



**ParentingNI**  
Supporting Families

**Report:**

**Parental Experiences and  
Attitudes on Post-Primary  
Academic Selection during the  
COVID-19 Pandemic**

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## Executive Summary

The COVID-19 pandemic has led to an unprecedented disruption to the education of children in Northern Ireland. While this has had a dramatic impact on all children, there has been a particular focus on those facing important exams. While sector-wide policies have been enforced for both GCSE and A-level results, this has not been the case for Northern Ireland's unique third examination period – the post-primary transfer.

One key result of this lack of government mandated policy has been regional variation. While some schools have indicated that they intend to continue with selection without adjustment, several others have decided to either drop or amend selection methods for this year. This decentralised response to the crisis has left parents and children in a uniquely challenging situation, without precedent.

This paper sought to gather a snapshot of parental concerns and views regarding post-primary transfer in the pandemic period. The findings of this demonstrate a wide range of very strongly held views, and a lack of consensus on almost any aspect of post-primary transfer both in the pandemic and more generally. Parents were deeply divided on core issues such as:

- Whether the transfer test should go ahead this year;
- Whether the transfer test should exist at all;
- Whether academic selection by any means should be a component of Northern Ireland's Education system.

Parents were often unambiguous and direct with their feedback. Those in favour of the transfer described it as “a necessary part of education” and said that altering it at this late stage was “deeply unfair”. However, some parents who opposed the tests described them as “almost a form of torture” and suggested that allowing the normal transfer process to take place in the shadow of COVID represented a “moral failing on behalf of the authorities”.

It is impossible to determine with such a small sample size how widely any of these beliefs are held. However, what is clear is that there are strong feelings regarding post-primary transfer that deserve to be examined in more detail.

## Background

Northern Ireland is the only part of the United Kingdom where academic selection remains a significant element of the education system. In England, there are around 160 grammar schools out of around 3,000 state secondary schools (5% of all schools). Comparatively, Northern Ireland has around 70 grammar schools out of 193 secondary schools (36% of all schools). This method of education was introduced shortly after the second world war, and was intended to encourage children who were academically gifted to proceed to higher education<sup>1</sup>.

This was a significant change from the pre-war system as previously only the wealthy attended such educational settings. In the new system, those who were academically inclined would progress to university, while secondary schools would prepare the rest for careers in industry. The proponents of academic selection – primarily but not exclusively Conservative governments – argued:

- Grammar schools produced better results for their students<sup>2</sup>;
- That Grammar schools reduced inequality by offering access to high-quality education to those without the means to pay for it<sup>3</sup>;

- The “hothouse” academic atmosphere where every child is relatively capable allows for more in depth teaching<sup>4</sup>;
- The Grammar schools, where desired by parents, should be allowed on principle to allow greater parental choice<sup>4</sup>.

However, academic selection has been hotly contested for most of its existence. It’s opponents in the rest of the UK (mostly but not always Labour governments) argued that:

- The much vaunted ‘social mobility’ primarily helped middle class children, not those in most need<sup>5</sup>;
- Grammar schools tend to exclude SEN, English as a second language or immigrant children and contribute to wider social division<sup>6</sup>;
- The presence of Grammar schools reduces the overall achievement levels of non-Grammar schools in the area<sup>7</sup>.

These are of course, just some of the arguments for and against selection. There has also been a more nuanced debate regarding the form and timing of selection. Some have argued that selection should stay but be done in a more comprehensive manner. Others have argued that 11 years old is too young, and that selection ought to happen at 14 or even 16.

Regardless of these arguments, academic selection was gradually phased out and replaced in the rest of the United Kingdom. Between 1965 and 1975 the majority of English and Welsh schools ceased to select academically. The Labour Governments had passed the choice to local authorities and councils, who had gradually transformed their systems. By contrast, no such major reforms had taken place in Northern Ireland. As of 2008, there has been no nationally-set standardised test, as it was abolished by then Education minister Caitriona Ruane<sup>8</sup>. At the time, the minister described the system as “out of date” and “unequal” and proposed a change in selective practices to be done at age 14. However, political deadlock and crisis meant that these proposals were never implemented.

Instead, two parallel exams – the AQE and GL – were created. These broadly conform to controlled and maintained grammar schools respectively, and have replaced the 11+. There have been numerous attempts to facilitate the creation of a single agreed test<sup>9</sup> but these have thus far been unsuccessful. As a result, children in Northern Ireland face not only selection, but choosing between doing one or both selection papers.

