

Putting the Truth First

When Ofsted inspected Northumberland County Council in May 2003 the performance of Northumberland schools was judged to be 'highly satisfactory' (page 46). The inspectors were very critical of the local authority and its capacity to support schools; not the standards achieved in its schools.

The latest consultation document from the county council, 'Putting the Learner First', gives the opposite impression. It claims that standards in its schools are not good enough, and that a change to a two-tier system will 'help overcome this'. No figures are given to support these claims. No evidence is offered that a change will lead to improved standards.

What is the truth? What does the actual evidence show?

1) Standards achieved at age 11

Looking at the country as a whole, the KS2 SAT results for 2002 show that there is very little difference between the proportions of pupils achieving Level 4 and above in middle schools and primary schools.

	Middle Schools	Primary schools
English	74%	75%
Maths	69%	74%
Science	87%	87%

In Northumberland in 2003, however, the results show that achievement at KS2 is either in line with or slightly above the national averages:

	Northumberland Middle Schools	National average
English	75.2%	75%
Maths	72.3%	73%
Science	88%	87%

Standards in Northumberland are in line with national expectations at age 11.

2) Progress from 11 to 14.

Nationally it is clear that middle school pupils make better progress during Key Stage 3 than pupils in other forms of schooling. The national performance tables show that the value-added (or progress made) during KS3 is higher in middle school systems.

These figures for 2003 are similar to

Age of entry to secondary school	Average Value Added 2002	Average Value Added 2003
11 (two tier)	99.8	99.8
13 (three tier)	101.3	100.4

(Source: 2002 and 2003 DFES performance tables)

This better than average progress is also evident in the results for Northumberland schools. In 2003, for example, the percentage of pupils achieving Level 5 and above at age 14 was above the national average in all three subjects:

	Northumberland Schools	All schools
English	71%	69%
Maths	74%	71%
Science	71%	68%

(Source: 2003 DFES performance tables)

It has been argued by some in the past that transferring schools during a key stage hampers middle school pupils in Key Stage 3. These results show that far from being disadvantaged they make better progress than in other types of school.

Middle school pupils make better progress during Key Stage 3 than pupils in other forms of schooling.

3) This improvement is sustained at KS4

At the national level children in middle school systems do better at Key Stage 4. The proportion of pupils achieving 5 A* to C grades at GCSE is higher than in secondary schools with entry at age 11.

Age of entry	Average Point Score	Average Value Added	% 5 A* - C
11 (two tier)	34.6	99.1	51.7%
13 (three tier)	35.4	99.1	53.0%
National Average	34.8	-	52.9%

(Source: 2003 DFES performance tables – excludes independent schools)

In Northumberland, as nationally, pupils in three tier systems achieve higher results at Key Stage 4:

Age of entry	Average Point Score	Average Value Added	% 5 A* - C
Northumberland	35.4	99.2	54%
National Average	34.8	-	52.9%

(Source: 2003 DFES performance tables – excludes independent schools)

Pupils in middle school systems achieve better results at GCSE than those in other forms of schooling - both in Northumberland and nationally.

4) What evidence is there for the assertion that standards would improve by changing to a two tier system?

There is no evidence to support this claim. As we have seen, in fact, the evidence all points the other way – that pupils in three tier systems achieve at least as well and probably better in three tier systems.