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# Selection by ability:

A comparison of admissions to  
grammar schools in England and in  
Germany

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .....</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>ABSTRACT.....</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>KEY WORDS .....</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>1 INTRODUCTION .....</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>2 METHODS.....</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>3 SCHOOL SYSTEM, LEGAL CONTEXT AND POLICY .....</b>	<b>7</b>
3.1 GERMANY.....	7
3.2 ENGLAND.....	8
<b>4 ADMISSIONS POLICIES AND PROCEDURES.....</b>	<b>10</b>
4.1 GERMANY.....	10
4.2 ENGLAND.....	14
<b>5 INEQUALITIES IN ACCESS TO <i>GYMNASIEN</i> AND GRAMMAR SCHOOLS .....</b>	<b>18</b>
<b>6 COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION.....</b>	<b>19</b>
<b>7 REFERENCES.....</b>	<b>21</b>
<b>ANNEX A.....</b>	<b>26</b>
<b>ANNEX B.....</b>	<b>29</b>

## **Abstract**

This working paper focuses on admissions to grammar schools in Germany and the UK (England). Although there are academically selective schools in England (grammar schools) and Germany (*Gymnasien*) there is a paucity of comparative research addressing the legislative provision, policy and approaches used to select pupils. This working paper seeks to shine a light on the institutional rules that apply to the selection and admission of children to grammar schools and *Gymnasien* and the characteristics of the main beneficiaries of selective schooling. We find clear differences between the two countries, with legislation being the responsibility of the *Land* in Germany and the national government in the case of England. A key distinguishing feature is that admission to a *Gymnasium* in Germany is based on the recommendation of the child's primary school; this may or may not be binding on parents. In England, admission to grammar school is based on the 11-plus test, which varies between schools / academy trusts / local authority areas. Notwithstanding the differences in policy and approaches used to selection, the evidence indicates that those who attend selective schools in both countries tend to be from more rather than less advantaged families.

## **Key words**

Grammar schools, Gymnasium, selective education, England, Germany, teacher recommendation, 11-plus

## 1 Introduction

This working paper focuses on admissions to grammar schools in Germany and the UK (England). The two countries differ insofar as Germany is a federal state with education being the responsibility of individual *Länder* whilst the UK is a quasi-federal state with education being the responsibility of each constituent country. The education systems also vary between countries. Germany has a stratified school system, which is characterised by early academic selection. The four countries comprising the UK—England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland—each have different education systems (see West, 2023). In England, our current focus, the publicly funded secondary school system comprises mainly comprehensive schools, alongside a small proportion of academically selective grammar schools.

In Germany, there is an academic school / track (*Gymnasium*) which prepares pupils for the university-entrance qualification (*Abitur*). Two other tracks / types of school prepare pupils for vocational training: the *Hauptschule* and the *Realschule*, catering for lower- and middle-ranking pupils, respectively. There are also a small number of comprehensive schools *Gesamtschulen*, catering for all ability levels. In 2021, the distribution of the school population in grade 8 (normal age 13-14) taken as a national average was: *Hauptschule* 8.1%, *Realschule* 17.4%, *Gymnasium* 37.2%, *integrierte Gesamtschule* 20.2%, schools with several education courses 12.3% and special schools 3.8% (Kultusministerkonferenz<sup>2</sup> (KMK), 2023). Empirical research suggests that the transition from primary school to different types of secondary school is a key time when social inequalities in the German education system emerge (e.g., Maaz et al., 2010; Gresch et al., 2010), with a disproportionate number of children from lower socio-economic backgrounds attending the *Hauptschule* (Nikolai & West, 2013).

In England, around 5% of secondary school pupils attend academically selective grammar schools, which require pupils to pass an examination called the “11-plus” in their last year of primary education (Long et al., 2023). There is clear evidence of social inequalities regarding access to grammar schools, with grammar schools catering for a far lower proportion of pupils eligible for free school meals, an important indicator of social deprivation, than non-selective schools (6% versus 21% in 2022) (Long et al., 2023).<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> The Kultusministerkonferenz or Standing Conference of the Ministers of Education and Cultural Affairs has responsibilities that include the coordination and development of education across Germany.

<sup>3</sup> Pupils attending grammar schools are also much less likely to have special educational needs (Long et al., 2023).

Little research has been carried out on the legal context that governs admission to selective schools in either Germany or England. As Füssel et al. (2010) note, these regulations form the framework within which parents decide which type of school they want their child to attend after primary school. In the English context, research on the rules governing admissions has tended to focus on comprehensive secondary schools (e.g., West et al., 2011) or on secondary schools in general (e.g., Burgess et al., 2023; Noden et al., 2014).

This working paper builds on the research carried out in both Germany and England. In addition to providing a thick description of the school system, policy and legal context, we analyse the admission arrangements in place in each country and also provide a comparative analysis. The two main research questions are:

- What are the institutional rules that apply to the selection / admission of children to grammar schools and *Gymnasium* schools in England and Germany, and how do they differ?
- To what extent are there inequalities in terms of access to grammar schools in England and *Gymnasium* schools in Germany?

The following section presents the overall methods. The next two sections provide a thick description of first the school system, legal context and policy in Germany and England, and second, the policies and procedures regarding the selection and admission of pupils to *Gymnasien* and grammar schools. We draw on legislative provision and in the case of Germany, four case studies of different *Länder* and in the case of England a survey of a sample of grammar schools. We then examine inequalities in terms of access to grammar schools in England and *Gymnasien* in Germany, drawing on previously published research. The final section concludes with an analysis and discussion of the findings.

