



THE COMPREHENSIVE CHAMPIONS

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John Craig – Oxford University Students Union – Guilsborough School, Northamptonshire, 1991-1998

I attended New College, Oxford, and got a first in Philosophy, Politics and Economics and am now Vice-President (Access & Academic Affairs), spending most of my time on outreach and mentoring initiatives aimed at encouraging students from non-traditional backgrounds.

My school genuinely represented the community in which I lived, and really felt like it was ours. A comprehensive education is just that, and what I learnt about working with others, of all abilities, outlooks and backgrounds, will stay with me forever. I learnt a great deal academically from those any selection process would have excluded - if there is a trade-off between excellence and equity, all I can say is that my school had plenty of both.

Rebecca Gill – Policy Officer, Equal Rights Department, TUC – Camden School for Girls, 1985-1990; Islington 6th Form Centre, 1990-1992

Attending comprehensive schools throughout my education allowed me to mix with a wide range of people with differing abilities and personal experiences. Like many people I know who also went to comprehensive schools, this experience has stayed with me and helped me enormously in my professional and personal life. Only by surrounding ourselves with a mixture of people can we truly understand how challenging but rewarding it is for us to work together. I think if the comprehensive system was dismantled, and religious or secular private schools became the norm, our society would pay a very heavy price.

Gloria De Piero – BBC TV Producer – Yorkshire Martyrs, Bradford 1987-1991

Quite simply because it enabled me to learn and form relationships with people from across the social spectrum.

Brendan Cox – Charity Communications Officer – Bulmershe School, Woodley, Reading 1990-1995

I learnt a lot from the people I attended school with that has stood me in great stead throughout my life so far.

Atif Rafique – Undergraduate, London School of Economics – Burnley Habergham High School, 1992-1999

I know now that my experience of being at comprehensive school has made me a tolerant person. It is as simple yet as fundamental as that.

Seema Malhotra – Management Consultant, Accenture

I am a school governor at a Comprehensive - Brentford School for Girls. I value the comprehensive system: diversity of people attending school, school more rooted in local community, people treated as equals and respect each other as equals.

Denis Barry – Barrister

Now a practising barrister in criminal law at 5, Paper Buildings, Temple EC4.

Age 30. At risk of blowing own trumpet, good practice and reasonably successful. Reasons I value comprehensives:

- a) Mine inculcated lots of positive virtues as a result of diverse intake: tolerance; appreciation of diversity; community; greater appreciation of opportunities given.
- b) Comprehensive schools remind those who attended them, and did well in them, of their responsibilities in what is sometimes an unequal and unfair society. You get a more rounded education.
- c) Handy for my job. Most people attend comprehensives, including most jurors.

Mari Williams – Comprehensive secondary school history teacher – Whitchurch High School, Cardiff 1987-1994

Teaching in a comprehensive in East London I see the racial and religious understanding that only a comprehensive school offers.

Vaughan Gething – Trainee Solicitor – Beaminster School (Dorset), 1986-1992

Quite simply my school was a good school, catering for all ability ranges including a special needs unit. As it was a rural school the catchment area was very large for a school of only 600 pupils and we really couldn't complain at all about the quality of education we received. Not only was the teaching good, but the results achieved were good in both streamed and unstreamed subjects.

Emma Taggart – Public Affairs Officer, Breakthrough Breast Cancer – Biddenham Upper School, 1988-1992

I am the first person in my family to go to university, an opportunity denied to my parents the moment they failed the 11-plus exam and which would very likely have been denied to me had I had to sit the same exam at the same age. The cultural diversity of my school was equally valuable as it enabled me to mix with people from different social and ethnic backgrounds, undoubtedly increasing my awareness of the wider community.

Michael Dugher – Special Advisor to Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions, Stephen Byers

I was born in Edlington in the heart of the South Yorkshire coalfield where opportunities were - and unfortunately still are - few and far between. I attended the McAuley School, a catholic comprehensive in Doncaster, and was really fortunate to have a first rate education. The school, which taught both my parents as well as my brother and sisters, manages to combine the highest educational standards together with a strong sense of values, which is just as valuable. I mixed with all sorts and like to think that the school gave all its pupils - whatever their background - the confidence and self-belief to go out and make the most of opportunities in life. I'll always be grateful for the education I received from the McAuley School and have no hesitation in supporting the comprehensive champions campaign.

