

Report summary

The most able students

Are they doing as well as they should in our non-selective secondary schools?

National data show that just over a quarter of the pupils who achieved Level 5 in English and mathematics at the end of Year 6 did not make the progress expected of them in their non-selective secondary schools. As a result, they failed to attain at least a B grade in these subjects at GCSE. In 2012, 20% of the 1,649 non-selective schools with sixth forms teaching A levels failed to produce a single student with an A-level grade profile of at least two A grades and one B grade in at least two of the facilitating subjects required by many of the most prestigious universities.¹

This survey investigated why so many of our brightest students in non-selective state secondary schools, including academies, fail to achieve their potential compared with students who attend selective and independent schools. The vast majority of young people attending secondary schools are educated in non-selective state schools, so it is vital that we assess the current position, and suggest what might be done to improve outcomes in the future. We also examined why relatively few students from non-selective state schools apply to, or gain places at, the most prestigious universities. The survey focused on two key questions.

- Are the most able students in non-selective state secondary schools achieving as well as they should?²
- Why is there such disparity in admissions to the most prestigious universities between a small number of independent and selective schools and the great majority of state-maintained non-selective schools and academies?

We reviewed evidence from a variety of sources, including a survey of parents and 2,327 lesson observation evidence forms completed by Ofsted inspectors during

¹ The term 'most prestigious' is used to describe the Russell Group of 24 leading United Kingdom universities.

² For the purpose of this survey, 'most able' is defined as the brightest students starting secondary school in Year 7 attaining Level 5 or above, or having the potential to attain Level 5 and above, in English (reading and writing) and/or mathematics at the end of Key Stage 2. Some pupils who are new to the country and are learning English as an additional language, for example, might not have attained Level 5 or beyond at the end of Key Stage 2 but have the potential to achieve it.

recent inspections of 109 non-selective secondary schools. We visited 41 non-selective secondary schools across England in March 2013 to help us to understand the reasons why the most able students do not routinely achieve the highest grades.³ Schools were selected from all eight of Ofsted's regions and were a mixture of size and type. Nearly all of the schools visited had a broadly average intake in terms of their students' prior attainment at the end of Key Stage 2, although this varied from year group to year group. We gathered evidence about:

- the leadership of the school
- the achievement of the most able students throughout the school
- the transfer and transition of these students from their primary schools and their induction into secondary school
- the quality of teaching, learning and assessment of the most able students
- the curriculum and extension activities offered to the most able students
- the support and guidance provided for the most able students, particularly when they were choosing subjects and preparing for university.

The survey findings present a discouraging picture of what it means to be one of the most able students in non-selective secondary schools in England. The 2,327 lesson observation evidence forms scrutinised separately as part of this report showed that the most able students in only a fifth of these lessons were supported well or better in such schools. Moreover, in around 40% of the schools visited in the survey, the most able students were not making the progress of which they were capable. In a few of the schools visited, teachers did not even know who the most able students were.

Poor provision in the weaker schools visited resulted in:

- fragile transfer arrangements between primary and secondary schools
- students being placed in groups where the teaching did not challenge them
- irregular checks on progress
- a focus on students near the GCSE C/D grade borderline at the expense of more able students
- a failure to prepare them well for A-level examinations.

The visits also identified common characteristics in the schools that were doing well for their most able students:

- leadership that was determined to improve standards for all students

³ Inspectors also visited three selective schools for comparative purposes but their data and the evidence gathered are not included in the body of this report.

- high expectations among the most able students, their families and teachers
- effective transition arrangements that supported the students' move from primary to secondary school, ensuring that the most able sustained the progress they had made and maintained the pace of their learning
- early identification of the most able students so that teaching was adapted, and the curriculum tailored, to meet their needs
- flexibility in the curriculum, allowing the most able students to be challenged and extended
- groupings that allowed the students to be stretched from the very start of secondary school
- expert teaching, supported by effective formative assessment and purposeful homework, that stimulated students' enjoyment of the subject
- effective training and cooperative practice, ensuring that teachers learnt from one another
- tight checks on the progress of the most able students so that any slippage was identified early and acted on
- an effective programme that encouraged and supported the most able students to apply to our most prestigious universities.

Key findings

- **The most able students in non-selective secondary schools are not achieving as well as they should.** In many schools, expectations of what the most able students should achieve are too low.
- **65% of pupils who achieved a Level 5 or above in both English and mathematics at the end of Year 6 failed to attain A* or A grades in both these subjects at GCSE in 2012 in non-selective schools.** These top GCSE grades are a key predictor of success at A level and progression to university.
- **Leaders in our secondary schools have not done enough to create a culture of scholastic excellence, where the highest achievement in academic work is recognised as vitally important.** Schools do not routinely give the same attention to the most able as they do to low-attaining students or those who struggle at school.
- **Transition arrangements from primary to secondary school are not effective enough to ensure that students maintain their academic momentum into Year 7.** Information is not used carefully so that teachers can plan to meet the most able students' needs in all lessons from the beginning of their secondary school career.
- **Teaching is insufficiently focused on the most able at Key Stage 3.** In over two fifths of the schools visited for the survey, students did not make the progress that they should, or that they were capable of, between the ages of 11

and 14. Students said that too much work was repetitive and undemanding in Key Stage 3. As a result, their progress faltered and their interest in school waned.

- **Many students become used to performing at a lower level than they are capable of. Parents or carers and teachers accepted this too readily.** Students did not do the hard work and develop the resilience needed to perform at a higher level because more challenging tasks were not regularly demanded of them. The work was pitched at the middle and did not extend the most able. School leaders did not evaluate how well mixed-ability group teaching was challenging the most able students.
- **The curriculum and the quality of homework required improvement.** The curriculum in Key Stage 3 and early entry to GCSE examinations are among the key weaknesses found by inspectors. Homework and the programme of extension activities for the most able students, where they existed, were not checked routinely for their impact or quality. Students said that too much homework was insufficiently challenging; it failed to interest them, extend their thinking or develop their skills.
- **Inequalities between different groups of the most able students are not being tackled satisfactorily.** The attainment of the most able students who are eligible for free school meals, especially the most able boys, lags behind that of other groups. Few of the schools visited used the Pupil Premium funding to support the most able students from the poorest backgrounds.
- **Assessment, tracking and targeting are not used sufficiently well in many schools.** Some of the schools visited paid scant attention to the progress of their most able students.
- **Too few of the schools worked with families to support them in overcoming the cultural and financial obstacles that stood in the way of the most able students attending university,** particularly universities away from the immediate local area. Schools did not provide much information about the various benefits of attending different universities or help the most able students to understand more about the financial support available.
- **Most of the 11 to 16 age-range schools visited were insufficiently focused on university entrance.** These schools did not provide students with sufficiently detailed advice and guidance on all the post-16 options available.
- **Schools' expertise in and knowledge about how to apply to the most prestigious universities were not always current and relevant.** Insufficient support and guidance were provided to those most able students whose family members had not attended university.

Main report published 13 June 2013
www.ofsted.gov.uk/resources/130118

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No. 130118

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