## 2 Methods

This paper draws predominantly on primary documentary sources and secondary analysis. In the case of Germany, we draw on legislation and documentary evidence relating to policy in one *Land* (Thuringia) and contrast this with the policy in three other *Länder* (Bavaria, North Rhine-Westphalia and Hamburg). In the case of England, we report on survey of a sample of around one third of grammar schools focusing on their testing and other admissions arrangements highlighting specific examples to exemplify the similarities but also variation that exists at the level of the individual school.<sup>4</sup> The information reported was obtained from publicly-available documents / sources.

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<sup>4</sup> To preserve anonymity, we have not named the schools concerned.



### 3 School system, legal context and policy

#### 3.1 Germany

The German secondary education system is highly stratified, with different school tracks for children of different abilities. Prior to reunification in 1990, the school systems in the former West and East Germany differed. In the former West Germany, there were three main types of school – *Gymnasium*, *Realschule* and *Hauptschule* – along with a comprehensive school, the *Gesamtschule* introduced in the 1970s. Transfer to different tracks depended on initially tests and subsequently teacher recommendations (Füssel et al., 2010). In the former East Germany, a communist state, a 10-year comprehensive school, the *Polytechnische Oberschule* was introduced; after completion, the school type leading to the *Abitur* was retained as the *Erweiterte Oberschule* (Nikolai, 2018) or extended upper school. Following German reunification, teacher recommendations were adopted by the East German Länder in 1991 as a key mechanism in the transition from primary to secondary education (KMK, 2021).

The legal authority to decide what type of secondary school or track their child will attend after primary school rests with the parents. However, in practice, the recommendation of the primary school teacher plays a major role (Weiss & Weishaupt, 1999). The *Länder* have different regulations governing the transition from primary into secondary education. In some cases, a binding decision on the choice of school / track for lower secondary education is made in grade 4, 5 or 6. If the pupil attends or transfers to an *integrierte Gesamtschule* (integrated comprehensive school) or another school offering several education programmes (KMK, 2021) no such decision is taken. In the final year of primary school, teachers recommend each pupil for a particular secondary school track and there are also consultations with parents. The vote of the primary school is either the basis for the decision or an aid in the decision regarding the pupil's future school career. The final decision is taken either by the parents or by the school or authority which supervises the school (KMK, 2021). The policies adopted at the level of the *Land* vary. Helbig and Nikolai (2015), analysed the criteria for the transition from primary school across *Länder* finding variation as regards whether the recommendation is based on a fixed average of primary school grades, whether the primary school recommendation is binding or non-binding, whether there is the possibility of an admission test, or whether there is a probationary period after the transition to high school.

In short, the primary school recommendation is more or less binding on parents depending on the *Land*. In most *Länder* parents retain their right to choose the secondary school that they think is appropriate for their child (Ertl & Phillips, 2000). In others, parents can only choose the track that is recommended or an academically lower track, and in yet others the track selected by the teachers may be changed following a meeting with parents (Gresch, 2010). Where the teacher's recommendation is not legally binding, parents can challenge the recommendation via different procedures which vary according to the *Land* (Weiss & Weishaupt, 1999). Research has found that parents generally follow the teacher's recommendation (Füssel et al., 2010); however, some do not. It is important to stress that policies have shifted in recent decades (Becker et al., 2016). Thus, in the school year 2023/24, there was a binding *Gymnasium* recommendation in only 3 of 16 *Länder* (Bavaria, Thuringia, and Brandenburg). In Baden-Wuerttemberg and Saxony, binding recommendations were abolished in 2012 and 2017 respectively (Saur & Nikolai, 2024).

### 3.2 *England*

In England, following the 1944 Education Act, and in line with the earlier Norwood Report (Board of Education, 1943), state funded grammar schools were established along with technical schools and secondary modern schools. Selection for grammar schools normally took place at the end of primary school following the "11-plus" examination. In most areas, local authorities used a 'procedure of allocation based upon at least one standardised test usually of verbal reasoning'; many also used standardised tests of attainment in English and in arithmetic (National Foundation for Educational Research, 1963, p. 3). However, from the mid-1960s onwards (Simon, 1991; West, 2022) they diminished in number (West, 2022, 2023) and by the late 1970s they only educated around 5% of secondary school pupils (House of Lords, 2016). Following the School Standards and Framework Act (SSFA) 1998, the remaining 164 grammar schools were formally designated as such and permitted to select pupils on the basis of academic ability. By 2025, there were 163 designated grammar schools.<sup>5</sup>

For historical reasons (Simon, 1991; West, 2022) their distribution is geographically uneven. In January 2022, the South East region had the highest proportion of state secondary pupils attending grammar schools (12% of secondary pupils), followed by the South West with 7%. The only region in England with no grammar schools is the North East. Only 35 local authorities with state funded secondary schools have any grammar schools and around 60%

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<sup>5</sup> These were designated under the SSFA 1998 as grammar schools. A 'grammar school' is defined in the legislation as a school that selects all (or substantially all) of its pupils on the basis of general (i.e. academic) ability (DfE, 2021, p. 46).

of grammar schools are located in 11 local authorities. In January 2022, 11 local authorities were classified by the DfE, as having a “highly selective” system (with 25% or more of state-funded secondary school places being in state-funded grammar schools). In these 11 local authorities there were 99 grammar schools. The majority of local authorities (116) have no grammar schools. All grammar schools were originally maintained by local authorities, but following the 2010 Academies Act, the majority converted to academy status. In January 2025, there were 20 local authority maintained grammar schools and 143 wholly selective academies (DfE, 2024a).<sup>6</sup>

