

'Fair admissions' – what does it mean?

Comprehensive Future Parliamentary Seminar : 7 March 2006

Speakers

Jacqui Smith MP Minister of State for Schools and 14-19 Learners
Nick Gibb MP a member of the Conservative education team
Edward Davey MP the Liberal Democrat education spokesperson
Professor Anne West Centre for Educational Research, Department of Social Policy, LSE
Steve Sinnott – General Secretary NUT

Chair David Chaytor MP

Below is the full text of the speech by Jacqui Smith MP -

Thank you for inviting me to speak at your seminar today. It's great to be with those who share a desire to ensure every child has access to a high-quality local school.

Nine years ago too many children were being denied such access because their nearest school was failing. Since then we have reduced the number of failing schools by more than half. And, due to targeted intervention programmes, standards in our inner-city schools have risen faster than in other areas. Over 50% of pupils in inner London now get 5 good GCSEs, compared to just a third in 1997. But even one failing school is unacceptable. And even one young person leaving school without a solid grounding in the basics is cause for concern. That's why the essence of our Education Bill, which we published a week ago, is to make sure every school is a good school; and to create a world-class education system that is centred round the needs of the child.

But we also made clear our priority that – having created more good schools – we then needed to ensure that there was fair access to those schools and places.

We will make this possible by ensuring there is no selection by ability; by legislating for fairer admissions; and by enabling wider access and greater

parental choice.

Selection

Our policy on selection is absolutely clear. We don't support selection by ability and we're not new (or slightly shaky) converts to this position. I'm 43. For 35 years of my life, I have been a pupil, a teacher or a parent in state comprehensive education. I think all ability comprehensive schools are at the heart of an education system that prepares young people both socially and educationally for the world around them. But I don't think that fair admissions alone are enough to ensure quality and I don't think that comprehensive equals uniform. That is why, alongside fair admissions, we are also right in the Bill we published last week to pursue the policies that will ensure more good schools and more children reaching their potential whatever their background.

But we are clear in the Bill about our position on selection. We have not moved on this, in fact we have tightened the rules. The Education Bill will also make clear what is already clear in the Admissions Code: that there should be no interviewing of parents or pupils. Schools should not be allowed to cherry-pick those that they consider to be the best pupils – either overtly or covertly. Instead, the choice of school should rest firmly with parents and children. And, once they have made their choice, they should have confidence that even if the school is oversubscribed their application will be dealt with fairly.

Fairer Admissions

We have already made a lot of progress in doing away with unfair admissions practices. In 1998 we passed the School Standards and Framework Act which established the parameters within which admission authorities could operate. It also introduced much greater transparency into the system – admission arrangements not only had to be discussed openly between authorities, but they could also object to any unfair arrangements. We appointed an independent Schools Adjudicator to investigate those objections. And we introduced the School Admissions Code of Practice which gives guidance not only on the law, but also on good practice.

Not only that, but in 2004, we gave local authorities the responsibility for coordinating the secondary school admissions process for their areas. And from this year, they are also coordinating primary admissions. This has made life much easier for parents who now have to fill in just one common application form. This system eliminates most multiple offers and prevents parents from holding on to more than one school place when others have none. As a result the number of children in London without secondary school places at this stage in the year is less than half that of last year. And the system also makes it much easier to identify and place those children who couldn't be made an offer.

But we want to go further. We have noted that the Education and Skills

Select Committee has expressed concern that the force of the Admissions Code may have been weakened by a legal judgement in 2004 so we are going to strengthen it. A new, tougher status will ensure that – in future – admission authorities must ‘act in accordance’ with the Code, rather than simply ‘have regard’ to it. And the Code will not only make clear what the law allows, but also which oversubscription criteria are always unacceptable.

David Chaytor strongly made the argument that we should put off publishing the new Code until we had the chance to consider it alongside the Bill. We accepted that and will want to consider further what goes into the strengthened Code.

Also need for consideration of collective impact of admission arrangements:

Admission Forum – reconstituted, with new powers to refer to adjudicator and to produce annual report on how fair access is being delivered in an area including in relation to impact of admission arrangements for FSM or ethnic make up of schools.

