
SECONDARY SCHOOL ADMISSIONS

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Introduction

Comprehensive studies of admission arrangements in England were conducted in 2000ⁱ and 2001ⁱⁱ. Considerable changes to secondary school admissions have since been introduced. The Department for Children, Schools and Families commissioned Sheffield Hallam University, in conjunction with NatGen to map, and measure the effectiveness of the admission arrangements in England in 2006, and to assess parents' experience of them.

Key Findings

- Admissions in 2006 were better coordinated and more effectively regulated than in 2000. However in some areas the co-ordination role of Local Authorities ended with the offer of places in March. After this date each admission authority within the area dealt with its own appeals and any other matters and no one had responsibility for the management of admissions and appeals across the whole area.
- Appeals heard increased up to a peak of 7% of all admissions in 2000/01 and then have steadily declined to 6.1% in 2005/06ⁱⁱⁱ.
- In the sample, parental satisfaction was broadly similar to that in 2000. Overall about 85% of parents gained their first choice school. The figure for London parents was 72%. Nationally 93% of parents gained either their first or second preference. Once their children start at the school, the great majority of parents are satisfied with that school with 95% of parents who got their first choice being satisfied and 82% of parents whose child attended a school that was not their first preference being satisfied.
- In the sample, 81% of parents said they were satisfied with the choice of schools in their locality. Satisfaction was lowest among parents living in London even though they have more schools to choose from.
- In the sample, 25% of parents said their child did not attend their nearest school^{iv}.
- Socio-economic status is widely considered to be a factor in the fairness of admissions. The sample was analysed to find any associations between the outcomes of the admissions process and socio-economic status. No association was found between the chances of gaining first choice of school and the socio-economic status of parents. This suggests that either different groups of parents seek different things from their secondary school or that parents are responding realistically to their chances of gaining entry to certain schools, or both. It does not mean that there are no educational disadvantages systematically visited on some groups rather than others. It indicates rather that the way that inequality of educational opportunity continues to occur is not reducible to whether or not a parent gets their first choice of school. There were no significant associations found between appealing and parents' family characteristics.
- While less affluent and less educated parents accessed fewer sources of information there was no evidence from the analysis of those gaining their first choice of school or of those appealing that this disadvantaged them in terms of their gaining their preferred outcome.

- It is a misconception to think that the unfairness of admissions consists in some groups being denied access to 'good' schools. It does not take adequate account of how intake contributes powerfully to the public perception of schools as 'good' or 'bad'. A more adequate account focuses on how the admissions system contributes to segregated intakes and how that segregation leads to unequal educational opportunity.
- Although admissions were better regulated in 2006 compared with 2000 some Schools that were their own admission authorities, in particular voluntary aided schools, were less compliant with the School Admissions Code of Practice 2003 and were more likely to covertly select than community schools.
- The most highly selective LAs (those that have the highest proportion of places allocated to children who score highest on an 11+ test) had more socially segregated schools, fewer parents gaining their first preference and a greater number of appeals.
- Admissions policy should concentrate not only on compliance with the 2007 Schools Admissions Code which is likely to reduce the incidence of direct covert selection by schools but priority should also be given to mitigating the indirect causes of segregated intakes.
- The most effective approach is likely to be a statutory requirement to take action combined with freedom at the local level to determine what methods will work in particular contexts. Admission forums, local authorities and admission authorities will need to take positive action where the outcome of local arrangements is found to be intakes that are socially distinct to an unacceptable degree.
- Policy options available for redressing indirect selection that leads to socially segregated intakes include a body to set or apply the admission criteria for all schools in an area, fair banding, subsidised travel for lower income families, measures to ensure balanced intakes to grammar schools, random allocation and removing the ability to select a proportion by aptitude. Procedural fairness with regard to appeals would be enhanced if Local Authority co-ordination was extended and if they fully managed appeals for all admission authorities in their area.

Background

Admission arrangements have been the focus of intense discussion because of their role in helping or hindering access to equal educational opportunity. In order to inform the debate it was timely to update and improve the map of admissions arrangements, to ask parents about their experience of the current process and to gauge the effectiveness of the system. In order to do this, clarity about the objectives of admissions policy was required. An effective admissions system would:

- Provide clear and understandable information and criteria that are transparent, and objectively applied
- Ensure that all parents are treated equally and schools do not covertly select students by social status or attainment
- Satisfy parents' wishes as to how and where their children are to be educated
- Provide the means for stakeholders who consider admissions arrangements to be unfair to refer the matter to an independent adjudicator
- Provide an effective means for parents to appeal to an independent tribunal if they are unsatisfied with the outcome
- Not worsen the quality of education overall and, if possible, contribute to enhancing it
- Not allow the high achievement of some children to be at the expense of others
- Contribute to social cohesion
- Not contribute to the harm inflicted by denigration of children and communities

Educational inequality is driven by more than the admissions system but it does play a role. However to think that the restriction of educational opportunity is mainly a matter of disadvantaged parents being denied access to the scarce 'good' schools is to misconceive the problem. It does not adequately take account of how school intakes contribute powerfully to construct the public perception of schools as 'good' or 'bad'. A more adequate account focuses on how the admission system contributes to segregated intakes.