Turning to legislation and policy, the School Standards and Framework Act 1998 prevented new selection by ability. However, in 2016, the Conservative Prime Minister, Theresa May, a strong proponent of grammar schools, proposed relaxing the restrictions on new grammar schools and requiring new or expanding grammar schools to take a proportion of children from lower income households (DfE, 2016). However, the general election in June 2017 resulted in a diminished majority for the Conservatives, and the government did not pursue proposals for new grammar schools.<sup>7</sup> Instead, an “expansion fund” was made available for existing grammar schools. Department for Education guidance (DfE, 2019) stated that proposals needed to demonstrate how grammar schools would increase access for children eligible for the “pupil premium”<sup>8</sup> by ‘increasing the numbers of such pupils sitting the entrance tests, being successful in those tests and going on to be admitted’ (p. 15). The minimum criteria were to include:

Prioritising pupils eligible for pupil premium funding in admission oversubscription criteria for September 2021 as the next priority after the mandatory priority that schools have to give to looked after and previously looked after children (LAC/PLAC)...[And] to ensure the school’s admission arrangements for September 2021 more widely prioritise access for children eligible for the pupil premium...(p. 16)

In 2018, a memorandum of understanding (MoU) between the DfE and the Grammar School Heads Association (GSHA) representing 152 of the 163 grammar schools was agreed. This was subsequently renewed until 2027 (DfE, 2023a, 2023b). One key area covered by the MoU was access of pupils from lower income backgrounds to grammar schools (2023a, 2023b). In 2022, 136 grammar schools prioritised disadvantaged children within their admission arrangements, compared with 63 in 2017 (DfE, 2023b) and 128 in 2020/21 (Burgess et al.,

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<sup>6</sup> See West and Bailey (2013), West (2023) and West et al. (2024) for more information about the academies programme.

<sup>7</sup> New legislation would have been required, which may not have successfully been enacted.

<sup>8</sup> Pupil premium funding is allocated to schools based on the number of pupils recorded as eligible for free school meals, or eligible in the past 6 years, and children previously looked after by a local authority or equivalent (DfE, 2024b).

2023). Furthermore, in 2022, 25 schools lowered the pass mark for disadvantaged children (24 of which also included an oversubscription criterion for disadvantaged children) (DfE, 2023b). In 2024, the percentage of pupils eligible for free school meals in selective (i.e., grammar) schools was 7.0% compared with 25.1% in non-selective secondary schools in England (DfE, 2025).

## **4 Admissions policies and procedures**

### *4.1 Germany*

Education in Germany is the responsibility of the *Land*; thus, it is necessary to focus on policies in specific *Länder*. In the first instance we review the legislative provision and policies in Thuringia, a *Land* in the East of Germany which has more rigid rules than many *Länder* regarding admission to the *Gymnasium* (see also West et al., 2025). We then outline the policies in place in another *Land* which has similarly strict policies (Bavaria) before outlining the policies in place in North Rhine-Westphalia and Hamburg, both of which have more relaxed, “non-binding” policies (but different school systems).

In Thuringia, there are two main types of secondary schools, the *Gymnasium* and the *Regelschule* (which comprises two tracks: a lower track with graduation after year 9 and higher track with graduation after year 10). Whilst in theory the choice of school and education track lies with the parents, this is based on and limited by the pupil’s abilities (Thüringer Ministerium für Bildung, Jugend und Sport, 2021). The school, and more specifically the class teacher and head teacher, advise the parents regarding their choice of school for their child.

The regulations (Thüringer Ministerium für Bildung, Jugend und Sport, 2021) state that the transition to the *Gymnasium* after primary school requires the pupil to succeed in the entrance examination which takes the form of a trial lesson. However, if the pupil meets specific performance requirements he or she can be exempted from the entrance examination: first, if the pupil has achieved the grade “good” (the second highest grade) in the core subjects (German, mathematics, *Heimat- und Sachkunde*<sup>9</sup> (local history and general knowledge) and the first foreign language) in the report they receive halfway through the final year of primary school; or second, if the pupil receives a recommendation from the “class conference” which comprises all the pupil’s teachers (based on the same report). The

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<sup>9</sup> Learning areas in the subject of local history and general knowledge include living things and habitats, nature and technology, space and time, individual and society (Thüringer Ministerium für Bildung, Jugend und Sport, 2015).

recommendation is based on the pupil's academic performance, performance ability and willingness to perform, as demonstrated so far. If the child is not exempted, there is the option of an entrance examination in the form of trial lessons at a *Gymnasium*. However, this only happens at the parent's / guardian's request. Following the trial lessons, the examination committee determines the result: the pupil either passes or fails. The pupil is deemed to have failed if the examination committee unanimously determines that he / she is obviously unsuitable to attend the *Gymnasium* (see Thüringer Ministerium für Bildung, Jugend und Sport, 2021).

If the child is not recommended for a *Gymnasium* or fails the entrance examination, he or she transfers to a basic secondary school (*Regelschule*). For this type of school – but not the *Gymnasium* – school districts and catchment areas apply. Parents can apply for another school, but if there are more applications than places available the decision about admission is taken by the headteacher according to criteria laid down by the Thuringia School Law and depends on the school type.<sup>10</sup> The school's headteacher also decides about the capacity and hence availability of places and intake of the school (see Thüringer Ministerium für Bildung, Jugend und Sport, 2021).

