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## Let's go back to the future with co-operative schools – and leave grammars in the past

England could move towards the success of Finland's schools and save money by expanding the co-operative model, says **Danny Dorling**. Below: what exactly are co-operative schools?



Haywood Academy in Burslem, Staffordshire, is one of 74 co-operative academies. Photograph: Christopher Thomond for the Guardian

### **Danny Dorling**

Comprehensive schools have improved our lives. The [evidence that they are better](#) for our children and for all of us is overwhelming. Which is why 60 organisations, including the Royal Society for the Encouragement of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce, put their names to an [open letter](#) in October pleading for the ban on new

grammar schools to remain. Why, then, in the face of overwhelming expert advice, do so many members of the public, some ministers, and the [prime minister](#) want to press ahead with more selective schools?

It is possible to select a subset of grammar schools and to suggest that the minority of children from poorer backgrounds who attend that small set do go on to get better [GCSE results](#), but that does not provide evidence that the grammar school model is good in general. It also does not question the English orthodoxy that it is always better to get higher grades in exams. If all we needed was lots of people who were especially skilled at exam technique, it would be – but that is not what we lack as a country. We lack rounded adults with a wide range of skills who respect and understand each other’s abilities and contributions.

Introducing a grammar school into an area does not only [harm schooling](#) in that immediate district but also in [neighbouring areas](#). Despite this, more people are in favour of creating new grammar schools (38%) than would be in favour of ending selection in those that still exist (23%). Among those who attended grammar schools themselves, [61%](#) would like to see more built. It’s the old who are most in favour of selection.

The argument for grammar schools is similar to the argument for leaving the EU. It is about people wanting something better than they currently have, and believing that a return to the past will be an improvement and that “experts” are not to be believed. However it is also an argument against carrying on as we are, and against the rising inequality of recent decades that has resulted in selection by [house price](#).



## Co-operative schools: the antidote to academies

The majority of people in England do not want to defend 1970s comprehensive schooling, just as they don't want to defend 1970s council housing, or having a health service treating elderly people as it did in the 1970s. People want something better than what is currently on offer. They are also not stupid enough to believe that their children will all pass the 11-plus – although unfortunately, a little like [Americans voting for Trump](#), the rise in individualism in the UK has harmed our collective thinking.

People do not want their child to have to attend a local comprehensive that is severely underfunded after years of cuts hidden behind the pretence of having “[ringfenced education](#)”. They do not

want their children to be assigned to the school in which almost all the teachers are very young because staff turnover is so high, and in which few children have middle-class parents – the school which those “in the know” tend to avoid.

People may also not want their precious child to be forced to attend an [exam factory](#) in which every C and B that can be squeezed out of them will be squeezed out of them, in which not going to university is categorised as failure. It is not impossible that some parents (and probably more grandparents) see the return of grammar schools as an opportunity to have more secondary moderns for the bulk of children who are bored with being continually pushed along a tedious national curriculum, given so much homework, and treated as a “problem” for “the school”.

Just like Brexit, the choice currently on the table is between “business as usual” or “change”. Business as usual is now a complex competing set of schools, many of which are now academies. Business as usual already includes selection at age 16 because academies can and do refuse to accept pupils who do not score high enough GCSE grades across a wide range of subjects.

It is the market that decides what makes a child’s grades high enough for them to be able to stay in their academy at age 16. Children and their parents find out if they are winners on the day GCSE results are released. If their results are not good enough, they have just a few days to let the educational market in their town find alternative provision – unless their child was persuaded to jump earlier to a vocational [“university” technical college](#) at the age of 14, from which they are unlikely to go on to university.



Pupils at Haywood Academy, a co-operative secondary school. Photograph: Christopher Thomond for the Guardian

Different children need different challenges at different ages. Other countries understand this, but that does not mean having to be in very different schools from each other.

What has not been put on the table is any alternative to business as usual that is not just a return to the past. Exactly the same mistake was made when the electorate was given a remain or leave choice over EU membership.

The UK has historically made big changes to public service provision when it has been forced to do so. The [NHS was introduced in 1948](#) partly because the middle class could no longer afford private doctors' fees. Comprehensives were introduced across most of the country in the 70s partly because at a time of high economic equality the middle class could no longer afford to pay for private education if their children failed the 11-plus. We are facing another financial crisis today – not just as a result of a falling pound, but because of the long-term fallout of the 2008 financial crash.

Selective education is inefficient and hence expensive. Academy schools and chains are also expensive, prone to [concerns about corruption](#), and to the negative effects of short-term competition to increase grades. Children are served best in countries such as Finland where there is no equivalent of Ofsted, no league tables, and only a small random sample of pupils' work is occasionally tested to monitor [school \(not pupil\)](#) performance.

We are a long way from achieving anything like the success of the [Finnish model of education](#), but how could we begin to move towards it, and could we do so while also saving money? I think we could.

British school senior management teams are large and expensive. Do two neighbouring schools really need two separate senior management teams or could one team do a better job, with the ability to move teachers and eventually pupils between sites? If we were to remove competition between neighbouring schools, we could begin to reduce the stigma built up over decades that surrounds some of our local schools. That stigma began to be significant only with the widespread publication of school league tables in the 90s. If the state schools in a small town were combined under [one governing body](#), then only the town as a whole would be ranked. And when catchments began to become less meaningful, the housing price differentials across a town should fall.