Aims

The study aimed to map admissions arrangements (used to allocate places for year 7 pupils for maintained secondary schools in September 2006) of all admission authorities in England and to examine the experiences, views and expectations of parents and carers who applied for a place in a maintained secondary school for September 2006, including those who researched schools and made applications online. The research also aimed to collate information on the outcomes for all pupils of applications for Year 7 in September 2006.

Research Design

Strand One gathered details of admission arrangements for all maintained schools from the composite prospectus sent to parents by each LA in England. Of the 148 local authorities that co-ordinate secondary applications (ie excluding the Isle of Scilly and the City of London) the research team were able to obtain the 2006 composite prospectus from 135 (91%). The 2006 prospectus was not available for 13 authorities (9%) and for these we used the 2007 prospectus. The research team wrote to all Voluntary Aided and Foundation schools and Academies requesting copies of their supplementary information forms or confirmation that they did not ask for further information. 67% of these schools responded.

Strand Two was a survey of parents and carers. Telephone interviews were conducted with a nationally representative sample of parents and carers who had applied for a place in the first year of secondary school beginning in September 2006. 2,215 parents were interviewed, a response rate of 75%.

Strand Three focused on outcomes. The research team requested from each LA what proportion of parents gained which of their preferences on the national allocation day and what proportion had expressed no preference. 106 (72%) of the 148 LAs responded. In addition for each LA data were gathered on the population density, level of cross border traffic, the level of appeals and the level of segregation between schools.

Findings

Regulation and co-ordination: Admissions in 2006 were subject to three mutually reinforcing measures of regulation namely the requirement to consult, the requirement to have regard to the

published guidance and the opportunity for stakeholders to object to the Schools Adjudicator. 97% of parents received an offer for their child on the due date.

Banding A small minority of schools had fair banding arrangements. Three LAs in London had authority wide fair banding (as defined in the School Admissions Code of Practice 2003). Of these, two had fewer appeals and all three had less segregated intakes than other London authorities. These systems accommodated a number of Voluntary Aided faith schools. In two of the LAs there were 5 voluntary aided schools that did not opt in to the banding arrangements.

Selection by attainment (selection by high academic 'ability') Selection by attainment in an 11-plus test was found to perform relatively badly in relation to the objectives of an effective admissions system as identified above. There were selective schools in 43 LAs. Twenty of these authorities had 10% or more selective places available. In the 14 most selective authorities (with between 19% and 39% of selective places) there were more appeals, fewer parents gained their first preference^v and the intakes were more socially segregated compared to all other authorities. Other studies suggest that there is little if any compensating gain in overall educational standards^{vi}.

Selection by aptitude There has been a small a rise in the number of schools with a specialism and therefore an increase in the proportion of schools selecting 10% of their intake by aptitude from 1.3% in 2000 to 3% in 2001 to 4% in 2006. There were therefore more children in 2006 than in 2000 subject to selection by aptitude. Voluntary-aided and Foundation schools were much more likely to select in this way than Community or Voluntary Controlled schools. There are significant differences between selection by aptitude and selection by 'ability'. Nevertheless there are strong arguments to suggest that selection by aptitude is likely to be socially selective by default. A high relative attainment in any of the subjects (even sport) will involve expense of resources of time and money for travelling, equipment and training. More affluent families have more of these resources as well as more social and cultural capital. In addition, parents from higher socio-economic groups tend to be more active in choosing a school and to be more willing for their children to travel away from their nearest school (financial resources will play a part in this as well) and so they may be more likely to apply for the aptitude

places. These possibilities remain to be proven but there would appear to be a potential for unfairness.

Supplementary information Supplementary information forms that ask for extra information beyond that required to apply published criteria offer schools the means for covert social selection. 29% of non-Community schools ask for additional information of this kind with Voluntary Aided schools more likely to do so than any other type of school. The 2007 School Admissions Code now prohibits the use of supplementary forms which ask for any personal information that is not relevant to applying acceptable oversubscription criteria.

Oversubscription criteria Schools are required to publish information which states their oversubscription criteria and whether they are over or undersubscribed. Some oversubscription criteria and the way they are implemented provide the means of covert selection by schools on the basis of social characteristics or attainment. The research team looked in detail at the most common criteria.