Linda Smith – Political Organiser to an MEP and Local Govt Councillor - The Cherwell Upper School, Oxford, 1989-1994

Many pupils were in different streams for different subjects, reflecting the fact that few people are good at everything. It was also possible to move streams - in my first year at Cherwell I moved from a lower stream in maths to the top one after I caught up with the children who had been taught at rather more demanding schools than my easy going middle school. Attending a comprehensive meant that I had friends who expected to stay on at school post 16 and expected to go to university. These were expectations that I did not have from home and if it were not for comprehensive education I may not have had for myself.

Robert Jubb – Undergraduate, St Catherine's College, Oxford – Shene School, Richmond-upon-Thames, 1992-1997; Elliott School, Putney 1997-1999

I believe very strongly in the merits of an education which encourages mixing across a variety of backgrounds and ability ranges, not only because of the improved educational opportunities it offers to students, but also because of the value of the experience which is provided by that interaction. The experience of comprehensive schooling which I had has made me into a more mature and well-rounded individual than some of my peers who lack this experience. I feel that the egalitarian ethos of the comprehensive ideal fosters a set of social democratic beliefs that serve a 21st century democracy well, and am proud of both the beliefs and the experience that gave them to me.

Matthew Johnson – In-house prosecution lawyer for HM Customs and Excise – Woodchurch High School, Wirral, Merseyside, 1983-1987

I particularly valued the diversity of the people that I went to school with and feel that this gave me a more rounded education. I think that I am able to relate to people from a wide range of backgrounds and I attribute this to my comp education. Schools are about more than academic achievement, although I also believe that I did as well academically as I would have done in any other school.

Richard Jarman – PR professional and Labour local authority councillor – The Shelfield Community School, High Heath, Walsall, 1981-1988

I was the brightest boy in my primary school and I passed the 11-plus exam to go to Queen Mary's Grammar School in Walsall but I wasn't allowed to continue with my application because my primary school head teacher believed I "wouldn't fit in" (my parents had recently divorced and my brother and I were on free school meals and in receipt of free school uniforms).

I therefore went to my local comprehensive, which is where my mother's family went to school including my grandmother. At all times, my school was supportive of my wish to go to university and I received great academic teaching from dedicated teachers who worked over time to help me. I still keep in contact with my headteacher.

James Grugeon – Government Affairs Manager – Biddenham Upper School, -1991

I am proud to have gone to Biddenham Upper School in Bedford, a school which made the most (and continues to make the most) of the talents of all of its students who came from a wide variety of social and cultural backgrounds. At a school reunion over Christmas it was great to see how well friends from Biddenham have done and the variety of different career paths people have ended up taking. But most important is the fact that the class of 1991 has turned out to be a group of pretty well rounded, tolerant and worldly wise individuals, which is what a good comp education should be about.

Farzana Hakim – Director, Black & Red and former policy advisor to the Prime Minister – Edgware Secondary School, 1980-1987

My comp gave me the chance to meet and get to know people from so many different backgrounds. I liked not being cosseted and protected from the real world from an early age and having to deal with things as they came. It's something I'll always value.

Joe Billington – Assistant Chief Executive, Workforce – Wimbledon College, Edge Hill, London

My comprehensive education took me to Oxford University. But some of the best minds and certainly the best teachers were at school.

Sam Gurney – Trade Union Organiser – Holland Park Secondary, 1985-90; Islington 6th Form, 1990-92

My commitment to comprehensive education stems from my belief that it is vitally important for people to go to schools which enable them to mix with people from all backgrounds in the areas where they live.

Sally Gee – Researcher, Centre for Research on Innovation and Competition, Manchester University – Kingsland, Hackney and Cross Hall High, Lancashire

I think that the problems with state education, which have been aired very publicly over the past couple of decades, are outweighed by the advantages of state education; both the ideology and the experience. Ideologically I believe that it is vital for the development of an egalitarian and integrated society to educate people together. The current tensions between religious, racial and national groups emphasise this point. Similarly, despite talk of a classless society, the need to provide the children of less 'well off' parents with a solid education is vital for the development of our society, to provide equal opportunities for all, to reduce the polarisation of society and to maximise our productivity. I attended two comprehensives and have since achieved a first class degree in BSc International Management and a distinction in MSc Technology Management. I have thoroughly enjoyed my education!

