

Grammar schools in Northern Ireland

Education is a devolved area of responsibility, and is under the purview of the Department of Education of Northern Ireland, referred to hereafter as DENI (www.deni.gov.uk).

The current Minister for Education is Mr John O'Dowd MLA. He has been in post since May 2011.

Grammar / Non-grammar pupil figures

- In the year 2013/14 there were 9,229 Year 12 (GCSE) pupils in grammar schools, with 12,768 pupils not in grammar schools. This suggests a proportion of students in grammar schools of 42%, based on a total pupil figure of 21,997.
- In the year 2013/14 there were 12,914 pupils at Year 14 eligible for A Levels. At this level, the majority attend grammar schools (62% Vs 38%).

Recent academic performance

- The latest DENI figures are available from:
http://www.deni.gov.uk/year_12_and_year_14_examination_performance_at_post-primary_schools_in_northern_ireland_2013-14.pdf
- In 2013/14 65.2% of Year 12 pupils (all school types) achieved 5 or more GCSEs at A*-C grade, inc. English and Maths.
 - Grammar schools only – 94.5% (97.2% not necessarily inc. English & Maths)
 - Non-grammar schools only – 44.0% (70.6% not necessarily inc. English & Maths)
 - For comparison, the UK total figure for 5+ A*-C (inc. English and maths) grades is 56.9%. Grammar schools score 95.9%, with comprehensives scoring 55.5%.
- Over the period 2008/9 – 2013/14 non-grammar schools have demonstrated a significantly greater increase in the proportion of their pupils achieving the 5 A*-C (inc. English & Maths) benchmark than grammars. Over the period non-grammars registered an increase in attainment rate from 32.9% to 44.0%, whilst grammars outcomes rose 93.8% to 94.5%.
- There has been a substantial change in the performance gap of grammar and non-grammar schools. The 2005/6 gap using the 5 A*-C (not necessarily inc. English & Maths) measure was 53.2%, but 2013/14 this was 26.6%. This is due to the aforementioned higher rate of increase in attainment in non-grammar schools.
 - It should be noted that when we use the 5 A*-C (Inc. English & Maths) measure this gap is 50.5% in 2013 (10.4% lower than in 2008/9).
- At A Level 75.7% of grammar school pupils obtain 3 A Levels at A*-C grade. The figure for non-grammars is 47.7%.
- The A Level performance gap has shrunk from 34.7% to 28% between 2009/10 and 2013/14.

Gender & FSM Outcomes

- GCSE Year 12 pupils are represented as follows: 49.8% male, 50.2% female.
 - Using the 5 A*-C measure (Inc. English & Maths), there is a gender attainment gap in favour of females of 8.4%.
- Final-year A Level pupils are represented as follows: 44.7% male, 55.3% female.
- 7.4% of grammar school pupils are FSM-eligible. The figure is 27.1% for non-grammars.
- 17% of FSM-eligible pupils attend grammars at GCSE level. At A Level the figure grows to 31%.
- There is an attainment gap of 20.9% across all school types between FSM and Non-FSM qualifying pupils in 2013/14, on the 5 A*-C (not inc. English & Maths) measure. If English and Maths are included, the gap widens to 32.1%.
- The gap between FSM-eligible pupils at GCSE level attending grammars and non-grammars was 58.4% in 2013/14 on the 5 A*-C (Inc. English & Maths) measure. The figures are 87.3% and 28.9% respectively.
- At A level there is a performance gap of 15.9% between FSM-eligible and non-FSM pupils in total across the DENI system. Within grammars there is a performance gap of 8.4% (FSM Vs Non-FSM), the figure for non-grammars being 5.7%. The gap between grammars and non-grammars is 24.7%, down 5% on last year.

Other

- DENI spends less on secondary education per head than the vast majority of the UK, being above only the South East and Scotland. (Source: House of Commons Library Standard Note NS01078, <http://intranet.parliament.uk/briefing-papers/SN01078.pdf>).
- Social mobility In Northern Ireland is often said to be higher than the UK average, although Northern Ireland is generally more deprived than the rest of the UK generally speaking, and social mobility statistics tend to be published on a national level. The UK overall performs poorly in terms of social mobility, demonstrating one of the highest linkages in OECD countries between earnings between parent and child, suggesting low social mobility. (See OECD 'Going for Growth' Report Part II - <http://www.oecd.org/eco/growth/chapter%205%20gfg%202010.pdf>)
- Access to higher education provides a useful proxy in the absence of useful social mobility indicators, with Northern Ireland performing relatively well in part because of its relatively small independent sector (a common side-effect of having grammar schools).
 - See: Croxford, L. and D. Raffe, 2014. 'Social class, ethnicity and access to higher education in the four countries of the UK: 1996-2010.' In: International Journal of Lifelong Education, Vol. 33, No.1. Available from: <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/02601370.2013.873214?journalCode=tlcd20#.VJL45sgKA>

Conclusions

- Grammar schools continue to outperform their non-grammar counterparts, as expected.
- Grammar schools in Northern Ireland accept a high proportion of students, with them becoming the main post-16 facility for education.
- Their GCSE grades are above the UK averages, due to a significantly higher proportion attending grammars, and therefore bringing up the overall averages.
- There has been a steady and statistically significant decrease in the attainment gap between grammar school and non-grammar school pupil attainment figures. This most likely indicates a gradual improvement in teaching capabilities and improved understanding in how to educate those who are less academically gifted.