Selection in this modern form has been reviewed on several occasions including the Burns and Costello reports. There has been a large degree of political discussion regarding selection and the transfer test. However there has been comparatively little review of the general public’s attitudes. The last time attitudes on selection was included in the Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey was 2003<sup>10</sup>. At that time, 80% either agreed or strongly agreed with the statement:

*“Selection has to happen at some time in a child’s education.”*

While this gives some idea of a general population view on selection in a non-specific manner it does not give insight about what type of selection is considered best. There has been even less specific review of parent viewpoints, as the Life and Times survey asked the population as a whole, not parents in particular.

The COVID crisis, and the subsequent impact on children and the transfer test has provided a unique opportunity for reflection. A few schools who typically chose to use academic selection have decided to suspend its use. However, the majority have decided to continue. The purpose of this report will

be to take in the views of 5 of parents living in Northern Ireland regarding selection and the transfer test.

This report does not purport to represent full analysis of parental opinion – instead, Parenting NI hopes to motivate those with the capacity to do so to produce a more in-depth study of parental attitudes to help inform education policy. It will look at a range of views and experiences and give context to both sides of the academic debate.

## Parents

Like political opinion, parental views on the transfer test vary widely. Some parents we spoke to were very strongly in favour of the tests both in general and specifically this year. Others viewed academic selection as unfair at any time, but were particularly concerned regarding its impact in the shadow of the COVID-19 pandemic. As part of this paper, we spoke in-depth to 5 parents and received written responses from a number of others.

It would be unrealistic to suggest that this paper can draw conclusions about the general views of parents across Northern Ireland. The time and resources needed to survey in depth thousands of parents who have gone through, are going through or will shortly go through the transfer procedure is beyond Parenting NI's current capacity. Instead, this report presents a snapshot of viewpoints. It is our hope that the Executive in seeking to review or reform academic selection uses this information as a jumping off point. A full NI-wide consultation exercise would significantly improve the process of reform or policy making.

## Parent 1: Rural Part of Northern Ireland

Parent 1 told Parenting NI that she was strongly in favour of academic selection at the age of 10/11. She pointed out that people spend their lives being “selected” based on a wide range of factors including academic ability. She recognised that 10/11 was young, but felt that there was no other realistic way of deciding who was suited for Grammar schools.

She also lamented the abolition of the state-managed 11+. She liked some elements of the new system, for example the fact that tests were spread out and the best 2 of 3 were taken. However, on the whole she felt the current system was worse than what had come before. She highlighted her concern that children couldn't sit their exams in the primary schools to which they were accustomed and felt that having to go to test centres added unneeded and undue stress.

Parent 1 had no real memories – good or bad – of academic selection herself as a young person. She noted that it was just “the done thing” and her strongest memory of the day was happiness that it was a half-day off school. Her family had not put any real pressure on her and the 11+ was seen as “just another test”. These memories did not, she felt, have much influence on her own decisions regarding academic selection for her child. Her child was sitting the test because they wanted to attend a particular school – which also happened to be a grammar school. JA said she and her partner were careful not to put any pressure on their child, though noted that her family was “a grammar school family” and that taking the test was seen as a natural development.

While she understood and sympathised with children and families who were struggling, Parent 1 was strongly in favour of tests being sat this year. She expressed concern that if an alternative selection was put in place, children ill-suited for Grammar schools would end up in an environment they would struggle in. She also felt it was unfair to ask teachers to decide – and that doing so would create tension between parents and teachers. She felt that the major difference in scores this year

will be between families who had “done the work” and those who had not. She felt the biggest impact the pandemic had on transfer was high levels of uncertainty. She felt that was damaging and unhelpful.

When describing the impact of the academic selection process, Parent 1 said that her family applied very little pressure on her child. Instead, the child itself was “sore on themselves” and would feel down if they had not progressed in practice papers. Parent 1 said that ensuring that their child was not too hard on themselves was a priority for her.

The major change that Parent 1 would have liked to see was a return to a state-run, standardised 11+ test. She was particularly happy with the fact that tests had to be taken outside of children’s own class and primary school environments. This was a sentiment shared by a wide range of parents who responded, regardless of their views on the transfer test.

Overall, Parent 1 felt that selection was important. She felt that not every child was suited for Grammar school education, and that there had to be a way for schools to make that determination. However, she felt the current system was inferior to the 11+ system, except for a few minor improvements.

## Parent 2: Sub-Urban part of NI

Parent 2 had a less firmly pro or anti view on the transfer process than some other parents. She felt it was very unfair to select at age 10/11. This was too young in her estimation, and should be done around age 14 instead. She expressed concern about children with SEN or who were not as academic, and felt that they did not benefit from selection. She was generally against selection but felt that if it had to be done it should be done more equitably.