Lucy Carr – Learning & Development Manager in Luxembourg for a large financial services organisation –Glossop Comprehensive School, Derbyshire (now Glossopdale Community College), 1981-1986

Looking at education in a wider context than the purely academic, the comprehensive system offers a range of opportunities for preparing children for real life. As I have passed through university and into the world of work, this has become increasingly clear. My ability to interact effectively with people from a wide range of backgrounds has certainly been enhanced by having had to learn to do this at school. My own background is fairly privileged, professional middle class and relatively academic. Had I

not attended a comprehensive school, I may never have had the level of interaction I did with people whose backgrounds and reference points were completely different. Being at school with people whose parents had never worked, or who worked in “blue collar” jobs, encouraged me to challenge my assumptions and to consider value as being connected to things other than academic achievement. I believe that working in an international office with people of at least 20 different nationalities, as I do now, has been made easier because of my varied experience as a child.

Kevin Hind – Student, Pembroke College, Oxford studying French & Linguistics – King Edward VI Upper School, Bury St Edmunds, 1995-1998; Cambridge Regional College

Both my parents failed the 11+ exam and they have described to me the way in which this affected their self-esteem. Failing the 11+ severely restricted one's opportunities - people who went to Secondary Modern schools often felt as though they were rejects, failed by a system that had not properly prepared them for the exam in the first place. Comprehensive education is the complete opposite of the old elitist system. It is based on the principle of egalitarianism, that each person has special qualities and talents that they can offer society, and that they should be given the opportunity to nurture these talents. Many have said that knowledge is power and I believe that only through comprehensive education can the majority of people acquire the knowledge with which to change society.

Dan Fox – Political Consultant – Watford Grammar, 1984-89

My secondary education took place at Watford Grammar from 1984-89. Although run along traditional lines, it was a state comprehensive with no entrance examination (though that has since changed). It was not the fabled “best years of my life”. But it did instil an enthusiasm for learning, helping me to build on my strengths and improve on my weaknesses, setting me in good stead for the challenges ahead in work and life. For me, it was five years that proved that a good, traditional education can take place in a diverse and challenging environment. Crucially, such an education recognises the positive effect that individuals from differing backgrounds and of differing abilities can have on each other's development.

Nick Davis – Journalist – Littleover Community School

Why I valued my experience of comprehensive education? Easy, it made me deal with life from an early age and taught me that failure is part of it. You

learn to brush yourself off and start again. It was good to have had teachers who actually gave a damn about me; some didn't, but it made the few who did even more special. It also gives people an edge, they can interact with people from very different backgrounds to their own. It's because so many comps are a melting pot of race/class/gender etc etc

Simon Atkinson – Parish Priest – St Mary's CE School, Hendon, London, 1983-1990

Comprehensive education was, for me, the opportunity to mix and learn with and from people from a huge variety of backgrounds and cultures. Our teachers were, in the main, committed to bring out the potential in each of us regardless of our background, wealth or status. We were all treated as individuals with gifts to offer the school community. Our teachers were passionate about their subjects and about the comprehensive ideal, and it showed.

Malcolm Hartwell – Comprehensive school teacher – The Heathcote School, 1970-1977

Coming from a single parent family on a Stevenage council estate, I feel I was given a chance to go to university, and more importantly given self-belief, because I went to a comprehensive rather than a secondary modern. I also think that it would be a waste of the vast talent and ability found in those from poorer, perhaps less education orientated, backgrounds to label them as failures at eleven. It must surely serve our nation to help all our citizens to achieve their potential.

Clare Donald – Producer, Commercials – Pilgrim School, 1980-1985

My education clearly didn't suffer - I got a 2:1 from Cambridge University - and have had a very successful career producing commercials and film. However, I think that the main benefit of my comprehensive education is to have witnessed and appreciated the extraordinary potential of people from all cultures, races and social classes.

Ben Johnson – NUS national executive member and final year public policy student, Birmingham University – Culcheth High School, Warrington, 1991-1998

For me, education is about far more than what we learn in the classroom. Comprehensives give children the chance to meet and learn about people from all types of backgrounds. This cultural, social, ethnic, religious and economic diversity is what makes comps so important. It's also important that kids don't get segregated based on perceived academic aptitude at such an early stage. The idea that someone's scores in a couple of tests aged 11 can be used as the basis that will fundamentally affect the rest of their life is quite clearly wrong. Putting people into sets, between which they can be promoted and demoted at various stages is a much fairer way of teaching groups according to ability.

Most of the people I know at uni went to private or state selective schools. Some of them were shocked when I told them I knew of people from school who were now single parents struggling to get by, unemployed, or even in

prison having resorted to stealing or dealing - all of their old school mates are also at redbrick universities. It's not that I believe that all former public school pupils are ignorant or apathetic - it's just that only in comprehensive schools do you get to experience the widest possible cross section of society.