The School Admissions Code of Practice 2003 recommended that authorities gave top priority to **children in public care**. 67% of all schools had this as a high priority (either first or second place) but nearly 24% did not feature it anywhere in their criteria. Voluntary Aided and Foundation schools were least likely not to do so with nearly a half of Voluntary Aided and just over a third of Foundation schools not including it as a criterion. From the 2007/08 admissions round onwards, admission authorities are now required by law to give highest priority in their oversubscription criteria to children in care.

17% of all schools put **Medical or Social Needs** as their first priority. 53% of schools included it somewhere in their oversubscription criteria. Community and Voluntary Controlled schools and Academies were the most likely to have Medical or Social Needs as a priority. Foundation schools were less likely to do so, but Voluntary Aided schools were much less likely with only a quarter making this any kind of priority.

Siblings and Catchment were significant criteria for all types of schools.

In addition:

- 61% of all schools' used **Proximity (distance from home to the school)** but it was often

used as a tie break when other criteria fail to differentiate.

- 32% of all schools used **Feeder** schools somewhere in their criteria. Only 6% had it as their first priority. Voluntary Aided schools used this more often than any other type of school.
- 30% of all schools used **First Preference**. A minority of all types of schools had this criterion.
- Only 15% of all schools had any **Faith Related** criterion but for these it was a high priority. As would be expected, the great majority of Voluntary Aided schools designated with a religious character used Faith Related criteria. 60% of Voluntary Aided faith schools gave some priority to **Other Faiths**. 16% gave some priority to children of **without reference to their Faith**.
- Only 9% of all schools had **Parent Commitment** as a priority but this included nearly a third of all Voluntary Aided schools. The 2007 School Admissions Code prohibits schools from taking account of parents' personal interests or other circumstances, except in the case of faith schools who may enquire about membership or relationship with a church or religious denomination.
- 4% of all schools had criteria that gave priority to children who were related in some way to adults connected with the school (**Associated Adults**) such as teachers or governors. This is unlawful since February 2007.

Parents' Experience The survey presents a picture of parents' experiences of secondary school admissions that is broadly positive and comparable with the findings of the previous study in 2000. The majority of parents surveyed found information about schools accessible, adequate and useful. They found the application process to be reasonably straightforward and the choice of school quite easy to make, focusing as it did on their local school. 84% of parents reported being offered a place for their child at the school they had put as their first choice. The figure for London was lower at around 70%. The data from LAs showed 93% gained either their first or second choice. First preference rates were *higher* in LAs with lower population density; fewer types of school; higher proportions of pupils with English as a first language; lower rates of cross border movement; and that were less socially segregated.

There was a minority of parents surveyed for whom the admissions process resulted in substantial disappointment (14% did not get their first preference school) and dissatisfaction (4% said that they were dissatisfied with the secondary school that their child attended). For these parents dissatisfaction was generally focused on the outcome rather than the process.

While parents generally felt well informed about schools, there was evidence that some parents had better access to information than others. School prospectuses and brochures were in plentiful supply but were used more by better educated parents than less well educated parents. The internet was playing a growing role and parents who had easy access to the internet appeared to have significantly better access to information. However, the most highly valued information was obtained informally, through school visits and talking to other parents and school staff. These findings suggest that parents with poorer educational attainment, low internet access, poorer social networks and poorer information-gathering skills could be disadvantaged in the admissions process. It is important to stress that these findings only relate to access to the available information and we found no evidence that less well-educated parents or lower income parents were disadvantaged in gaining their expressed first preference because of their lower use of information. This suggests either that different groups of parents seek different things from their secondary school or that parents are responding realistically to their chances of gaining entry to certain schools, or both. It does not however mean that there are no educational disadvantages systematically visited on some groups rather than others. It indicates rather that the way that inequality of educational opportunity continues to occur is not reducible to whether or not a parent gets their first choice of school.

The survey data showed that proximity to schools was central to parents' perception of the oversubscription criteria of many admissions authorities and parents had a good understanding of how this affected their chances of success. A fifth of parents had taken account of catchment areas the last time they moved home. Parents' satisfaction with their child's travel arrangements was greater when the child could walk or travel by a dedicated school bus than when they had to travel by car or public transport.

Appeals Appeals heard have increased up to a peak in 2000/01 and then have steadily declined.

Appeals were *higher* in LAs where there were more children whose first language was not English, which were not in London, which had higher population density, where intakes were more socially segregated and which were highly selective. There were no significant associations between appealing and parents' family characteristics.

Conclusions

How satisfied are parents? The great majority of parents report, as a similarly representative sample did in 2000, that they are satisfied with the process and the outcomes of the admission arrangements. This is corroborated by the figures from LAs on the proportion of parents gaining their first or second preference and the reduction in the level of appeals which is more marked in London than elsewhere. However the national picture obscures less satisfaction in localities especially in densely populated areas.