The role of parents is thus crucially important when it comes to secondary school admission. If a pupil does not receive a recommendation for a grammar school and his or her parents want their child to attend this type of school, they must make a request for their child to take the entrance examination. Thuringia is amongst the *Länder* where the primary school recommendation has a high degree of binding force so parents cannot simply decide to ignore the outcome of the recommendation. The rules thus act as a “negative correction force” meaning that they correct downwards if the parent's decision does not match the recommendation of the primary school or the pupil's primary school grades (Gresch et al., 2010).

If a child is not recommended for a grammar school and also fails the entrance examination, he or she goes to a basic secondary school (*Regelschule*). This is divided into two tracks. The parents submit their application to the school and the school makes a decision as to whether or not to admit the child. If the child does not receive a place to either track the

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<sup>10</sup> For example, siblings, school is closest to the place of residence for the chosen track, parents explicitly request the profile of the school / specific foreign language programme (after these criteria are applied the decision is taken by random draw) (see Thüringer Ministerium für Bildung, Jugend und Sport, 2021).

relevant school authority allocates the pupil to a school (Thüringer Ministerium für Bildung, Jugend und Sport, 2021).

The situation in Bavaria is similar insofar as the decision made by the school is binding. Transition from primary school to secondary school *Gymnasium* or *Realschule* is in year 5. Prior to this in year 4, pupils receive what is known as a certificate of transition (*Übertrittszeugnis*), stating the type of school type recommended for the child. A recommendation for the *Gymnasium* is given with an average grade of at least 2.33 in German, Mathematics and *Heimat-und Sachunterricht*<sup>11</sup> (local and general studies). A recommendation for *Realschule* is given with an average grade of at least 2.66 in these subjects. Scores of 3.00 and below result in a recommendation for *Mittelschule*. If parents are not content with the recommendation made by the school, their child can participate in a three-day assessment period at *Gymnasium* or *Realschule* called *Probeunterricht*. During this period, children are tested in German and Maths. To pass, the child must achieve a mark of at least 3 and 4. If the children are marked 4 and 4, parents can decide if their children will attend the school in September (Landeshauptstadt Muenchen, 2021).

We now turn to two other *Länder* where the recommendation by the child's primary school is not binding, North Rhine-Westphalia and Hamburg. In North Rhine-Westphalia, Article 8 of the Constitution, Parental Rights and Compulsory Schooling, states that 'The natural right of parents to determine the upbringing and education of their children forms the basis of the educational and school system' (Ministerium für Schule und Bildung des Landes Nordrhein-Westfalen, 2020). Parents are advised:

The change from elementary school to secondary school is an important decision for parents and child. You will receive a recommendation in the counselling interview with the teachers of the elementary school in the 4th grade. The elementary school recommendation is not binding for parents in North Rhine-Westphalia. However, it provides a good orientation, as the experienced teachers can make a good assessment of your child's performance. However, the final decision is yours (Ministerium für Kinder, Jugend, Familie, Gleichstellung, Flucht und Integration des Landes Nordrhein-Westfalen, 2023).

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<sup>11</sup> This includes democracy and society, body and health, nature and the environment, time and change, space and mobility, technology and culture (Bayerisches Staatsministerium für Bildung und Kultus, Wissenschaft und Kunst, 2014).

In North Rhine-Westphalia there are four school types: *Hauptschule*, *Realschule*, *Gymnasium*, *Gesamtschule* and *Sekundarschule*. Both the *Gesamtschule* and *Sekundarschule* cater for pupils of different abilities (Ministerium für Schule und Bildung des Landes Nordrhein-Westfalen, 2022). If the parents wish to enrol their child in a school of a type for which the child has not received a recommendation or a limited recommendation, they attend a consultation at the secondary school during the admission process. During this process, the possibility of individual support in the areas that led to the lack of a recommendation are discussed.

If the number of applications exceeds the school's capacity, the headteacher takes hardship cases into account when deciding on admission to the school. He or she also takes into account one or more criteria, including for example, siblings, balanced ratio of girls and boys, balanced ratio of pupils with different languages of origin, the school being close to the primary school attended. In comprehensive schools and secondary schools, the mix of pupils with different abilities is always taken into account. If the number of applications exceeds the school's capacity and the school authority has established a school catchment area the admission procedure first considers children who live in the school catchment area (Ministerium für Schule und Bildung des Landes Nordrhein-Westfalen, 2024).

We now turn to Hamburg, a city state, where the secondary school system was reformed in 2010. The reform resulted in the three-tier secondary school system – which was identified as a major cause of the low outcomes of disadvantaged students – being reformed into two secondary school types *Gymnasien* and *Stadtteilschule* (comprehensive school). Following the reform, parents were able to apply to any school within the state. If there are more applicants than places available, the Hamburg Act of Education defines geographical criteria (distance to school) and relationship criteria (siblings already attending the school) to prioritise who should be admitted (Leist & Perry, 2020). *Gymnasien* do not have entrance examinations but give preference to students with a teacher recommendation. Parents are advised that:

At the end of primary school, when your child is in year 4, the class teacher will recommend the type of secondary school he or she considers most suitable for your child. However, it is your decision whether you want to enrol your child at a local comprehensive school (*Stadtteilschule*) or a grammar school (*Gymnasium*) (Beutner & Medvedev, 2016, p. 6).