I'm proud to be a product of comprehensive education - I went to a great school with excellent teachers, and had a fantastic time.

Simon Buckby – Director, Britain in Europe – Montsaye School, Corby

Children just two years older than me were the last at my primary school to sit the '11-plus'. So I was lucky: I escaped the trauma of having this exam, at such a young age, to determine not just which school I would go to next but also my likely long-term opportunities; for those who failed were denied options available to others. By the time I got to Montsaye School, therefore, it had started evolving from a secondary modern into a comprehensive. And as I passed through the years, I could feel the standards improving as better teachers and a more diverse mix of pupils joined.

Things improved so much that I was part of the first generation of children from the school to go to university. I will always be grateful for the chances, and the happy times, Montsaye helped give me.

Dr Jo Gill – University Lecturer – Culcheth High School, 1976-1983

Quite simply, a good education - in its broadest sense- should be available to all equally and should not be a commodity/privilege available only to those with the means to pay for it. A comprehensive education gave me everything except a sense of the worth of that education, and of my own right - and ability - to succeed in the wider (public-school dominated) world. I should have liked to have had a firmer sense of the value of my schooling, and the language/tools with which to defend it. I remember being reduced to silence by a fellow MA student (privately educated) telling a group of students about her experience as a trainee teacher, and by her "brave" choice of a comprehensive school for her teaching practice. I hope that this campaign helps to foster this confidence, and instils in comprehensive school pupils a sense of their own worth, and of the special value of their education.

Having said all this, I owe my education a great deal: I have worked in newspapers and in publishing, I have a PhD in English and now work as a University lecturer. NOTHING would persuade me to educate my own three children in any other way.

Catherine Slater – Parent Consultant – Parliament Hill School, 1960-1966

I fully support comprehensive education for several reasons. When I was 11 we had been overseas since I was seven and so did not take the 11 plus. When my brothers and I returned to England we were 12, 14 and 16. We were sent by the LCC to our nearest school which was a secondary modern. My brothers transferred quickly - one to a mixed comprehensive and the other to a boys' comprehensive. But I stayed at the secondary modern until the end of the school year and got transferred to Parliament Hill in September.

It had been a grammar school until a few years before and a brand new modern building had been added to the site. So we had new science rooms, art rooms and home science rooms but we also had teachers who could teach Latin and other academic subjects who had stayed on when the grammar school made the smooth transition to a comprehensive.

I liked the fact that people could move easily from one stream to another (say in maths or French) if the initial assessment of their skills was wrong or if they were, to use a hackneyed phrase, late developers. Students in the fourth year (I think it's now year 10) could choose vocational or academic subjects and take a wide range of RSAs, GCEs and other qualifications. I enjoyed being with such a rich mix of people and in the 1960s there were plenty of activities such as drama, art, music, and plenty of resources to fund them like free individual piano lessons available to all.

At the end of my career at school I went on to Newnham College Cambridge to read history, and all my contemporaries in the upper sixth went on to universities and colleges. This, and the fact that my elder daughter (now 26) went to another inner London Comprehensive (North Westminster Community School) and then on to read Physics at Somerville College Oxford, belies the critics who think that bright children need to go to selective schools to succeed. My son, aged 16, is at her school but my younger daughter, who is 22, attended a segregated school for children with severe learning disabilities because she has Downs Syndrome. I am sure that had she been born 10 years later, she too would have had the opportunity of going to mainstream primary school and a mainstream comprehensive. They provide a high quality education for children of all abilities.

Russell Edworthy – Student – Exmouth Community College, 1994-2001

I believe that a comprehensive education is the best preparation for the real world. The diversity of people that you meet from so many backgrounds and with so many different perspectives can only be advantageous. Academically, I believe that a comprehensive school is as good as a private school when you take into account the ability of the intake - I got four As at A-level and am now at Cambridge University, so it doesn't seem to have done me too much harm!

Danielle Moon – Assistant Commissioning Editor, Academic Law Department, Oxford University Press – Cockshut Hill School, 1990-1997

I am a Comprehensive Champion because I am a firm believer in equality of opportunity. My brother, sister and I went to the same comprehensive school in Birmingham, and although it was always clear that we were very different people who were good at very different things, we were all given the support we needed to achieve our goals, and our goals were all seen as equally valuable. I went on to do a law degree at Oxford (something I wouldn't even have thought myself capable of without the massive support I received from my teachers), my brother went on to do an apprenticeship to become an electrician, and my sister, who is still at the school and who doesn't know yet what she wants to do, can be sure of the same support that my brother and I received. There should be no question that comprehensive schools can offer a good standard of education, but what is often ignored is that they also offer

children the opportunity from an early age to make their own decisions, and develop as individuals, taking responsibility for their own lives. Surely this is just as important as anything that can be studied in a classroom?

