



Re-founded 1555

Ripon Grammar School

Helping shape the future since 1555



The Right Honourable Theresa May, MP
Prime Minister
10 Downing Street
London SW1A 2AA

12 September 2016

Dear Prime Minister

As the head of one of the leading grammar schools in the North of England, I thought I would take this opportunity to share my thoughts with you over the current proposals for increased selection in secondary schools. I am pleased that you have taken the brave decision to propose an increase in selection to improve the life chances of disadvantaged young people.

I would like to inform you of the arrangement that we have in Ripon, a small city of around 20,000 people. Much of the debate revolves around the importance of giving opportunities to children from disadvantaged backgrounds. I am totally in favour of this goal and believe that grammar schools can provide the opportunity for social mobility in this country. I was very fortunate personally to benefit from a grammar school education, coming from a working class background in North London. The opportunity to attend a grammar school clearly gave me a wonderful chance to attend Oxford University, like yourself.

I acknowledge the fact that some grammar schools, particularly in the South of England, are super selective and operate an admissions policy which does not involve having a catchment area. As a consequence, these schools draw on a very wide area and recruit very bright students from some considerable distance. This means that competition for places in these schools is extremely fierce and the number of students from deprived backgrounds is very small; therefore this does not reflect the socio-economic locality near the school. Such schools are some of the highest performing grammar schools in the country and regularly finish top of the league tables at both A level and GCSE. The situation in Ripon is very different. Ripon Grammar School has a catchment area and takes 28% of the cohort based on their academic potential. This potential is assessed through a VR and NVR test. The catchment area means that we must give priority to students who live in Ripon, which does have some areas of deprivation and relatively low house prices. As a consequence, the socio-economic make-up of Ripon Grammar School students is very closely aligned to Ripon, the city which we serve. The system we operate means that very bright students who live some distance away from the school will not be given a place here because that place will be given to a student who lives in Ripon, who may not have achieved as well, but has met the mark in the selection test and is therefore considered to be 'grammar suitable'.

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In much of the debate, which I am following, there is no mention of grammar schools having catchment areas and indeed, I believe, very few still have one. By removing a catchment area, one can increase academic selectivity and end up with a higher proportion of academically able students which means that results will be greatly enhanced. For schools chasing places for a position in the league tables this strategy works extremely well. My belief is that grammar schools should not be doing this and should primarily serve the local community and should reflect the socio-economic make-up of that community, thereby giving the opportunity of a grammar school education to students in the local area. If this happens, the proportion of Free School Meals in the school will therefore mirror the FSM in the catchment area and provide the opportunity for social mobility. This is the case at Ripon Grammar School.

I hope you do not mind me writing to you but I believe it is important to make this point since it appears to be lacking in much of the debate. Ripon is also extremely fortunate in having another secondary school in the city, also rated as Outstanding by Ofsted. Selection is therefore not an issue in Ripon since the alternative school available, if the entrance test mark for Ripon Grammar School is not achieved, is very good. It also means that the results the students achieve within Ripon are vastly superior compared to what would be achieved in a single comprehensive school since the education can be tailored to student needs in two separate schools.

Finally, we have adopted an expansion at age 14 of thirteen additional places for late developers and for those deserving a second chance of a grammar school education. There is significant expansion too at post-16 already. Ripon Grammar School is also a state boarding school, so opportunity for an outstanding education is available on a country-wide basis, with many students coming to RGS from far afield as many live in isolated rural communities.

I hope my thoughts are of some interest to you and I wish you well in championing grammar schools in England and emphasising the importance of meritocracy in a more just and fairer society.

Yours faithfully

M L Pearman
Headmaster

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