And we are making it easier for schools to introduce banding so that they can achieve an all-ability intake. Some schools have been using locally-based banding systems for years – and we are legislating to allow others to introduce that too. Offering places using banding or in accordance with a policy that combines banding and catchment area means that some applicants who would have been disadvantaged will have a much better chance of attending a good school. And that where you live in relation to the school won’t be the be all and end all. Choice shouldn’t be determined by your ability to pay or your ability to move house to the right area.

Trust Schools

Unfortunately good schools are bound to be over-subscribed. That’s why it is vital that every school is a good school.

Focus on standards in Bill:

Personalised learning – Dedicated Schools Grant

14-19 – entitlement and collaboration

Discipline – National Union of Teachers

External support and collaboration throughout the Trust Model

Tackling failure

Widening Access/ Parental Choice

Even with more good schools, many parents currently feel marginalised, unable to choose the school they want for their child and then unable to contribute or have a say in the way it’s run. Our Schools White Paper set out a number of plans to give parents a stronger voice.

I want every parent to be supported in choosing a secondary school for their child, but I particularly want that support targeted at those who find it more

difficult to navigate the system, who in some cases don't even complete the forms. We will provide choice advisers in every local authority to support parents in choosing a school. They will offer independent, unbiased advice and empower parents to make the right decision for their child.

And through our extension of free transport to those from lower income homes, we will remove a potential barrier to choosing a place that will suit their child.

Conclusion

Choice and access go hand-in-hand. By remaining firm on our policy of no selection by ability, by ensuring admissions processes are fair and transparent and by having more good schools in the system, we will be able to extend meaningful choice to every parent and child whatever their background and we will be able to ensure that every child in every community can be confident of the life opportunities that a quality comprehensive education has provided for me.

Nick Gibb agreed that parents want a good local school and if this was the case admissions would not be an issue. He repeated the pledge not to bring back the 11 plus but he said that constantly focusing on the issue of admissions resulted in an 'angels on the pin head' type of debate. Drawing attention to the National Audit Office analysis which reported that 23% of secondary schools were underperforming, he said this should be tackled rather than 'fiddling around with admission criteria'. A secondary modern he knew had been transformed by good leadership. Setting must be used more extensively, mixed ability was still used in 60% of lessons in comprehensive schools.

Edward Davey said that the effect of league tables was to give schools an incentive to manage their intakes. We should look at the Dutch model of school funding which gives schools a financial incentive to take low prior attainment pupils. Giving schools more control will make it easier for them to weed out applicants. Recent Government claims that there is not increased social segregation where there are more own admission authority schools were based on flawed research, which had not weighted results on the size of the authority. Admissions should be made simpler and easier to navigate. Local authorities should have the role of managing admissions, they are democratically accountable.

Professor Anne West briefly outlined the results of her research on admissions in London secondary schools funded by the Greater London Authority. It can be found at :

<http://www.lse.ac.uk/collections/CER/research.htm>

London has a high proportion of own admission authority schools. She had found that about a quarter of nominally comprehensive secondary schools

were using a criterion which could be potentially selective, for example aptitude or ability in a subject or general ability, child of an employee, child of former pupil, pastoral factors, compassionate factors, interview or meeting. Significantly more own admission authority schools used selection on aptitude than community /voluntary controlled schools. Banding was used by 16% of schools. It was found some own admission authority schools were using banding which allowed them to skew their intakes towards higher ability schools. Some schools might be using meetings with parents and supplementary forms which might deter some parents from applying or allow schools to choose their intakes. However since 2001 there had been an increase in the number of schools using criteria which would promote social justice, ie giving priority to children in care.

Regarding the Bill, it would be improved by including a menu of permitted criteria.

More information is needed about who applies to which school and who is offered places.

Steve Sinnott welcomed the launch of Comprehensive Future as an all party organisation. Selection is an immoral system which damages children's life chances. The test of the Bill is whether the reforms will help vulnerable children and deal with social and ethnic segregation. The Government needs to look at Finland as an example of the country which has a successful comprehensive system.

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