Luke Mason – Student, New College, Oxford University – Judgemeanow Community College, 1993-1998

A comprehensive education gives you an education which is just that: comprehensive. There is an overprioritisation of certain forms of academic knowledge and aptitude in this country. At an ordinary school you truly do get an education, rather than merely wrapped in cotton wool for the formative years of your life. No-one has the right to cut themselves off from reality in this way, and to do this to your own kids is irresponsible. The only reason this continues is our society's failure to recognise the inherent worth of a comprehensive education, something which is especially true of employers. The reasons why the existence of private/public schools is unfair are well documented, however the reason why the comprehensive system is inherently better for everyone is less so. We must rid our minds of the idea that education comes only in the form of classical knowledge and being well spoken; these are, in truth, only secondary in importance. Only a comprehensive school can give you those forms of education which should take priority.

John Walden – Teacher – John Cleveland College, Hinckley, 1960-1963

I was in the first cohort of pupils in Leicestershire ever to attend a comprehensive school. This scheme was known as the Mason Experiment named after the Director of Education (of a Conservative County Council). I was a slow developer and believe the school gave me the opportunity to progress at an appropriate pace, leading to good qualifications. It also encouraged my sporting and musical talents which remain a major interest today. Without this comprehensive school experience I doubt if I would have taken the exams that put me on the road to a rewarding teaching career.

Dr Susan J Bowie – General Practitioner – Cathkin High School, 1971-1974

I had an excellent all round education as did my peers. I went to University at 16 and qualified as a doctor at 21. I am in touch via the internet with many of my classmates most who have gone on to do very varied and interesting things worldwide. My teachers gave me great encouragement and an interest in History and Politics. At times they were positively inspirational. They were champions of the comprehensive system and we were in no doubt that the total number of highers and O levels had increased greatly since the amalgamation of the secondary modern and the grammar school into our state comprehensive.

My husband, who is a successful writer and broadcaster, is also a product of this system and we educate our children in the state sector. My oldest child, a boy who has a disability, is doing very well now in the year before his standard grades. He has blossomed at the comprehensive school that he is at and is now in credit classes in every subject after performing mediocly at primary school. I asked him if he felt that he would have passed an 11 plus at that

stage. He says he would not have bothered at 11 to do the work and I know that to be true. He is now expected to do well in his highers and go on to university. What would have happened to him and other boys like him to have failed an eleven plus!

Rebecca Durston – Headteacher – Helena Romanes School, Great Dunmow, Essex, 1964-1971

I failed my 11+ and cried for a week when all my friends and brother went to the grammar school. My secondary school became a comprehensive when I was a 3rd year. Lots of money was poured in to improve science labs etc. We attracted better qualified and ambitious staff but I was still very naughty. My aspirations were to become an office or shop worker. Then I met some excellent teachers who got me interested in literature and Art. I began working and never looked back. I was one of the first 6th formers the school had and went on to train as a teacher. I have been teaching for 28 years and a Head for 18 years. I love it still. Having taught in six different counties I am now a parent governor of my old school. Both my sons attend. The elder of the two has just taken three A levels as well as doing his gold Duke of Edinburgh award. We were taken to many places too: Sweden, Wales, Yorkshire, London and Norfolk in the days when travel was not so easy. Their education and mine has been rounded. We have met different youngsters from different backgrounds with a variety of talents. We have learnt how to make our way in the real world not an artificial one created to protect us from some fictitious threat. The school serves the local town and surrounds, all are welcome. We did not need grant maintained schools and we do not need foundation schools or specialist colleges. We just need local schools which are well staffed and well funded, welcome all youngsters from an area and educate not just test.

Tom Murphy – President, University of Bristol Union – Pope John Paul II RC High School, Salford, 1992-97

The school I attended was tough, both academically and socially. An inner-city school with a GCSE A*-C pass rate of 5% in 1996 and many pupils actively involved in crime, the aspirations of, and future prospects for, most of those who went through it were not high.