## 4.2 *England*

In England, parents apply to secondary schools during their child's final year of primary school using a common application form, which is submitted to the local authority where the family resides. Parents must list a minimum of three choices, which can include both selective and non-selective schools within the same or different local authorities. Parents who wish their child to attend a grammar school list their preferences and the child then takes one or more tests to determine his or her suitability for the school. Whilst testing is the norm, Noden et al. (2014) reported that other oversubscription criteria are also used 'indicating that test scores were most often used to determine a threshold rather than to rank applicants' (p. 17). Their research, which covered all grammar schools at that time (N=164) revealed that the most frequently occurring criteria were looked after children (95%), distance between home and school (88%), siblings (50%), catchment area (47%) and medical/social need (30%).<sup>12</sup>

Limited previous research has examined the types of tests used by grammar schools. However, West and Barham (2008) sampled 10% of the 164 grammar schools in existence at that time stratified by the percentage of grammar schools in the LA.<sup>13</sup> Fourteen of the 16 grammar schools in their sample used verbal reasoning tests, 10 used English tests and the same number mathematics tests and 6 used non-verbal reasoning tests. Three schools used a headteacher's report, mainly to determine whether applicants on the borderline should be offered a place. More recently, Allen and Bartley (2017) conducted a thorough and detailed analysis of the testing and selection arrangements in one highly selective local authority (Kent) (see also section 5 below).

### *Methods*

We analysed the tests used for admission in September 2025 to a sample of grammar schools in England, along with admissions arrangements including oversubscription criteria used in the event of there being more applicants than places (see DfE, 2021). The aim was for the sample to be geographically representative and to include areas with a high proportion and low proportion of grammar schools as well as different types of school. The achieved sample comprised 50 grammar schools, 31% of grammar schools (N=163) in England. The sample included 30 schools in highly selective areas and 20 in areas not classified as highly selective (Danechi & Bolton, 2020) and covered all English regions. The

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<sup>12</sup> Research carried out before the legislative provision prioritising looked after children had been introduced revealed that the main oversubscription criteria for the schools sampled (N=151) were siblings (72%), distance (70%), catchment area (50%) and medical/social need (44%) (West and Hind, 2003).

<sup>13</sup> Eleven schools were from less selective systems and five from more selective systems.



sample included different types of grammar school: 15 single sex boys schools, 20 single sex *girls* schools, 15 co-educational schools, and 10 schools with a religious character (three Church of England, five Roman Catholic and two Christian). The free school meals eligibility in schools in the sample was 7.2% (compared with 7.6% for all grammar schools) (DfE, 2024c).

#### *Testing procedure*

Turning to the types of tests used, we found that over nine out of ten schools used a mathematics test (46 out of 50), around three-quarters (38) used an English test, the same proportion used a verbal reasoning test and six out of ten (30) used a non-verbal reasoning test. In the majority of cases (seven out of ten) schools used tests produced by GL Assessment.

There was variation between schools as regards the testing arrangements. Thus, in one area covering grammar schools in the West Midlands region, pupils sit the entrance test (the 11-plus), which is produced by GL Assessment, at a test centre. Candidates sit two one-hour papers, each divided into timed sections testing English comprehension, verbal reasoning, mathematics and non-verbal/spatial reasoning. All the questions are multiple choice, with weightings for the test results being 50% for English / verbal reasoning, 25% for non-verbal reasoning and 25% for mathematics. 'The scores for each section are standardised to take into account differences in age, meaning younger children are not disadvantaged compared to children in the same cohort who could be almost a year older' (West Midlands Grammar Schools, 2025).

In highly selective areas, schools in the local authority may use the same tests. Thus, in Kent, there are three tests. Two are standardised, multiple choice tests, produced and marked by GL Assessment. The first is an English and mathematics paper; the English section involves a comprehension exercise as well as some additional questions designed to test literacy skills. The second test is a reasoning paper; this comprises a verbal reasoning section and a non-verbal reasoning section. The third assessment is a writing exercise which is not marked; however, it may be used by a local headteacher panel as part of the headteacher assessment stage of the process (see below) (Kent County Council, 2025).

Individual schools, even in highly selective areas may not be part of the local authority testing programme. In the case of one school in Lincolnshire in the East Midlands, applicants take verbal reasoning tests only (unlike other grammar schools in the area which also require a non-verbal test to be taken); the school administers these tests. Only children

who attain a total score of 220 or more in the tests are eligible for entry. This corresponds to the county-wide standard required in the local authority for entry to grammar schools and is designed to select the upper 25% of the ability range.

The process differs in other highly selective local authorities. In the case of one girls' grammar school in Sutton, in London, all girls must sit and pass all parts of the two stage "entrance test". The first stage is a "selective eligibility test" and the second stage an "entrance examination". The first stage comprises two multiple choice tests (one in mathematics and one in English). Candidates who meet or exceed the pass mark in the selective eligibility test, are invited back to sit the entrance examination which comprises two tests: one in mathematics and one in English, neither of which is multiple choice. Candidates must pass both parts of the entrance examination to be eligible for a place. The marks in the entrance examination are then added to half of the aggregate mark achieved in the selective eligibility test, with each part carrying equal weight, to create a total score in the "entrance test". The total scores are used to create ranked lists. In the event of the number of eligible applications exceeding the number of places available, the school's selection criteria are applied.

