appendix:

The following is drawn from the Centre for Social Justice ‘Selective Education and Social Mobility’ report (December 2016) to illustrate the German and Dutch systems that inform the above conclusions:

The Netherlands

The Netherlands came ninth – 11 places above the UK – in last year's global school rankings conducted by the OECD, the biggest ever study of its kind.⁴¹

The Dutch education system, though sharing some commonalities with that of the UK's, operates very differently with regards to streaming throughout secondary school, and the variety of educational pathways it offers its pupils.

In their final year of primary school, usually aged 12, the vast majority of children take an aptitude test designed to indicate the best type of education suited to each pupil. Informed by these results, and the advice of the primary school, pupils and parents are then able to choose the stream(s) they believe to be the best match.

These streams are broadly split into three, with different schools offering different combinations of streams and their accompanying sub-streams:

1. The **VMBO** is the stream taken by the majority of students (60%) and consists of a combination of vocational training and theoretical education in languages, mathematics, history, arts and sciences. Within the VMBO, there are four directions pupils can take, allowing for varying degrees of interest/aptitude for different areas:
 - Basic vocational training (**VMBO-B**), with 12 hours a week devoted to practical subjects.
 - Framework training (**VMBO-K**), with 12 hours a week similarly devoted to practical subjects, but aimed towards a particular profession.
 - Mixed training (**VMBO-G**), with four hours a week devoted to practical subjects, and the rest of the time allocated for general subjects.
 - Theoretical training (**VMBO-T**), with the whole week dedicated to theoretical subjects.

Across these sub-streams, pupils may also choose to specialise in four areas: technology, agriculture, economics, care and welfare. At 16, many VMBO students move onto the **MBO**, a higher vocational training course lasting one to four years.

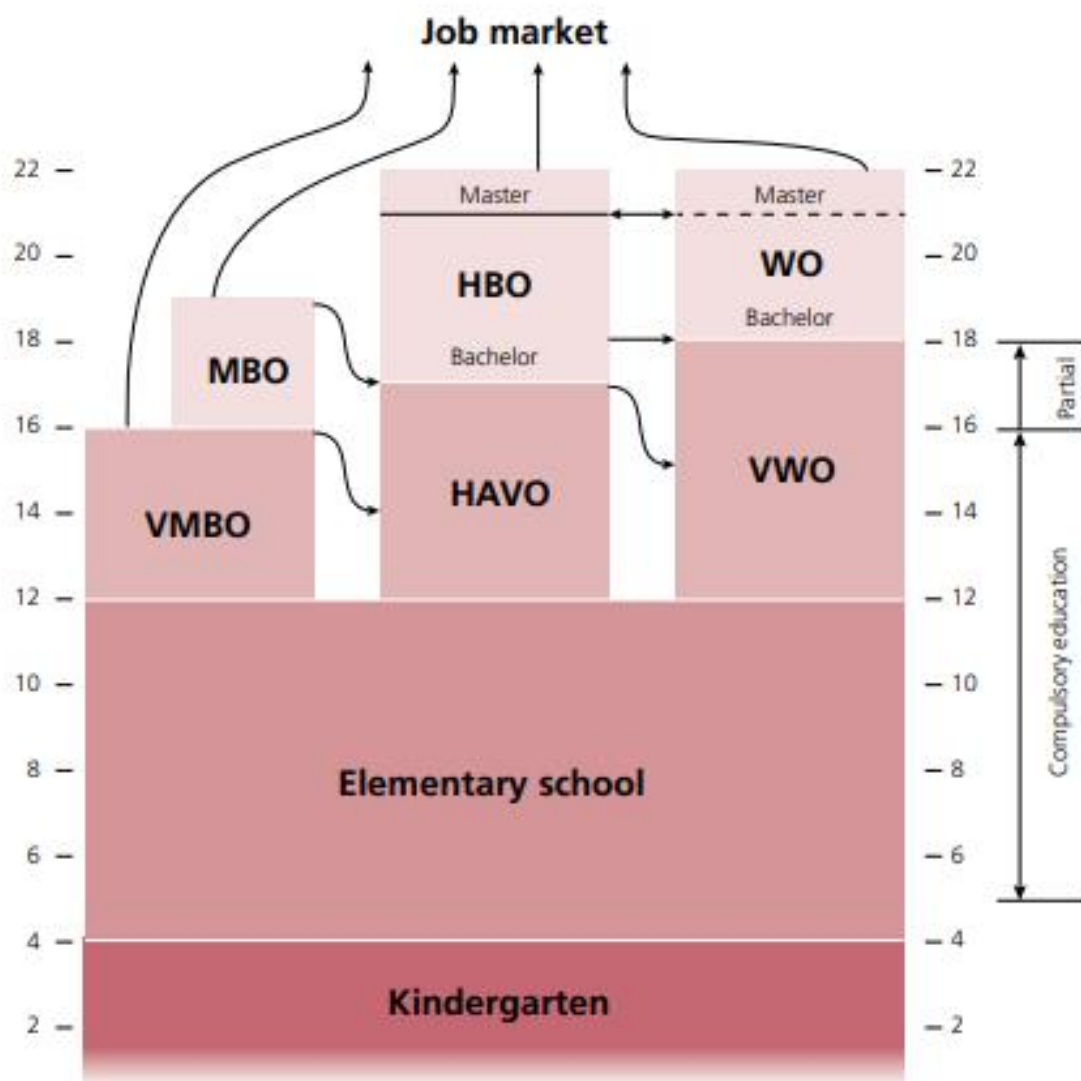
2. The **HAVO** stream is taken by more academically suited pupils in preparation for the **HBO** – literally, 'higher professional education', similar to the polytechnic. Two years

