

Campaign for State Education – Briefing

Secondary School Admissions – Choice or Confusion?

Introduction

In 2002, the Prime Minister claimed that “a more diverse school system will deliver better results for our children.” Since then the government has promoted academies, specialist schools and foundation status for existing schools. The vast majority of schools are maintained schools and are governed by education law applying to them. Academies and CTCs are not maintained schools and are largely defined by their funding agreements with the DCSF.

The result in many areas is an increasing range of schools with different admissions arrangements including, specialist, faith, foundation schools and academies. Some Local Authorities (LAs) retain the 11+ and maintain the grammar school system. Some schools are highly selective, requiring aptitude and assessment usually based on verbal and/or non-verbal reasoning tests. Currently the LA coordinates the admissions process for all types of state school, even where the LA is not a school's admission authority. This means that parents must apply on their own LA's common application form, for all their choices, including schools in other LAs.

However some schools which are their own admissions authorities, e.g. academies, City Technology Colleges and voluntary aided schools require an additional application form or supplementary information. **Parents need to check these requirements very carefully.**

The common admission form gives parents up to 6 choices and the LA will consider it has met its obligations if it offers any school named on the form.

Admissions Code of Practice

All maintained schools are governed by the 2007 Admissions Code of Practice, but not all of it is binding. The Code is designed to ensure fairer admissions and it outlaws many practices such as interviewing parents.

Academies are also now required by law to comply

Types of school

Community

The Local Authority employs the staff, owns the land and buildings and has primary responsibility for deciding the admission arrangements for community schools.

These are usually comprehensive schools and admissions priorities are usually by criteria such as having siblings in the school, statements of special educational need and distance from the school.

Some LAs try to maintain a “balanced intake” for community schools in their area through “banding” systems.

Specialist Schools

There are now over 2,000 specialist secondary schools, the majority of which are also community schools.

A school must raise funds through sponsorship from a business, benefactor or similar to gain specialist status. For an average secondary this will be at least £50,000.

It must also apply to The Specialist Schools Trust, which administers the programme to specialise in one of ten subjects. A huge amount of senior management time is involved in preparing the bid, but the school gets additional funding per pupil.

The school must continue to offer a broad and balanced curriculum but it can then select 10% of its pupils by “aptitude” in the chosen subject. As few schools have taken up this option, the likelihood is that the move to specialist status is largely for cash reasons.

Voluntary aided

Most Voluntary Aided (VA) schools are historically linked to either the Church of England or the Catholic Church, though there are VA schools linked to other faiths.

In most VA schools the majority of governors are appointed by the foundation or diocese. The land and buildings are normally owned by a charitable foundation or diocese. The school employs the staff and decides its own admissions criteria. Its revenue funding comes from Government on the basis of the locally agreed funding formula for all maintained schools in the LA area, but VA schools pay 10% of their Capital funding themselves.

Voluntary Controlled

Voluntary Controlled schools are almost always church schools, and the land and buildings are often owned by a charitable foundation. However, the LA employs the staff and has primary responsibility for admission arrangements.

Foundation or “Trust” Schools

Many foundation schools were formerly “grant maintained” schools. They receive funding through the LA. The governing body employs the school staff, owns the land and buildings and has primary responsibility for admission criteria. Many schools governed by the School Standards and Framework Act 1998 are academically very selective and have entrance examinations.

With minimal consultation and by a single vote of the Governing Body, foundation schools can also acquire a Foundation which then appoints the majority of governors, takes control of the school land and buildings and becomes its own admissions authority

The Foundation must be a “charitable body”, but could be formed by a business organisation or individual.

In the 2006 Education and Inspections Act the concept of “Trust” schools was introduced. They would operate in the same way as foundation schools and can acquire a trust or foundation in the same way and with similar implications.

Academies (see CASE Briefing)

Academies must have a sponsor. Sponsors may be private companies, individuals, faith groups, educational institutions or the voluntary sector. Although they are notionally asked to contribute up to £2 million to the capital costs of building a new school or remodelling an existing one, many have not.

The DCSF (Department of Children, Schools and Families) contributes the remainder and also pays the running costs, enabling the academy to run independently of the LA. The land and buildings are ceded to the sponsor who then appoints the majority of the governors. Each academy sponsor chooses a specialism and they also have considerable flexibility over the curriculum. They can also select 10% of pupils by “aptitude” for the specialism.



