

# Overhauled entrance tests to remove advantage from children whose parents have paid for tutors

**Nicola Woolcock**, Education Editor, Friday 6<sup>th</sup> February 2026, **The Times**

A leading grammar school has overhauled its entrance tests to focus on flair and creativity in a backlash against the “insidious” tutoring industry that its head teacher said is depriving pupils of their childhood. The supposedly tutor-proof 11+ test paper has been created for use at Reading School and others and removes the advantage to those who have had years of intensive tutoring. The paper is based solely on the curriculum covered by the end of Year 5 of primary school, whereas most grammars set tests deemed inaccessible to those without tutors because they test verbal reasoning, or maths and English concepts that have not been covered in primary.

The aim is to recognise those who work hard at primary school with maximum attendance and engagement, read widely and deeply, develop problem-solving skills through real-life examples, engage in imaginative and critical thinking discussions around the dinner table — and not those who learn by rote through tutoring. Chris Evans, head of Reading School, a boys’ grammar, says the new test aims to make assessment more accessible regardless of primary school or parental wealth, allowing all to showcase their ability, not just those who have been tutored to “swallow a thesaurus”. While the school will retain English and maths assessments, heavy weighting will be given to the new paper, which seeks to identify innate ability and curiosity about the world. It will ask children, for example, to analyse paintings, identify geography fieldwork techniques and think about the suitability of historical sources. The test has been created by Future Stories Community Enterprise, a trading company of Reading School, and is being used at nine schools.

The school says: “This move away from tutoring is essential in ensuring that we select children who will be best placed to thrive in our challenging and enriching school environment. There is no element of the test that should surprise, trouble or

intimidate candidates. “It will explore imaginative flair through creativity, we define this as the ability to think of new and imaginative ideas or to solve problems in original and unique ways.”

From this year, the test will also move from September to July so that children do not spend the summer holidays cramming. Evans told The Times that most 11+ assessments included advanced English and maths, and many use verbal and non-verbal reasoning tests but there is evidence that these just reward practice, he said.

The new test will allow a curious child, with questions they have not faced before, to extrapolate and eliminate wrong answers. Most children take the 11+ test at the age of 10, at the start of their final year in primary school. By that age, those from the most deprived backgrounds are usually a year behind their affluent classmates.

However, pilots of the test found the same success rates for children from disadvantaged homes and richer classmates, whereas in English and maths assessments those who were less affluent could not compete with those who had been heavily tutored. Evans said the test did not reward a family’s background, cultural capital or whether the child went to private school.

He added: “The only way to reward children for curiosity and breadth is to focus on creative tasks and broader curriculum. This paper rewards those who take broad brushstrokes and apply it with aplomb. It’s a neutralising paper.” A fourth paper that tests creative writing has also been overhauled by the school because “we tended to see the same skills: heavily tutored children, lots of stock phrases, lots of cerulean skies. Children who had swallowed a thesaurus using flamboyant adjectives but couldn’t write particularly well in response to the stimulus.”

Other grammar schools should take heed, he said, adding: “We would encourage other grammar schools to reflect on the ability that’s really being rewarded,” and that this should not include hours spent learning adjectives. “If we continue to test

for things that can be tutored for, that makes them selective on wealth and affluence. It's important for grammar schools to provide high value for society. Grammar schools must try to equalise the playing field."

Reading School takes 150 boys each year and its free school meal intake was 9 per cent in 2024-25, compared with 25.7 per cent nationally and about 20 per cent in Reading. Of parents' reaction to the changes, Evans said: "Parents [whose children are heavily tutored] are looking for a narrow set of skills for a 1 per cent advantage over their nearest neighbour — setting them up to have a narrow skills set that can easily be replaced or replicated."

Parents felt pressure and this came from a place of fear, he said, adding: "Parents feel they have to spend money now to ensure their children get a degree and then a job. If parents spend time with their children they will flourish wherever they go. Different schools have different opportunities and children are remarkably adaptable."

Of moving the test to July, Evans said: "Children need a summer holiday, if you're lucky you get 80 summers and the best of them when your imagination is free and you can play and splash in the sea. It's awful to think of spending the summer holiday chained to a desk. The growth in the [tutoring] industry is insidious and deprives children of that childhood."

"If that's what is part of getting into grammar school then grammar schools are part of a profound social problem."