The tests sometimes include non-traditional assessments. In one school in Liverpool in the North West, candidates for the 180 places are tested in English and mathematics and creative writing. The English and mathematics elements are marked by computer and age-standardised. All students with an eligible score from these two elements have their creative writing element assessed. In order to be eligible for admission to the school, candidates must achieve an "eligible score" which includes minimum standards in each element of the test. This is not a pre-defined pass mark but reflects a candidate's position in the rank order of standardised scores in the mathematics and English elements once a minimum standard for creative writing test has been achieved. The school has academy status, and the admissions committee determines, by reference to performance in the tests, an appropriate eligible score and a rank order of children who should be offered a place.

#### *Associated admissions arrangements*

In Kent, a highly selective local authority in the South East, primary school headteachers are provided with the test results for their children and are able to apply for a "headteacher assessment" for children who have not reached the pass standard to attend a grammar school.

This is carried out on a confidential basis without parents being informed. A panel of headteachers consider a selection of work submitted by the primary school, the

Writing Task undertaken as part of the Kent Test and a report containing evidence from the headteacher. If the child is successful in the headteacher assessment, then the decision is regarded as a pass on an equal footing with those who gained automatic selection through test results. This ...decision is recognised at all Kent grammar schools (Petham primary school, 2025; see also Annex A, Figure A.5).

In Buckinghamshire, another highly selective local authority in the South East, a “selection review” is part of the admissions process. Each selection review panel comprises two grammar school headteachers and one primary school headteacher. Parents need to provide evidence to demonstrate that their child’s results were not as expected, due to exceptional circumstances; this might include school reports and supporting letters from the child’s class teacher. If the panel agrees that the parents’ case demonstrates that their child ‘would be best suited to a grammar school’, the child will then ‘be considered qualified for a Buckinghamshire grammar school – the same as if they had scored 121 [the pass mark] or higher in the test’. (Buckinghamshire Council, 2024; see also Buckinghamshire Council, 2023).

#### *Oversubscription criteria*

In all schools, if there are more applicants than places available, oversubscription criteria are used to determine who should be offered a place. In the case of some grammar schools, test scores are used to rank applicants (see Annex A for examples). In the case of others, there is a threshold and oversubscription criteria are used to decide who should be offered a place.<sup>14</sup>

All schools in the sample used as an oversubscription criterion looked after / previously looked after children.<sup>15</sup> Over nine out of ten schools (47 out of 50) used eligibility for the pupil premium (or equivalent) as an oversubscription criterion. Nearly eight out of 10 (39) used distance from home to school (although in some cases this was used as a final tie breaker only) and six out of ten prioritised children living in its catchment area. Less frequently used criteria included a sibling attending the school (four out of ten schools) and the child of a staff member (around one in three schools). For the ten schools with a religious character, religion was an oversubscription criterion. Small numbers of schools used other criteria (such as feeder school, medical needs and aptitude in a subject area). To

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<sup>14</sup> Grammar schools that rank all children according to a pre-determined pass mark and allocate places to those with the highest score are not permitted to give priority to siblings of current or past pupils (DfE, 2021).

<sup>15</sup> ‘Where admission arrangements are not based solely on highest scores in a selection test, the admission authority must give priority in its oversubscription criteria to all looked after children and previously looked after children who meet the pre-set standards of the ability test’ (DfE, 2021, s.120).

exemplify the variation and, in particular, the priority given to different categories of children, the oversubscription criteria for a sub-sample of schools are presented in Annex A.

Under the School Standards and Framework Act 1998, if a child is refused a school place, parents can appeal to the admission authority of the school, which must act in accordance with relevant legislative provision (DfE, 2022). There was considerable variation as regards the appeals process as shown in Annex B. In each case, parents can provide additional information to support their appeal. It is notable that current schoolwork or national test results can be used at this stage (albeit that the 11-plus tests themselves are not necessarily related to the school curriculum).

## **5 Inequalities in access to *Gymnasien* and grammar schools**

In this penultimate section we explore inequalities in access to *Gymnasien* in Germany and grammar schools in England. Drawing on previous research and data analysis we provide an overview of the inequalities in the German context and then in the English context.

In terms of inequalities in access to *Gymnasien* in Germany, Dumont et al. (2019) analysed the mechanisms underpinning the social inequalities at the transition from primary to secondary school in Berlin. They combined quantitative data from a large-scale survey and assessment study of nearly 4,000 pupils and their parents and qualitative data from interviews with a sample of parents. The quantitative analyses showed that pupils from higher socioeconomic backgrounds were more likely to enter the academic track than pupils from lower socio-economic backgrounds.

Turning specifically to tracking recommendations, the social background of parents has been found to influence both teachers' recommendations and parents' decisions (see Nikolai & West, 2013 for a review of relevant research). In short, the 'school system, together with family influences, structures the education decision via school recommendations' (p. 63). Indeed, more recently a systematic review of research on teachers' tracking recommendations and pupils' socio-economic and ethnic background (Batruch et al., 2023) found that teachers' recommendations were biased against students from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds, although evidence with regard to ethnic biases was more mixed.

In England, there are also inequalities as regards access to grammar schools. In local authorities with a system of grammar schools, children who are not eligible for free school

meals have a much greater chance of attending a grammar school than children whose achievement levels are similarly high<sup>16</sup> but who are eligible for free school meals (Cribb et al., 2013a; 2013b). A detailed and thorough study by Allen and Bartley (2017) focusing on the grammar schools in Kent examined the social inequalities in the testing process, finding that pupils eligible for free school meals do not often achieve scores that reach the 11-plus pass boundary; that they have specific difficulties ‘achieving a good mark in the reasoning element of the tests’ (p. R39); and that their scores are not generally as high as the national test scores taken at the end of primary school suggest that they should be. They further note that the performance score in the 11-plus is greatest in the reasoning paper which ‘is almost certainly attributable to lack of test preparation’ (p. R39). This is significant as there is evidence that private tutoring is used to prepare children for the 11-plus (e.g., Hajar, 2018; Ireson & Rushforth, 2011).