⁴¹ BBC News, *Asia tops biggest global school rankings*, 13 May 2015 [accessed via www.bbc.co.uk/news/business-32608772]

into the HAVO, pupils pick from various 'profiles' that include both compulsory and elective subjects. These consist of 'Culture and society', 'Economics and society', 'Nature and health', 'Nature and technology'.

3. The **VWO** stream is taken by the most academic pupils, in preparation for courses in the arts and sciences at research universities – the **WO**. Within the VWO, different pathways include *atheneum*, which may include bilingual education, *gymnasium*, in which pupils study the two classical languages, and '*technasium*', with an extra focus on science and engineering.

Where there is disagreement over the best stream suited to a pupil when they start secondary school, they are able to undertake an 'orientation year', or even two years, and then move into the proper stream. Movement is also possible for high achieving pupils on the HAVO stream wishing to move into the VWO stream. Likewise, pupils struggling with the academic focus of some streams are given plenty of opportunities to reconsider.



Germany

Owing to its decentralised nature, school-level education in Germany is complex, with systems varying across each of the 16 *Länder* (federal states).

After *Kindergarten*, however, most children will attend a primary-level *Grundschule* from the ages of six to ten, or 12 in Berlin and Brandenburg. And then parents are generally able to pick from four different types of secondary school at the recommendation of their child's teacher.

These offer varying specialisms:

1. The **Gymnasium** is designed for the most academic children, preparing pupils for further study at university. Although their curricula vary from school to school, most offer a variety of classes including chemistry, biology, physics, history, philosophy, computer science, German, mathematics, social studies and foreign languages. Upon completion, *Gymnasium* students receive a final diploma called an *Abitur*, or *Abi*. The *Abi* is necessary for university admission.
2. The **Realschule** is designed to give pupils a broader general education, and pupils are offered more opportunities to develop vocational skills. At the end of the tenth grade, they obtain the *Realschulabschluss*, a certificate which allows them to go onto in-company vocational training, work in the public sector at entry level, or further school-level education.
3. The **Hauptschule** is a vocational school designed for less academically suited children. It is sometimes considered less demanding than other types of schools, but combines a general theoretical education with focuses on mathematics, computer science and a foreign language, with vocational training. Students completing grade nine are awarded the *Hauptschulabschluss* leaving certificate or diploma. Students staying on for another year are able to receive the *Realschulabschluss*.
4. The **Gesamtschule** is a comprehensive style school that combines elements from the *Hauptschule*, the *Realschule* and the *Gymnasium*. They were first introduced in the late 1960s and trialled further in the 1970s to see if a more comprehensive system produced better results. They now exist in various forms in only about ten of the 16 German states. Students usually spend six years at the *Gesamtschule* and either obtain a *Hauptschule* or a *Realschule* leaving certificate. Pupils wishing to sit the *Abitur* attend the school for another three years.

Notwithstanding the general lack of movement between schools once pupils have started, and 'the PISA shock' of 2000 where Germany scored below average internationally, there remains a strong popular attachment to this system, with the *Gymnasium* occupying a significant place in the German cultural imagination.

In the past decade, however, some states have experimented with more comprehensive style systems by combining the tiers of *Realschule* and *Hauptschule* into **Oberschulen**. By the release of 2012's PISA scores, Germany completed what has been called the 'great turnaround' in education.