She was extremely unhappy with the current system, describing it as “absolutely crazy” that it was run by private companies. She mentioned the “soft” segregation between the GL and AQE as further splitting children along sectarian lines. She expressed distain that the Department of Education and Minister were prepared to endorse the system but not take full responsibility for running it.

Speaking about her own personal experience as a young person, Parent 2 said she had not been overly stressed. She described herself as being quite academically minded and had been expected to do well. She met those expectations and similar to Parent 1s comments suggested that when she participate in the 11+, there was a lower overall feeling of pressure compared to today. She suggested that her own experiences had some impact on her choices for her children. These were primarily societal – that to get to a “good school” it was easier if you did the test. Her own success was an unavoidable background element in her choice, but said it was not a primary factor.

When asked about this year’s tests, Parent 2 felt quite strongly that they should be allowed to go ahead. She suggested that if change was to come it should not be done in a sudden “kneejerk” manner, but in a planned and fully consultative way. Parent 2 suggested that the parents seeking to have the test cancelled for the year were a “loud, but unrepresentative minority”. If the test was going to be pulled, it should have been done early on. She felt it was very unfair for children who had spent large amounts of time and energy preparing for the test to have it pulled out.

The pandemic itself did not, Parent 2 felt, have a major impact on her views. She was not a partisan supporter of academic selection and suggested it was “almost against the grain” for her to want the tests to proceed this year. She raised the fact that children who had been working hard all year might find it difficult to get a place in their preferred school without the test. The criteria being used

to select students without the test was unclear, and felt it was unfair for a child who had worked hard and who was likely to achieve success in the test to not get a place this year, when under normal circumstances this would not be an issue.

Her own child had two older siblings who went through the process. So, despite the unusual circumstances around COVID Parent 2's child "knew what to expect". He feels fine about the test, and Parent 2 suggested that he would be more worried or stressed if the test was suddenly cancelled on him. There were, she said, always low levels of stress or mental health impacts related to the test, but these were not worse than a typical year in her estimation. She has not informed him of the discussion regarding cancelling the test.

Parent 2's main priority for change was to have the government retake control of the test. She said this year has highlighted the importance of having a department, not private corporations running the process. She felt that this year's tests should have been delayed (but not cancelled) but the department had ceded control and was unable to implement this. She, like other parents, highlighted a strong desire to have the test administered in a familiar primary school setting. She raised the fact that primary schools had to plan carefully for COVID-related social distancing, but gathering students from many schools in one place to do a transfer test "makes a mockery of this".

She felt that there was no good reason to have two tests and that a single test was a clearly better solution. It should also be done, in her view, over two days rather than four consecutive Saturdays.

## Parent 3: Urban Area of Northern Ireland

Parent 3 was strongly and unambiguously opposed to academic selection. He stated that even as someone who had children who had been successful in the transfer test, it was unfair. In particular, he was unhappy with the plan to press ahead with the test in the context of the pandemic. The transfer tests were, in Parent 3's view, a drain on the time and resources of children and teachers. He felt that the energy and effort put into preparing for the exams could be better spent learning other, more useful academic subjects. Parent 3 felt that having effectively two parallel exams divided by community/religion was harmful and described the lack of a state-run system as a black spot on local leadership. He felt that it was discriminatory to have a system that is divided by community, and noted that there seemed to be no consistent methodology for schools to prepare children for the GL/AQE leading to an uneven experience.

Parent 3 referenced the "Dickson Plan", an alternative to academic selection currently in place in the Craigavon/Armagh area. This system allows students to attend a 3-year "junior high" in place of selection at 11. Selection within the Dickson plan occurs at age 14 and is done by internal exams. Parent 3 felt this was a far superior method of academic selection.

In the current context, Parent 3 stated that with so many parents balancing working from home with limited support from schools it was particularly unfair that students had to prepare for a transfer test. He noted that divides between those whose parents had the expertise, resources or technology to prepare them and those who did not was already significant, but that the pandemic was likely to dramatically increase the inequality. He described paying for the services of an online tutor for his child, which he recognised as something that not every family would be able to do. He felt that the pandemic has produced unique challenges for the system, and exposed deep problems with it.