However a lot of the teachers were inspirational given the circumstances and I was lucky enough to do well. The experience also taught me many valuable skills that cannot be learnt in the classroom - about being streetwise, critical and self-aware. Skills that I've taken with me through Sixth Form College to Bristol University, where I've worked hard through the Students' Union Widening Participation Project to ensure more inner-city, state educated, pupils have the same opportunity to get into higher education as I've had.

A comprehensive education set me up for life in a way no fee-paying experience ever could have done. I'm proud to say I went to a state school and I'd recommend the experience to others.

Lucy Floyer – Secondary School Teacher – Chiswick Community School, 1988-95

Having attended and worked in schools in the state sector, and compared my experiences to friends and acquaintances who haven't, I can't imagine a more

successful system. Schools need to be fully inclusive to adequately prepare pupils for the realities of life outside the education system. A good comprehensive breaks down the barriers between gender, class, religious differences and ability, and fosters tolerance and understanding in both staff and pupils.

Emma Willson – Education Officer for DfES funded Government Agency – Northwood School and St Clement Danes School, 1978-1985

I attended two comprehensive schools during the 1970s and 80s. Neither were ideal, but the benefits I feel I have gained from mixing with children from differing backgrounds is huge. I work for a government agency funded by the DfES and I continually see the negative effects of exclusive schooling (in terms of gender, perceived ability and funding) both inside and outside the organisation. I believe strongly that if more parents were community minded enough to send their children to a state school things could be better for everyone. This Campaign is much needed in my opinion.

Mike Ion – DfES Regional Director of the Key Stage 3 Strategy – All Hallows School Macclesfield, 1972-1977

I failed the 11 plus and attended a Catholic secondary modern school in Macclesfield (All Hallows). We were all prepared for CSEs as O Levels were deemed to be beyond our ability. I and my three closest friends (all 11 plus failures) at school were labelled as no-hopers; the whole school engendered a culture of low expectations and low achievement. The four of us are still in regular contact. One is now a circuit judge, one a Professor of Chemistry, one an international banker based in Singapore and me (a Regional Director of the DfES). Selection is bad for our country. It depresses standards overall, contributes to poverty and is really elitism masquerading as excellence.

Sam Crooks – Technical Sales Rep – Morecambe High School, 1987-1994

I was a late bloomer academically and certainly would have failed the 11-plus if I had taken it. The area where I grew up suffered from the usual academic apartheid created from the existence of two single-sex exclusive grammar schools and two rather elitist "faith schools" which masqueraded as comprehensives. Consequently, those averse to the 11-plus and those families who weren't so chummy with the parish priest were sent to the local comps, which were basically fulfilling the role of secondary moderns. Despite this, I went on to achieve a first at Oxford, a subsequent MPhil, have travelled and worked abroad and am now about to re-train as a teacher. Despite lacking the academic resources of grammar schools, comprehensives allow you to mix with all kinds of people, which provides great training for the real world. Adequate streaming in years 10 and 11 does help the more academic students fulfil their potential, and by far the majority of high achievers I have met have been educated at comprehensives. Schools should reflect the society we live in. At the moment, the Government's obsession with "excellence" is merely further dividing the UK by faith, gender and postcode.

Lynne Locker – Tutor and freelance writer – mother of two Glanafan School, 1972-1979

My school taught me the value of learning for life, not just how to pass exams (though it did that too) and how to get on with a very wide range of people from a variety of different backgrounds. It taught me that a stimulating and challenging education should be open to all, not just those who can afford to pay for small class sizes. It taught me how to work with and encourage others whose families did not see the value of education as my own family did and not to look down on them as inferior to me, but rather to see the potential in each of them. It taught me not to expect that life would owe me a living, but that I would have to go into the world and prove myself to be a responsible member of society each and every day.

My school taught me not be afraid of the social awkwardnesses between myself and other children but to get beyond them and find a way of living and playing together - and for this, in particular, I give thanks to my teachers every day.

Ryan Davies – Deputy Headteacher – Cynffig School, 1977-1984

I attended a large comprehensive school in the South Wales valleys. It was the only secondary school in the area, with nearly all the local children attending it (some did attend a Welsh medium school). It was a happy place. The teachers were highly skilled individuals who had the talent to make the curriculum appropriate to an extremely wide audience. There was no place for “safe teaching” here - lessons had to be interesting and lively, which they were. The school placed an emphasis on celebrating all forms of success - not just academic achievement. It was this which made all pupils feel valued. There were “challenging” pupils in the school and my time there was not without incident but I don't know of many schools which could claim this not to be the case. Again, it is a testament to the quality of the teaching staff in the school that these “distractions” were never allowed to change the course of the school. Being part of this community ensured that I had access to others from all walks of life. It means that now, when I return “home”, I will always meet someone who I know from “the comp”. At the moment I live in a city where my son attends the local primary school but most of our neighbours' children attend different primaries. I can already see that he is not getting the community experience which I was so lucky to have.

