

Rt Hon Justine Greening MP
 Secretary of State
 Sanctuary Buildings
 Great Smith Street
 London
 SW1P 3BT

November 10th 2016

Dear Ms Greening,

I am writing to express my great disappointment over the announcement of a return to selection as part of the government's Green Paper.

I am the newly appointed head of a highly successful comprehensive school on the outskirts of Cheltenham. We do not select students on any basis other than the admissions criteria set out on our website which certainly do not allow for selection by ability. We have a superb record of achievement for **all** of the children who attend the school. In 2016 our Progress 8 score was +0.63 which is the highest for any school in Gloucestershire. Our Progress 8 score for high ability children was +0.57 which was higher than at each of Gloucestershire's seven grammar schools. We believe strongly that bright children do better here than they would at a grammar school. In 2015 we benchmarked our high ability children (students with level 5 in English and maths at KS2) and found that they had a **higher** average points score at GCSE than the average for all the grammar schools in Gloucestershire. This is some achievement when you consider that the average ability profile within this group is likely to be far higher in the grammars than it is in a comprehensive.

Gloucestershire Top 10 Schools Ranked by Progress 8

Rank	School	Status	Progress 8 Score
1	Balcarras	C	0.63
2	Sir Thomas Rich's	G	0.53
3	The Cotswold Academy	C	0.49
4	High School for Girls	G	0.45
5	Stroud High	G	0.44
6	Chipping Campden	C	0.40
7	Katharine Lady Berkeley's	C	0.34
8	Pate's Grammar	G	0.33
9	Churchdown	C	0.27
10	Sir William Romney's	C	0.26
12	Marling	G	0.21
15	The Crypt	G	0.16
20	Ribston Hall	G	-0.01

Balcarras top ability students= +0.57, middle ability students +0.64, low ability students +0.81, pupil premium students +0.32

We are proud to be a comprehensive school where children of all abilities work together and inspire one another. I am convinced that part of the reason we are so successful with middle and lower ability students is because we are able to build an aspirational culture right across the school. Although we do set in certain areas we have plenty of mixed ability groups, particularly at GCSE and A level and the results in these groups match those in the other subjects. Schools like mine depend on having this broad mix of students so that intellectual capital can transfer from one student to another. I am afraid that the proposals outlined in the Green Paper will result in a return to the days of secondary moderns where aspirations were low and educational standards were lower still. The government must understand that for every grammar school place they create, a secondary modern place is created at the same time.

If the real goal of the government is to create social mobility an expansion of grammar education seems an unlikely place to start. At the moment grammars take 2.6% of children on Free School Meals and whilst there is an entrance test, this will be unlikely to change. Nothing in the proposals convinces me that there will be any significant increase in the amount of FSM children entering grammar schools. Talk of grammar schools sponsoring state comprehensives is hot air and is in most cases insulting to those schools. If grammar schools are the elite institutions the government believe, with the best teachers and the best organisational structures, they should be willing to take a fairer proportion of FSM students and particularly those FSM students who live in the immediate vicinity of the school. The fact that very few of them do undermines the idea that they are the engine of social mobility.

In my view the government is trying to fix a problem that doesn't exist. There are issues we need to resolve but the achievement of the brightest children in our schools is not one of them. If the government wants to improve education for all students they need to address the performance of white working class boys of all abilities (and other groups who perform well below average) rather than focus on the performance of high ability children, who in fact do very well indeed. An increase in selection won't have a positive impact in this area because so few of these children will gain access to selective schools anyway. In short: if your aim is to increase social mobility, by increasing selective education you will only increase mobility for people who are already socially mobile.

I read with interest that the government is going to allow for the expansion of grammar schools as part of the proposals. You should know it is happening already. Here in Gloucestershire the grammars have expanded by 150 school places this year; 150 more high ability students heading out of the comprehensive system and into the grammars. Thankfully here at Balcarras we are oversubscribed and are better placed to cope with this unwelcome development. Even though we can prove that the brightest students do better here than they would at a grammar we are not immune to parents who believe that the opposite is true. Other schools are less fortunate still, particularly those schools who are located close to the existing grammars. If more grammars open in the county it is inevitable that an educational divide will open up between those schools who can select and those who don't. It is also inevitable that as the state system becomes ever more dominated by secondary moderns parents will be even more desperate to get their children into selective or independent schools.

My predecessor Chris Healy spent the last twenty years turning Balcarras into a genuinely outstanding comprehensive school. I fear that these suggested policies will undermine much of that work. To increase selection now flies in the face of the evidence. The best education systems around the world do not select, rather they have high expectations and aspirations for **all** students. In our own country the educational success story of the last 20 years has been in London. Resources were poured into London's schools and there was a relentless focus on improving teaching and boosting aspirations. The results have been transformational, particularly for those students on FSM, so that they now have the best educational outcomes anywhere in the country. Had London decided to re-

introduce grammar schools 20 years ago I rather think that the educational achievement of the poorest students would not be at the top of national figures but somewhere near the bottom.

The other great development recently, following on from the experience of the London Challenge, has been the creation of a system led programme of school improvement. Balcarras has worked closely with Pittville School over the last 5 years to try to help them boost levels of attainment and to improve the overall level of teaching in the school. The results have been nothing short of transformational. Pittville is now a school of choice and is in a position to expand whilst its progress measures are positive. This is the way to boost educational achievement for all.

One final point is worth saying. I can't help but feel that these proposals turn the clock back to a world that no longer exists. The economy that our young people will operate in is very different from the one that existed when the 1944 Education Act was put in place. We have a knowledge based economy rich in services and high end technologies. No longer is it the case that there are huge amounts of students who leave the school gates and enter the local factory in low or semi-skilled jobs. The economy of tomorrow will demand a highly educated workforce, one that is intellectually fit to compete in a world of rapid technological change. We need to focus on raising the bar for all students not just a privileged few. No matter how the government try to massage the language by calling non-grammar schools technical schools, or academy schools or whatever - everyone will know that the brightest students are now in selective schools and it will affect their choice fundamentally.

In my view these proposals will be hugely damaging. They will not help engineer social mobility, they might perhaps improve the educational attainment of the brightest (although I'm not convinced) and it will certainly be at the expense of the majority of students. I urge you very strongly to drop these proposals now and instead focus on how we continue to develop a system led approach to improving **all** schools in the interests of **all** children.

Yours sincerely,

Dominic Burke
Headteacher

cc: Alex Chalk, MP for Cheltenham
Sir Michael Wilshaw, HM Chief Inspector, OFSTED
Sir David Carter, National Schools Commissioner
Rebecca Clark, Regional Schools Commissioner for the South West
Philip Collie, Chair of Governors, Balcarras School
Tim Browne, Head of Education, Gloucestershire County Council (GCC)
Jane Lloyd Davis, Head of Education, Performance & Inclusion, (GCC)