

'No evidence' grammar schools can promote social mobility, study suggests

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Expanding the number of grammar schools is unlikely to promote social mobility by providing more opportunities for disadvantaged pupils, a new study published in *Educational Review* finds.

Study author Binwei Lu, of Durham University, used England's National Pupil Database to show how a child's chances of going to [grammar](#) school varied depending on the Local Authority (LA) in which they lived, their social and ethnic background, and their attainment level at primary school. The database included more than 600,000 pupils, of which around 186,000 were in the 36 LAs with grammar schools.

In those LAs, the proportion of pupils attending such schools varied widely: from 1.4 to 37.4 per cent. Selection criteria also varied, with pupils in certain LAs needing to achieve more than twice the Key Stage 2 marks of those in other LAs to have any chance of being admitted.

As a result, applying in a different LA—an option more readily available to more affluent families—could increase a child's chances.

"While it is often mentioned that coaching gives more affluent pupils an unfair advantage in grammar school selection, our study suggests that a simpler, but effective action for the rich would be to let their children sit the 11+ in other Local Authorities with more grammar school opportunities," Miss Lu noted.

The study also found that pupils eligible for free school meals, pupils

with special educational needs, native English speakers, and white pupils were less likely to go to grammar schools, while those from more affluent areas and from minority ethnic groups were more likely to attend.

Despite these differences, the research showed that, during the selection process, attainment was more important than personal background, indicating no bias towards certain groups of pupils in the selection process itself. Rather, the inequality of opportunity to go to grammar school for pupils from different backgrounds was probably the result of diverging attainment among these different groups at the end of primary education.

"While this outcome demonstrates the relatively equitable process of grammar [school](#) enrolment based on selection criteria, there is also no evidence that grammar schools can help the poor, as their likelihood of attending such schools is limited," Miss Lu said.

"If secondary schools are allowed to select based on attainment, they are thus selecting pupils from more advantaged backgrounds. The assumption that grammar schools promote [social mobility](#) is therefore unsound.

"On the contrary, if [grammar schools](#) do perform better than other state schools, they will widen the gap between children from high and low socioeconomic groups by offering higher Key Stage 4 results for their pupils. In the meantime, pupils without sufficient family support, who thus perform worse than they would have otherwise at the age of 11, will lag further behind as they will be enrolled in less effective secondary schools."

More information: *Educational Review*, [DOI: 10.1080/00131911.2018.1483893](https://doi.org/10.1080/00131911.2018.1483893)

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