



# Members' Newsletter

## Spring 2004

### SKS says "Test before Preference"

In 1998, Government passed the Schools Standards and Framework Act which introduced the possibility of parents petitioning for ballots to end selective education, i.e. grammar schools. Because they thought the existing mix of high, grammar and comprehensive schools was actually working well in Kent, Medway and Bexley, a group of like-minded parents, school governors and headteachers came together. Support Kent Schools was formed and quickly gained momentum, with over 6,000 parents expressing an interest in supporting its aims. SKS has successfully fought for the continuation of the status quo in secondary education in the three Local Education Authorities, such that the anti-grammar school lobby seems to have turned away from using the direct legislation to achieve their aims.

This does not mean, however, that the threat to the status quo has gone away. It is known that some activists within the Labour Party want to have a clause in their Manifesto for the next General Election about the abolition of selective education. The Secretary of State for Education and Skills, Mr Charles Clarke, has said that he does not personally like the 11 Plus tests. And locally we are aware of the pressure that has been placed on the LEAs, the Schools Adjudicator and the Secretary of State to change the admission processes so that this discriminates against those parents who would like to see their children go to a selective school. Parents and Year 6 pupils in Kent have this year, again, faced anxiety and stress in expressing their preferences for secondary places. The turmoil at the start of March following the advice of places allocated was entirely due to the ridiculous process that is currently in place.

Support Kent Schools says that, no matter what one's view on selective education, it cannot be right to expect preferences to be nominated without full information. In the case of potential grammar school pupils, this must include the indication of whether they are likely to be suited to such a school. In other words, the 11 plus should take place before preferences for secondary schools are chosen.

#### Support Kent Schools' Annual General Meeting

Members will find notice of this year's AGM, to be held on 20<sup>th</sup> May, enclosed with this Newsletter.

#### SKS web-site

Our web-site continues to carry relevant recent information for members and for those interested in joining us, as well as links to other sites of possible interest. Hopefully, members will find this a useful source of information between Newsletters. The site can be found at [www.support-kent-schools.org.uk](http://www.support-kent-schools.org.uk)

#### Voluntary Subscriptions

We are grateful to the many members who took the opportunity last year to send in voluntary renewal subscriptions. Such income does help us to keep the campaign going.

Our newsletters are always published on the web-site. If you wish to be alerted by e-mail, rather than receive paper copies, please write to [sks@avery67.freemove.co.uk](mailto:sks@avery67.freemove.co.uk), including sufficient information to identify your details on our register.

## **Kent on Sunday's Common Sense Choices Campaign**

In recent months there has been a growing clamour to change the system for choosing secondary places. Most importantly, the Kent on Sunday has been running a "common sense choices" campaign, not specifically pro-grammar, but rather seeking to bring transparency to the transfer to secondary school process. This campaign concentrated on the need for parents to have full information before they have to make choices, i.e. mirroring our message. This appears to have been an extremely successful initiative, with many schools organising petitions and individual parents giving pledges of support. Kent on Sunday has now taken these to the Department for Education and Skills and to the Schools Adjudicator, but the outcome was not known as these notes went to press. We congratulate Kent on Sunday and its chief reporter Shelley Whittaker for running such a successful campaign.

### **Kent LEA admits their process has failed parents and pupils**

Following the first allocation of secondary places at the start of March, Kent LEA was inundated with enquiries and appeals from parents. As this Newsletter was prepared, it seemed that there were still many hundreds, perhaps thousands, of pupils uncertain about their place for September. Perhaps this has caused the LEA to look more carefully at their processes, as they have now indicated that they want the Government to allow parents to apply to schools after they know the outcome of the 11 plus. They went on to say that, in the long term, they will consider scrapping the 11 Plus altogether and move instead to a system of continuous assessment to end the annual turmoil facing thousands of parents. It seems, however, that the LEA is still committed to selective education.

### **SKS visit to Charles Clarke**

In last spring's newsletter, we said that we had been trying to see the Secretary of State for Education to clarify his attitude towards selective education, as various quotes in the press seemed to indicate that he had an ambivalent attitude towards grammar schools. In the event, after a number of cancellations, your representatives did manage to talk to Mr Clarke last summer. A full report of that meeting is on our website.

It is worth noting here that whilst Mr Clarke did say that he was not personally opposed to grammar schools per se, he was not keen on seeing children tested and then placed in different secondary schools as a result. Importantly, he said the abolition of grammar schools was not on his list of priorities and he had no plans to change the existing arrangements. He promised to meet and talk with Support

Kent Schools representatives again before any such plans were contemplated. We can but hope!

### **Vote winners (and losers)?**

We firmly believe that, whilst there are many national and international matters that will quite rightly determine how the electorate votes at the next General Election (in 2005?), the various parties' attitudes towards selective education is an important issue in Kent, Medway and Bexley. As such, we are pleased that Michael Howard, Leader of the Conservative Party, has agreed to meet us. We want to learn about his view of the future of grammar schools. Perhaps we should actually seek to understand what plans his party has for the future of secondary education nationally, as it is clear that comprehensive schools have not been as universally successful as some of his predecessors had hoped.

### **Gloucester parents say "hands off our Grammar Schools"**

The result of a public consultation exercise carried out in Gloucester surprised Councillors who wanted to reduce the number of places at the grammar schools in the authority. Almost 82% of parents polled wanted to keep the status quo, with only 9% voting to end selection, with even the majority of parents of children at comprehensives wanting to retain selection. All four options for reorganising schools in Gloucester were rejected. The dumb-founded Council has decided to carry out a further review – what a waste of money!

Nationally, figures provided to Parliament recently indicate that there has been an increase in the number of pupils attending grammar schools, with 35% more in 2003 than 1993, although the number of schools remained the same. Clearly, the existing schools are seen by many to fulfil an educational need.

### **More unnecessary public expenditure**

SKS has been saying for a long time that the existing legislation allowing parental ballots is unwieldy and that the attempts by abolitionists to trigger votes had cost the tax-payer huge sums of money. This has recently been announced at £1.7million even though only one ballot has been held under the process. Those with a long memory will recall that this was in 2000 in Ripon, where parents voted overwhelmingly in favour of retaining the selective system.

Now, the Kent Messenger group has called on the Government to change the petition and ballot regulations to stop more public money being wasted. Interestingly, this is about the one area where SKS and its opponents agree!