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Academies act as their own admissions authorities as set out in an individual funding agreement between the DCSF and the “sponsor”.

City Technology Colleges (CTCs)

The last Conservative government created 14 CTCs with a specific focus on science and technology as well as one for performing arts. CTCs are all independent of the LA and funded directly by the DfES. Their sponsors appoint the majority of the governors and CTCs are their own admissions authorities. (The academy programme is based on CTCs most of which have responded to government encouragement to move to academy status which offers additional funding.)

Grammar/Secondary Schools

15 LAs still operate fully selective systems through the 11+ examination accounting for about 20% of their places. LAs still operating the 11+ include Kent, Buckinghamshire, and Gloucestershire. Another 21 LAs have some selective schools.

In total, there are 164 grammar schools, and it is likely that there are at least 3 secondary modern or “community” schools for each grammar. The system affects about 1 in 10 pupils. Existing legislation makes petitioning and balloting to end selective admissions so impractical as to be virtually impossible.

There will be no change to the system at a local level unless there is a new commitment to fairness at national level.

What CASE thinks

Standards. The key question is whether having 2,000 specialist schools, more faith schools, more foundation schools and up to 400 academies will raise standards. There is no evidence that it has done so.

Funding. Additional revenue has gone to specialist schools and academies have received massive capital funding – generally more than £25 million each.

Yet community schools which educate the whole community, including its most disadvantaged do not benefit from this largesse. Often, these are those schools on which children depend most for their life chances.

Admissions. In an area with a range of different types of schools, parents may have to apply to several schools, each with different criteria and admissions arrangements.

They may experience selection by faith, or by “aptitude” for a particular subject. Many grammar schools and some foundation schools are academically very selective and use entrance examinations.

CTCs and Academies are not bound by the Admissions Code of Practice but by the individual funding agreement between the DfES and the sponsor. Nor are they required to take children with statements of special educational needs in the same way as other schools. However it does seem that some may be abiding by the Code and the DCSF say that new Funding Agreements will be more tightly bound to it.

Faith The freedom to favour children of a particular faith necessarily reduces the options available to other local parents. In areas with a high number of faith schools it significantly reduces parental choice for those of other faiths or none. In a multi-faith society, there are fears that more faith schools will lead to increased social segregation in some areas. In some areas faith schools have significantly more children from higher socio-economic groups than the population in the area around the school.

Specialisms. There is no co-ordination of specialisms, so neighbouring schools may have chosen similar ones. Particularly in sparsely-populated areas, parents may feel that the nearest school’s specialism will not suit their child, yet the alternative may be impractically distant.

There is also no evidence that parents want to choose a specialism for their children at 10, or that it is specialisation that raises standards, rather than additional resources. 2007 research by Lancaster University Management School found that the effect of the specialist schools programme was “minimal”

Grammar School Selection. The 11+ system means that many English children continue to be labelled as “failures” at 11.

In England in 2000, only 2.7% of grammar schools pupils were eligible for free school meals, compared to 17.1% in non selective schools, illustrating the social segregation caused by selection. In 2007, a DCSF commissioned reports confirmed that grammar schools had the highest levels of socio-economic segregation.

The 2007 GCSE league tables show that the lowest attaining schools in the country are in areas where a grammar school system persists. Though notionally comprehensive schools, these schools are in fact the secondary modern schools that take the children not accepted to grammar schools. The system fails these children.

Conclusion

Parental choice. “Diversity” can actually reduce parental choice and access to local schools because of faith, specialist and academic selection.

In reality comprehensive community schools (including those that do not use their specialism to select) educate the majority of young people successfully and fairly. They should not be undermined by direct or covert selection in the name of “diversity” or by receiving less funding.

In some areas they deserve recognition for successfully serving a high proportion of children with special needs, English as a second language or high mobility.

CASE will continue to campaign for a comprehensive system and an end to selection.

Additional Information

DCSF website www.dcsf.gov.uk

ACE for advice on individual cases www.ace-ed.org.uk

Comprehensive Future www.comprehensivefuture.org.uk

Feedback on this document will be gratefully received. You can contact CASE by post c/o 98 Erlanger Road, London, SE14 5TH, by phone on 07932 149 942, or by email at contact@campaignforstateeducation.org.uk
Our website is: www.campaignforstateeducation.org.uk
CASE has been campaigning on education issues for over 40 years and relies entirely on membership fees to fund its activities.

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