Eventually we should aim to fund our state schools as well as they are funded in Finland, per child, but that is a long-term aspiration. In the short term, unless we know what it is we want – new Finnish cooperation rather than old English competition – we stand little chance of getting there, and a good chance of moving back to the bad old days of selection.

You might think such cooperation can never happen. However, there are already 800 [co-operative schools](#) in the UK. And they are beginning to organise regionally with [more plans in place](#) for 2017.

The first comprehensive school was up and running long before the comprehensive movement became mainstream. The [first co-operative schools](#) are already here – now we need to explain again and again why cooperation trumps competition in education. Almost any fool can be taught to achieve an A\* if enough resource is thrown at them. We need children who become adults who understand that there is so much more to learning than simply achieving grades in an exam.

*This article is a shortened version of the [Caroline Benn Memorial Lecture](#), which Danny Dorling will give this evening on 15 November at the House of Commons. The lecture is an annual event in memory of the comprehensive schools campaigner, [who died in 2000](#).*

## **You've heard of supermarkets and funeral parlours, but what is a Co-op school?**

A co-operative school is a state school, primary or secondary, *writes [Susanna Rustin](#)*, that has partly or fully opted out of local authority control and turned itself into a co-operative, with members and a commitment to the values of the co-operative movement.

Co-operative schooling [began in the north of England](#) in the 1830s, as one of the projects of the movement's early supporters, the first to be formally designated a cooperative in recent times was Reddish Vale High in Stockport in 2008.

There are now 811 co-operative schools, 139 of them secondaries. More than 700 of these are foundation trust schools, with co-operative values – self-help, self-responsibility, democracy, equality, equity and solidarity – written into the constitutions of the charitable trusts that own their land and assets. Some trusts control only one school, but more include a secondary and a group of feeder primaries, or a group of local primaries that want to work together, such as the [Coastal Alliance](#) foundation trust in Kent, formed earlier this year.

Some of the first co-operative schools sought more autonomy than is granted by trust status, and in 2010 the Department for Education approved a co-operative model for converter academies, including a values clause in their articles of association. Today 74 co-operative schools are academies, and Carl Ward, the Stoke-on-Trent headteacher who chairs the [Schools Co-operative Society](#), to which many of them belong, describes the past few years as a period of “immense growth”. Two Church of England primary schools have just joined the multi-academy trust he leads in Stoke, [City Learning Trust](#), and become the first co-operative faith schools in the process.



Most people think of food rather than schools when they think of the Co-op. Photograph: Yui Mok/PA

It is tempting to view the whole [co-operative schools project](#), as promoted in the first instance by the [Co-operative College](#) – a Manchester-based charity, and not a college – as a rebellion against the market-oriented education policies of the past 30 years. But, says Ward, “at its heart it’s not political, it’s probably cultural”.

Back in 2008, [David Cameron](#) spoke with enthusiasm of creating a new generation of co-operative schools, and while some of the early foundation trusts were seen as a means of [fending off academisation](#), there are now at least 12 co-operative multi-academy trusts – the government’s favoured model – running about 80 schools. One, the [Co-operative Academies Trust](#) with eight schools in the north of England, is sponsored by the Co-operative Group and shares its typeface with Co-op supermarkets and funeral directors.

Meanwhile, “school improvement”, meaning raising standards measured in exam results and league tables, has moved to front and centre of what the [Schools Co-operative Society](#) does, with seven

devolved regional organisations setting up their own school improvement teams.

Of course, schools that are formally designated co-ops do not have a monopoly on the ideas co-op schools have embraced. Rachel Snape is headteacher at the Spinney school in Cambridge, and explains that although the school has stayed with the local authority, “I feel we’ve got values, cooperation is one of those, and solidarity and unity and collaboration are others.”

Some question to what extent co-op schools really are co-ops. Steve Watson, a former maths teacher and now a Cambridge University lecturer, became interested in them because he thought they might support teachers’ professional development, one of his research areas. “Autonomy of schools tends to mean autonomy of headteachers,” he says. “Democratic member control – one member, one vote – is a [co-operative principle](#), and could be a way for teachers to have a greater say in how they are run.” But he believes the central accountability demanded in the current system, and emphasis on targets and measurement, make such ideas difficult to implement: “My view is that the schools are more co-operative in name than in the fundamental value of workplace democracy.”

Ward once met a headteacher in Italy who was elected by his staff, and agrees “we haven’t gone that far” in England. But he says he would have an open mind if he came across a proposal or pilot project, as “you have to be prepared to take risks to innovate”. He adds: “What most co-op schools try to do is treat their staff very fairly, and subscribe to levels of pay that unions agree on”.

At present the government is trying to move towards a skills-based system of school governance, appointing accountants and other

professionals – though the education secretary, Justine Greening, recently [dropped a plan](#) to remove altogether the right of parents to be represented on governing bodies. Ward believes the co-operative model, whereby pupils, staff, parents and the local community elect members of a forum that advises a school’s governing body, is the ideal compromise.

What’s more, co-op schools should benefit from help and advice from other co-operative business, since co-ops are “honour-bound” to support each other.