Research has also explored inequalities in access with regard to ethnicity and other key characteristics. The proportion of pupils from non-White backgrounds going to grammar schools was found to be higher than in other secondary schools: these pupils were predominantly from Asian and Chinese backgrounds. On the other hand, there were lower proportions of Black pupils than in other schools (Cribb et al., 2013a; 2013b). Broadly similar findings were observed in the case of grammar schools in London (West & Hind, 2007), suggesting that such differences in the composition of grammar schools are longstanding. More recent research has also revealed that children attending grammar schools are, on average, less likely to have English as an additional language and to be identified as having special educational needs (Gorard & Siddiqui, 2018).

## **6 Comparative analysis and discussion**

This final section compares and contrasts legislation, policy and admissions arrangements in Germany and the UK (England) before discussing inequalities in terms of access to selective schools in each country. In terms of prevalence and distribution of grammar schools in Germany, there are *Gymnasien* across the country and they cater for a significant proportion of pupils. In England only around 5% of pupils attend grammar schools, with such schools being distributed unevenly across the country. There are also differences between the two jurisdictions in terms of legislative provision, with legislation and legislative provision regarding admissions to grammar schools being determined at the national level in England, but at the regional – *Land* – level in Germany.

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<sup>16</sup> As measured in the national key stage 2 tests, taken at around 11 years of age.

In terms of admissions policies, in Germany across all *Länder*, there is a broadly similar system with teachers making recommendations based on children's school performance. The major distinguishing characteristic is whether the recommendation is "binding" on parents or not. In England, grammar schools use tests of different types to decide who should be selected. In some local authorities, the testing arrangements are the same across grammar schools, but this is not necessarily the case even when the local authority has a highly selective system. In some local authorities – for example, where the whole local authority is "highly selective" – school headteachers have a role in the admissions process. Thus, in one local authority the headteacher is able to review the results of the 11-plus and if the child does not reach the required level, he or she can provide supplementary material for a headteacher panel to review. There are a range of geographical inequalities, not only in terms of the testing arrangements but also in terms of cut-off point for a selective place to be offered, the existence of assessment panels and the role (if any) played by headteachers.

The appeals process also differs between countries. In Germany, if a recommendation for grammar school is not made (and this is binding), the child has an opportunity to be assessed. In England, appeals can draw on additional academic information, but this does not necessarily mean that a child will be allocated a place as other children may have greater claim to a place.

In both Germany and in England there are inequalities in terms of which groups are more likely to gain a place at a grammar school. In both countries, children from more advantaged families are likely to be beneficiaries. In Germany, the teacher recommendation plays an important role, and this serves to advantage parents from higher socio-economic backgrounds. In England, the 11-plus test material includes verbal and non-verbal reasoning tests: the material covered in these is not part of the national curriculum so disadvantaging children whose parents are not in a position to afford private tutoring for the 11-plus. Furthermore, even though policy in England has actively encouraged grammar schools to prioritise children from low income backgrounds, the proportion of children eligible for free school meals remains significantly lower in grammar schools than in non-selective secondary schools.

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## Annex A

**Figure A.1: Grammar school (academy status) in Birmingham LA**

Applicants are required to sit an entrance test, comprising English Comprehension, Verbal Reasoning, Mathematics, Non-Verbal/Spatial Reasoning. Applicants must achieve the qualifying score in order to be eligible for admission to the school. [Qualifying score is lower than the priority score.]

Where the number of eligible applications for admission exceeds the number of places available at the school...places are offered as follows:

1. Looked After Children / Previously Looked After Children who achieve the qualifying score.

Applicants in this category will be ranked by test score and then by distance from the school.

2. Children attracting the Pupil Premium who achieve the qualifying score and live within the school catchment area. Applicants in this category will be ranked by distance from the school.

3. If fewer than 45 places (25% of the places available) are filled by applicants in category 2, offers will be made to children attracting the Pupil Premium who achieve the qualifying score and live outside the catchment area, until a total of 45 children attracting the Pupil Premium have been offered. If 45 or more places are filled by applicants in category 2, there will be no offers made from this category. Applicants in this category will be ranked by test score. Where scores are equal, priority will be given to those with a sibling at the school, then by distance from the school.

4. Applicants who achieve the priority score and live within the school catchment area. Applicants in this category will be given priority if they have an older sibling at the school; then ranked by distance from the school.

5. Applicants achieving the qualifying score. Applicants in this category will be ranked by test score.

Where scores are equal, priority will be given to those with a sibling at the school; then ranked by distance from the school.

**Figure A.2: Grammar school (academy status) in Lincolnshire (highly selective LA)**

Applicants take two verbal reasoning tests; one is written and one is multiple choice.

If there are more qualified candidates than places, the following oversubscription criteria are used:

1. Qualified candidates who are in public care (looked after children), will be considered first in the allocation of places

2. Qualified in-catchment candidates. In-catchment candidates are those whose principal residency is within 6.5 miles in a straight line distance from the post office address of the School to the applicant's principal residence.

