

Why Comprehensive Education in Plymouth

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Plymouth has suffered a Grammar-School system for many many years, causing dissatisfaction because Grammar education by definition is only for a minority. Worse - an 11-plus test decides that four out of five who don't pass are classed as educational 'failures'.

Not all children develop at the same rate, but all can succeed in a basic secondary education, given the right attention and resources. Citizens of Plymouth will not accept that Secondary Modern Schools are as good as Grammar Schools, with much less chance to get qualifications.

Equal access to the mainstream of education should be every- one's right. This is not possible in a City offering two different types of school. How can every pupil be tested equally in a broad range of knowledge and skills required today? No-one can say for sure how his or her capacities will develop in the future. Some politicians resisted the change to comprehensive completely, it is true, but their number is small now, even in the most Conservative areas. Some sections of the media put strong views forward in support of a Grammar system, even before comprehensive education really started.

Comprehensive education is not opposed nationally or in most local areas by the Conservative party, it is only in Plymouth where such strong opposition has resisted for too long; even now under proposed restructuring of education in the City the Conservative party insists on keeping three Grammar Schools, two girls' and one boys', declaring loudly, "Freedom of choice". What choice? When people are asked to choose - in theory - between Grammar and Comprehensive systems, they imagine their children would be offered the Grammar School, but four out of five would be directed to the other type, a school with a more limited education, far fewer resources and sometimes lower esteem.

Recent education acts suggest that parents have more choice, but in fact the majority were only given a chance to express a preference. They still have no legal right to choose a comprehensive education, and again this choice is restricted to those who can afford to pay their own travelling costs if over 3 miles.

Some may consider it possible to have both Grammar and Comprehensive systems in the City, ignoring the fact that comprehensives are by definition schools for everyone.

Grammar schools in the same catchment area are bound to contract the range of education offered to everyone else in the comprehensive school, where they will get fewer resources, and eventually affect the school's morale, and parents' willingness to choose the school. They will realise it is no longer fully comprehensive.

The G.C.E. examinations, designed for a grammar school system, causes problems in a comprehensive school, by demanding the lion's share of attention and resources, downgrading other courses and pupils, and encouraging practices like streaming. We need examination reform, and progress in developing a common curriculum, including a 'core' of learning which everyone can experience.

We must make sure that Conservative extremists do not succeed in forcing a system that fails the majority of pupils, and once the local Conservatives realise that people will not accept their system of selection, they are more likely to postpone their ideas indefinitely.

Comprehensive education will never be safe from selection open or hidden, education cuts are still depriving schools and colleges of essential facilities and teaching, even basic upkeep. Until these are made good, there will be a desperate struggle to keep education the free service any democracy expects as of right.

Taxpayers and ratepayers pay over a million pounds a day to subsidise private schools - directly or indirectly. They get some of this because they can claim to be 'charities'. That is not freedom, that is privilege, the better off living off the rest. New laws are needed, even to define what a full comprehensive education is, and guarantee it to everyone, including the resources. More democratic ways of running schools and colleges are needed too, and better equality programmes for women and minority groups.

Education after 16 should provide a flexible combination of academic, practical and vocational study. There should be an agreement on how to develop a tertiary system. Training for work: is the Manpower Services Commission the right agency? All young people need a decent living wage or allowance, to enable them to continue in education and training without putting an impossible burden on the family. Training schemes should be carefully designed and monitored, providing real skills for real jobs. The present Youth Training Scheme provides none of this; no wonder young people feel it is only using them as cheap labour.

Comprehensive schools and colleges are part of a community's services, and should be available to everyone right through life. Everyone should take part in developing Comprehensive schools and colleges - councillors, parents, teachers, students, and all who care about education - to make sure of an educational future for all our children.