To conclude, my experience of comprehensive education provided me with what I believe is the most complete education that anyone could wish for and I am striving to promote this in all that I do in my present position.

Tim Swift – Chief Executive, Age Concern Calderdale – The Beauchamp College, Oadby, 1971-1975

It's about real life. As I went to a comprehensive in an area which was an early converter (and under a Conservative council) I find the political defence of grammar schools today largely incomprehensible.

As an academic kid, I might have found a grammar school easier on a personal level - but what sort of life would it have prepared me for? One where I kept away from anyone from a different background? At the end of the

day, I got a good education (ended up with a first class honours in maths, so can't have done that badly) and learnt to mix and cope with people from a wide range of different backgrounds, experiences and interests.

I now live in Halifax where there are still two grammar schools. I see hundreds of parents panicking about getting their children into these schools, spending on tutors and making their kids' lives a misery to push them through. As a result, they cream off the brightest kids who I suspect would achieve top grades in whatever school they went to. They are socially divisive, encourage the children to think of themselves as superior, and disrupt the whole education system throughout the Borough - for no positive benefits.

Mike Rowley – Advice Centre Director – Walton High School, 1989-1992; Stafford FE College, 1994-96

When I was 11 my parents were faced with the choice of sending me to the local comp, or finding the money to pay for a local private school. We visited both schools and Mum and Dad decided I would be better off at the comp. I am eternally grateful for this. There I benefited from dedicated teachers and a broad educational approach; at FE college too, learning by rote was anathema. It did me good academically; I got a place at Oxford to study law. What is more, I acquired vital knowledge of the world and of the diversity of people; my prejudices were refuted. Had I got to Oxford without this comprehensive knowledge, having spent all my life in a cloistered school for the comfortably off, I am sure my life and choices would have been different. I would have made more money probably, but no-one would have wanted to know me! Therefore, je ne regrette rien!

I believe that in a properly resourced comprehensive system every child can achieve their best; that every child deserves this; and that therefore the comprehensive system should be universal. I believe in free education for all at all levels, funded by progressive taxation, free of selective judgements and categories that damage children, in order to achieve an equal society in which everyone realises their potential. I think it was Christopher Logue who said, "We don't want to abolish first class, we want to abolish third class." I believe in that too. A first-class education for everyone, now!

Sam Jaffa – Management Consultant – Allerton Grange School, 1964-71

I failed my 11plus. It took me more than 30 years to admit this in public - when I stood up to be selected as a Labour Parliamentary candidate in 2001. I was the first in my family to go on to gain a degree. I have since continued with education - to gain an MA from London University, a post-graduate diploma in Journalism from the University of Wales and been a fellow at Wolfson College Cambridge. I was a BBC Foreign Correspondent before having a second career becoming a Director of Communications and Marketing for the Swiss banking giant, UBS and working in Zurich. I now run my own company where I spend most of my time advising Government departments. I am currently a board member of a £400 million business. None of this would have been possible without my comprehensive education. The problem, as I see it, isn't that we have put too many resources into comprehensive education but that we have put too few in. We have allowed the elitist and segregated system to continue and the present Government would rather paper over than do the job

properly. They would rather do this to appear to be reforming to gain votes. I would rather they tackled the continuing issues which blight our country - of access to education, opportunity through ability to pay not simply ability. I will defend the Comprehensive System not as an ideal that has lost its time but as an ideal whose time has yet to come.

Jennifer Wilson – Trainee teacher – Kingdown School, 1994-1998

My school had some of the best teachers you could ever wish for. They were clearly dedicated and gave up lots of their free time to take me and my friends on extra-curricular trips, or to run after school clubs. Whilst at school, I visited France three times, Italy, Switzerland and I even went to the Himalayas in Northern India to complete my Duke of Edinburgh Gold Award. I have received many awards since then, especially at University where I gained a 2-1 degree. I have travelled throughout the world, using my earlier experiences with the school as a guide, have taught in Asia for two years, and am now training to teach in London. Comprehensive schooling has done me no harm at all... in fact, it's where I intend to teach... no question!