Parent 3's own personal and familial experience of the test did influence his views. Having passed the 11+, he attended a grammar school and describes his own academic experience as having been fairly good. This was in stark contrast to his brother, who was unable to take the exam due to

medical issues. Parent 3 felt that this led to his brother, who he felt was as academic as himself, then had to work much harder to reach the same level as him. Parent 3 suggested that this was a function of the rigid academic selection system in place in NI. For his own child, they felt that it would be both a disservice and “churlish” to simply refuse to allow them to do the test, and to miss out on opportunities provided as they are fairly academic. However, he described feeling trapped by the system and wishing there was an alternative so that his child could spend more time learning “useful things” as opposed to preparing for a test that he disagrees with.

Despite his strong opposition to the test, Parent 3 feels that there is no fair alternative for this year. He was opposed to asking teachers to make assessments – pointing out that many will have not seen children in person for months. He suggested that there has been a lack of support for parents, children and schools to create alternatives to the test. He had hoped that the pandemic would allow for a “clean slate” and an excuse to try something more equitable, by providing the political cover to abandon the test this year. He was disappointed to see a “lack of creative thinking” by leadership in addressing this problem.

Parent 3 stated that he was “lucky” because his own child is calm and relaxed about the situation. He was aware of many other children who are finding this time particularly stressful, however. Again, AC highlighted the lack of a level playing field, because children who needed extra support emotionally are less likely to be able to access it during the pandemic. He also noted that any support he was aware of was reactive, rather than proactive.

Parent 3 felt that the whole system would benefit from a rethink and reorganisation. He mentioned the Dickson plan as a much fairer and sensible method, but also stated that schooling should be “a continuum” and that children should be able to access help where needed but encouraged to grow where they are able. He felt that the current system was poor at doing this, as many children were locked out of opportunities if they did not pass a test aged 11.

## Parent 4 : Suburban area of NI

Parent 4 was firmly opposed to the current system of academic selection in Northern Ireland. She felt that some sort of streaming or selection made sense as some children were more academically inclined than others. However, she strongly suggested that a test – particularly at age 11 – was not a good way to determine ability. She repeatedly mentioned a preference for a system of continuous assessment. Parent 4 described a system that would work as a partnership between parents, teachers and the child to determine where the child would best thrive. She noted that an approach like that was done for GCSE and A-Level students’ selection options, and questioned why it couldn’t be done at primary transfer level.

Like other parents, Parent 4 was particularly unhappy that the current system required children to take the test in unfamiliar surroundings. She felt that some children who would already be struggling with the stress related to the test would be overwhelmed by the new environment. She also stated that the current test was too narrow – Parent 4 described it as being more of a test of “technique” than knowledge, and failed to account for children’s general academic capabilities in favour of a very specific set of competencies. Like Parent 3, Parent 4 was disdainful of the fact that children spent time learning to take the test, when they could be engaged in more generally applicable learning.

Parent 4 described her own experience of the 11+ as having made her anxious, though this was lessened by the fact that she was able to do it in her own school. She recalled feeling anxious and overwhelmed. She did not feel, however, that this experience influenced her own decisions around

her child's transfer, though the pandemic has thrown up several questions that she had not previously considered. She felt it was extremely unfair and unkind to force children to take a transfer test under the current circumstances. She highlighted the lack of equality for children in terms of home learning environment. She already felt that tests were not equitable, but the pandemic had introduced even more challenges that increased this issue.

The inconsistent approach with regards to support from schools was an issue that Parent 4 highlighted in particular. She questioned why the Education Minister who, she assumed knew schools were not all providing the same level of support, still supported the test to go ahead as normal. She said that while many had said "we are all in the same boat", she felt this was inaccurate as some were in much worse circumstances than others.

Parent 4 questioned advocates of the test using AQE/GL registration numbers as "proof" that parents supported them. She said that many parents felt trapped into registering children, despite personal concerns because it was the only way for their child to attend a school they desired. She described feeling overwhelmed and restrained by the current system, and this was heightened by the burden of homeschooling.

Parent 4 said that she would like to see the test scrapped completely. In its place, a method assessment conducted throughout the primary period starting at p4/p5 would determine the best place for a pupil. This would allow for children's attitudes towards work, emotional maturity and other non-academic aspects to be considered. She suggested that CCEA should be leading on this, and that if a test must form part of the assessment it should be based on what the children learn in school in the curriculum.

## Parent 5: Sub-Urban Part of Northern Ireland

Parent 5 was unique in terms of the parents interviewed. She was not native to Northern Ireland, and had attended school in an Eastern European nation herself. She personally was very positive about the system of academic selection which she described as a robust system that had proven that it works over a long period of time.