How fair is the system? Overall parental satisfaction does not imply a fair system or the fulfilment of the other objectives of an admissions system. Continuing social segregation between schools, if not a source of great parental dissatisfaction, is a source of unequal educational opportunity. Procedural non-compliance and covert selection on the part of schools is only a part of the reason for segregated intakes. While more educated parents were likely to access more information, very few parents felt they were lacking basic information about secondary schools and there was no evidence that parents who were less educated had any reduced chance of gaining their expressed first preference. Factors such as residential segregation, the likelihood of an unsuccessful application, and the disincentive of financial and social costs are more likely to explain the social segregation of intakes than an inability to understand or negotiate a complex system. The location of the causes of segregation is to be looked for in the structures and circumstances of choice rather than some deficiency on the part of certain kinds of parents.

Schools that are their own admission authority, particularly Voluntary Aided schools, used aspects of admission arrangements that lend themselves to covert social selection more often than other schools and they had more advantaged intakes than other types of school. While the better regulation in 2006 may have reduced covert selection it did not eliminate it nor greatly mitigate residential selection. Admission arrangements such as banding can mitigate

social segregation especially in densely populated areas.

What are the effects on attainment? The evidence from other studies suggests that competition between schools for admissions has not increased overall attainment but segregation means that some children's high attainment is gained at the expense of others because being educated with peers from higher socio-economic groups has a positive impact on an individual's attainment and being educated with peers from lower socio-economic groups negatively affects an individual's attainment^{vii}. In the special case of selective education the evidence as to whether it has positively affected overall attainment levels is complex but it is clear that any effect, either positive or negative, is small. However although there is little if any significant educational benefit for all children selective education contributes substantially to social segregation, and therefore disadvantages some children at the expense of others as described above.

Policy options The theoretical benefits of balanced intakes are considerable but the practical problems arising from the complexity of local contexts are great. A requirement on admission authorities to move towards better balanced intakes while leaving the detail to be worked out at local level would seem to be wise. This is the approach embodied in the new Schools Admissions Code 2007. However progress will need to be carefully tracked. Policy options include a body to set or apply the admission criteria for all schools in an area, fair banding, subsidised travel for lower income families, measures to ensure balanced intakes to grammar schools, random allocation and removing the ability to select a proportion by aptitude.

Banding is a powerful means of balancing intakes both by attainment and social characteristics. Catchments or geographical priority areas are also an effective means but may be less manageable or sustainable. Feeder schools have the advantages of predictability and sustained relationship between schools but share similar problems to catchments. They can however require longer journeys and, like catchments, can cause socially segregated intakes. Random allocation can be an efficient and effective means of allocating places especially in combination with other oversubscription criteria.

It is likely that it will be appropriate to use a mixture of methods in many areas. It would be

helpful to reduce the incentive for schools to select the easier to educate pupils. This may be achieved by changing the way schools are held accountable, making more explicit the inclusive mission of schools and providing resources according to the social characteristics of the intake. Selection by ability/attainment is currently also largely selection by social background. One option would be to phase out selection by attainment or, less radically, to take effective steps to ensure equal social representation amongst those who qualify on the 11+ test.

Some of the benefits of eliminating segregation between schools will be lost if in-school practices - such as setting and streaming pupils by ability - are implemented in such a way as to promote social segregation. A fairer and more effective admissions system will not solve the problems of lack of equal educational opportunity or social mobility, but it can make a valuable contribution in combination with other policies.

ⁱ Flatley, J., Williams J., Coldron J., Connolly H., Higgins V., Logie A., Smith N, Stephenson K. (2001). *Parents' Experience of the Process of Choosing a Secondary School*. Office for National Statistics and Sheffield Hallam University. Department for Education and Skills Research Report RR278 2001 (West et al)

ⁱⁱ West, A. and Hind, A. (2003) *Secondary school admissions in England: Exploring the extent of overt and covert selection*. London School of Economics and Political Science. Research and Information on State Education Trust www.risetrust.org.uk

ⁱⁱⁱ Based on figures from DCSF Statistical First Releases

^{iv} This is lower than other estimates. For example DCSF figures supplied to the authors suggest about 50% of pupils travel further than their nearest school. Burgess et al also suggest a higher figure see Burgess S., McConnell, B., Propper, C. and Wilson, D. (2007) *The Impact of School Choice in England: Implications from the economic evidence*. Policy Studies, Vol. 28, No 2

^v On the basis of information on preferences from local authorities

^{vi} See Schagen, I. and Schagen, S. (2003a) *Analysis of national value-added datasets to assess the impact of selection on pupil performance*, British Educational Research Journal, 29, 4, 561–82.

^{vii} OECD/UNESCO-UIS (2003) *Literacy Skills for the World of tomorrow – Further results from PISA 2000* OECD and

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