Russell Conway – Solicitor – Central Foundation School 1966-1977

I went to a rather down at heel comprehensive school in East London. Out of a four-form entry of approx. 90 students just three went on to University. I was one of those three. Having obtained a 2.1 (hons) degree in Law at University College London I went on to qualify as a solicitor. I am now Senior Partner of Oliver Fisher, a West London firm specialising in housing matters. Did I receive a good education? You bet! Did I get the incentive to improve myself? Absolutely! Now, as a father of three boys, I can look back at my seven years at Central Foundation School and rather wistfully recall a time when there were no calculators let alone computers but there were committed teachers, people prepared to do unpaid work to advance your studies and senior leadership who were very much on your side. I have very fond memories of those seven years.

Bill Kerry – Chartered Secretary – Forest Boys School, Winnersh, Berkshire 1977-1984

My comprehensive successfully combined an inclusive community ethos with an effective and properly monitored academic system that allowed pupils to flourish to their potential. My experience did not include the so-called "mixed-ability" teaching sets that educational elitists often cite as "evidence" to damn comprehensives.

The staff were highly motivated and paid close attention to the pupils' progress (or lack of it) such that we were moved up and down as and when necessary according to our performance in different subjects. I underachieved in years 1-3 and found myself (not unreasonably) entered for CSEs in a few subjects in year 4. I then bucked my ideas up and, as my performance improved, I was moved up to GCE O-level sets, notably in History which I took through to study at the University of Southampton.

In the 6th Form, the school also found the time/resources to provide me with additional coaching for the Oxbridge exam which I took in 4th term and passed - but I did not make it past the interview.

In short, I owe a lot to my comprehensive and to the comprehensive system. As a "late bloomer" I would have likely been faced with a secondary modern tertiary education had I been asked to take (and likely fail) an 11+ exam.

I do not see why, given proper funding and the dedicated staff that would result, comprehensives cannot serve all of society's needs leading to a fairer and less divided society. It strikes me as hypocritical that those who say you just can't "throw" money at education often do just that by opting to pay for private education.

Private schools should have their charitable status removed so that those who opt to "throw" money at their children's education pay the real, unsubsidised, economic cost. Monies thus saved by the Treasury should then be ring-fenced for mainstream state education.

***Tom Barney – Research Fellow in Linguistics, University of Lancaster –
Teddington School, 1974-1979***

I am not at all sure I would have passed the 11+. Although I was always academically inclined, my intelligence at 11 was not the kind that was good at logical reasoning. So I count myself lucky to have been in the second year of comprehensive intake in my LEA. My comprehensive was a former secondary modern which even as such had entered some pupils for O-level and had the occasional university entrant; they took the change to being a comprehensive in their stride. I was well served with consistently stretching and stimulating work (and I now have a PhD). And I am glad that I was sent without any fuss to the local neighbourhood school with no nonsense about travelling to get something supposedly superior. As the late Professor John Mackintosh MP once said in a speech to the Commons, parents in the best comprehensive systems:

"need not think about standards, the quality of the education or fees. They simply send their children to school. They think about the quality of the education, of course, and they think about the lessons. But they do not experience the misery which afflicts so many people in big cities who feel that they cannot send their children to schools created by ghetto housing and wonder what alternative they have, twisting and turning, this fee or that fee, up a grade or down a grade, will there be a uniform or will there not be? ... [In] my constituency... there is one good school for the whole area for all classes. Parents have no second thoughts about the matter. Their children go to the school and they can concentrate on their happiness, well-being and development."

Simon Brindley – Deputy Solicitor to the Office of Fair Trading – Windsor Boys' School, Hamm (British Forces Education Service) 1969-1975

I had a great six years at an unusual comprehensive school (after one year in an independent school) in that it was a state boarding school in West Germany for the sons of British Servicemen. My father was the school chaplain. Most of the army children had parents who were not officers as they tended to send their kids back to the UK to school. We also had a lot of American boys whose parents worked at a nearby Dupont factory. There was a very similar girls' school in the town. After school I went to Oxford University and got a first in law, qualified as a solicitor and am now in the Government Legal Service.

Comprehensive school taught me that children who want to can do well given half a chance, get on with people of all abilities and backgrounds and be self-motivated as well as led by others; school and university taught me that there is absolutely no monopoly on ability or good teaching outside the state sector or even at Oxbridge.

Both of my children have gone to state comprehensives in inner London and are doing very well and enjoying it. Assisting poorer children into the independent sector will only help the few. A good state school dedicated to high standards for all can help many and is a joy to observe.