Her and her child's primary concern was the uncertainty caused by COVID. She felt that the potential cancellation of the exam and the use of alternative criteria was a cause of anxiety and stress for her family. She highlighted that any other method of selection would necessarily favour one child over the other – seniority, only children or parental history for example. She argued that at least children could (and in her child's case, had) prepare for an exam. The subsequent handling of the exam grades for GCSE and A-Levels caused her concern. She said that if teachers were asked to assess students for transfer, that would be unfair. She noted that her own child would likely benefit from a close relationship with their teacher but knew others whose school had been much more disrupted.

Like other parents, parent 5 was confused and frustrated by the need for children to take the exam outside their primary schools. She argued that with the need for social distancing, forcing potentially hundreds of children into one place or room made no sense to her.

Parent 5's own personal experience of academic selection provided an interesting backdrop for her views on the Northern Irish system. In her origin country, she went through selection aged 14, and the format were exams in subjects chosen by each student (though mathematics and the native language were mandatory). She felt that 14 was probably a more appropriate age, and her own experience of feeling nervous about the exam simply helped her to understand her child's feelings.

Her child was more anxious about potential cancellation of exams than the exams themselves. Parent 5 described her child as having a great deal of stress at the idea that she would not be able to go to the school she wanted. She felt that the exam gave her something to focus on, and was worried that if it was cancelled her child would feel unfairly treated and without recourse to influence their outcome.

## Other Parental Viewpoints

A range of other parents responded to our call for viewpoints on this issue. On the whole, they reflected the range of diversity of experience and preference that we found in our interviews. Some parents very strongly disagreed not only with the tests proceeding this year, but with academic selection in general:

*“Even if [the tests] did accurately test ability, one has to argue the merits and the of testing 10 and 11 year old children. Age aside, children maturity both cognitively and emotionally at very different rates.”*

*“The NI system of selection seems extremely cruel and unnecessary.”*

*“I feel very against academic selection (Scale 1.) I feel it is a pointless exam that proves very little.”*

However, some parents were supportive of selection. These were not necessarily parents who liked or agreed with the current system, but did express a clear preference for a system of academic selection:

*“I agree that there should be some sort of testing as there are those pupils who will struggle academically in a grammar school and this will help them decide where they would like to apply to.”*

Many parents felt that selection should be reformed. Many felt that a test aged 10/11 was not a suitable way to determine academic ability:

*“I would explore the Dixon system (is there not a functioning alternative to the 11+ operating in Craigavon?) to see if aspects of it could be instituted across Northern Ireland.”*

*“Streaming kids seems so much more sensible. Streaming means there is no big ‘this is what determines the rest of your life’ moment causing enormous anxiety and utter misery for some who then see themselves as failures.”*

*“I feel there has to be a better way than the current system. Not only is it very expensive to working class single parents but the whole experience does not account for 10/11 year olds mental health”*

The pandemic has also prompted parents to reconsider their general feelings about post-primary transfer. It has exposed a range of challenges and inequalities that were previously less visible to them:

*“I think [the test] is especially problematic now. I think that saying children are all in the same boat (as a local high school near us said) is extremely short sighted and naive.”*

*“I’m left in an awful quandary of not knowing what to do and not knowing what is best for her.”*

*“My child has endured a double set of disadvantages this year. She has mother who was a key worker who worked long hours and she also has SEN.”*

## Conclusions

What this small snapshot has shown is that overall parental views on post-primary transfer is not uniform. When combined with the negative impact of the pandemic on teaching and preparation, the current system has allowed a range of parents to feel particularly disadvantaged. However, there is no consensus amongst the parents we spoke to that a non-selective or comprehensive system would be preferable.

Instead, what parents seemed to suggest was that there were a number of smaller changes that could be made that would immediately alleviate some of the strain associated with the tests. These include:

- A more uniform approach to test preparation across all primary schools;
- Continued efforts to have just one, rather than two tests;
- Allowing children to take the tests within their own primary school settings.

These measures would be a good start on the conversation regarding reform. Almost no parent we spoke to, even those strongly in favour of selection, felt that the system was good enough as it currently exists. While many parents disagreed with academic selection in principle, most parents simply wanted a fairer and more well-rounded system of assessment. A good next step for the department and school governing bodies would be to open this discussion to a wider audience.

Building a system that pleases each parent would be impossible. However, this short report has identified a series of key issues that have existed for some time, but that the COVID-19 Pandemic has drawn a particular spotlight on. We hope that one of the few positive outcomes from this challenging period will be a more open minded and frank conversation of how a system to assess academic ability for post-primary transfer can occur.

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