3. In the main admissions round for entry into Year 7, up to 12 places (12.5% of places available) will be reserved for students who are in receipt of Pupil Premium... Aside from those Pupil Premium...students who have already been allocated places by virtue of being in-catchment, out-of-catchment students who are currently in receipt of Pupil Premium...will make up the remainder of these places, based on the highest VR scores. ...

4. Priority between children who do not fall into the above categories ... will go to the applicants with the higher VR scores.
5. In the case of over subscription in [categories above] we would take the highest VR scores. In the event of a tie, the following criteria shall apply: the school calculates the mean rank position and, if there is still a tie, we shall take the highest individual score on the written test. If a tie still exists, we take the least number of mistakes made on the written paper, then the raw mark on the written paper and finally the raw mark overall. If there is still a tie between two students, then the School would admit both candidates. If there is a tie between more than two students, a lottery will be drawn by an independent person...

**Figure A.3: Grammar school (academy status) with a religious character in Wirral**

The criteria for admissions: Places will go to applicants who have reached the required standard in the assessment and testing procedure comprising three tests in English, mathematics and verbal reasoning. If more than [planned number of places] boys satisfy these criteria, then places are allocated according to the following oversubscription criteria:

1. Catholic looked after and previously looked after boys, baptised Catholic boys, living in the relevant area...
2. Baptised Christian, non-Catholic looked after and previously looked after boys, baptised Christian, non-Catholic boys, living in the relevant area.
3. Looked after boys and previously looked after boys who are not baptised Christians, non-Catholic boys whose parents wish them to have a Catholic education.

Notes: Priority will be given to boys in receipt of free school meals, at the time of application, in each category of the over-subscription Criteria...

If in any category there are more applicants than places available, priority will be given on the basis of rank order of performance in the assessment and testing procedures. Where two candidates are equally ranked in those procedures priority will be given on the basis of distance from home to the school, those living nearest to the school having priority.

**Figure A.4: Grammar school (academy status) in Kent (highly selective LA)**

Places are offered only where a girl has been given a selective assessment through the LA's Procedure for Entry to Secondary Education (PESE) 11-plus test (comprising English, mathematics and verbal and non-verbal reasoning)

*Oversubscription Criteria*

1. Looked after children (LAC) and all previously looked after children...who ... have been awarded a selective assessment via the LA's Test, will be given priority over all other applicants and the number of available Area places will be reduced accordingly.
2. Rank score

*A Area places (up to 135 places)* Girls with a selective assessment through the LA's PESE 11-plus test resident in any of the following three local council areas for Council Tax purposes [named areas] will be considered according to the following:

1. a girl's ability as indicated by her combined score in the age-11 assessment
2. Tie-breaker 1 - proximity ... of the pupil's home address to the School
3. Tie-breaker 2 - in the case of the above not determining a place, then a random selection will determine the place by drawing lots supervised by an independent person

*B Trustee places (30 places)* Girls with a selective assessment through the LA's PESE 11-plus test resident outside any of the following three local council areas for Council Tax purposes [named areas] will be considered according to the following:

1. A girl's ability as indicated by her combined score in the age-11 assessment
2. Tie-breaker 1 – proximity...of the pupil's home address to the School
3. Tie-breaker 2 – in the case of the above not determining a place, then a random selection will determine the place by drawing lots supervised by an independent person.

3. Pupil Premium places (15 places) – girls eligible for Pupil Premium with a selective assessment through the LA's PESE 11-plus test. [The school] will allocate 15 places to eligible students. Places are allocated where eligible student scores are below the automatic qualifying score for the Area places, according to the following:

1. Proximity...of the pupil's home address to the School
2. Tie-breaker 1 – in the case of the above not determining a place, then a random selection will determine the place by drawing lots supervised by an independent person.

#### **Figure A.5: Kent Headteacher Assessment Stage**

The Headteacher assessment stage is designed to enable the LA 'to identify the small proportion of children who are of grammar school ability but have not qualified through testing for a grammar school place. Headteachers may request a panel assessment where they have evidence that a child's test scores have not done him/her justice'. The reasons could include illness, additional educational needs, English as an additional language. Headteachers must provide specific reasons with clear evidence for requesting a panel assessment as a minimum history of scores from standardised tests, all work available in the final year of primary schools, work from the summer term in the penultimate term of year of primary school' (Kent County Council, 2018).

## Annex B

### Figure B.1: Examples of appeals procedures

In one grammar school in Lincolnshire (a highly selective authority), parents are advised that the appeals documents ask for 'some basic information' about them and their child and offer the parent the opportunity to make a statement supporting their 'son's suitability for grammar school' stating that 'Most parents then attach copies of primary school reports or supporting evidence of current primary school achievement'. Once this information has been received the parents are offered an appointment to meet with the independent appeals panel who will ask about their 'son's circumstances and then make their decision on whether or not he should be admitted'.

In the case of another grammar school, parents are advised to include evidence or supporting material with their appeal and must give the grounds for their appeal. Parents are advised that 'The panel will give due weighting to academic letters from professionals such as, headteachers, teachers and tutors, plus CAT [cognitive abilities test] or NFER [National Foundation for Educational Research] test reports'.

One LA, Gloucestershire, states: 'For appeals for grammar schools the panel are only able to uphold the appeal if it is satisfied that there is evidence to demonstrate that the child is of the required academic standards, for example, school reports giving Year 5 / Year 6 SAT [national test] results or a letter of support from their current or previous school clearly indicating why the child is considered to be of grammar school ability'.