

COMPREHENSIVE FUTURE BRIEFING NUMBER 4

School admissions and social segregation

When schools 'choose' their pupils do they give fair access to children from all backgrounds?

If schools are socially segregated it means children from low income families are concentrated in one or two schools in an area, thus being separated from more affluent pupils who tend to be concentrated in other schools. Academic research measuring levels of social segregation in English schools has generally focused on the unevenness in the distribution of pupils who are eligible for free school meals (FSM), using this as a proxy for social disadvantage. Where FSM pupils are evenly distributed across schools in an area so that each school has exactly the same proportion of its pupils eligible for FSM, i.e. its 'fair share', we can say that there is zero segregation.

School choice researchers in England were concerned that the policies of 1988 onwards would give schools both the motivation and the means to select the most able and avoid admitting educationally disadvantaged pupils to their schools, thus producing socially divided schooling. As a society we should be concerned about socially divided schooling because it is likely to increase inequalities in academic achievement and threaten social cohesion.

English secondary schools have moderate levels of social segregation compared to other OECD countries [11], but most researchers agree that social segregation between schools has been rising consistently, albeit slowly on average, over the past ten years [9, 10, 7, 12]. However, this average rise masks considerably differences in social segregation between Local Education Authorities (LEAs). For example, school segregation appears to be currently rising fastest in London.

This briefing shows that where schools have some discretion over which pupils they accept evidence suggests this is increasing social segregation between schools. It considers the role of the remaining 164 grammars schools who select on ability and the existing own-admissions authority schools (31% of secondary schools), which are principally Voluntary-Aided (VA) faith schools and Foundation schools.

Explicit ability selection and school segregation

Despite the move to a comprehensive system of secondary schooling in England, explicit selection by ability affects a considerable proportion of children. 15 LEAs (i.e. 1 in 10) still retain a grammar school system and a further 20 LEAs have one or more freestanding grammar schools. Many grammar school pupils actually cross an LEA border to travel to school, meaning that even fully comprehensive LEAs are affected by the continuing presence of grammar schools. Furthermore, many LEAs also have partially selective 'comprehensives' (11.2% of foundation schools and 6.5% of VA schools) [14]. The School Standards and Framework Act 1998 has curbed the introduction of new selection policies, but many specialist schools are still allowed to introduce selection by aptitude for 10% of pupils [5]. It is not possible to have an education system that allows a degree of ability stratification without having to accept some stratification by income because ability and parental income are already correlated at age 11. In 2004, 2% of pupils were eligible for free-school meals in grammar schools, compared to 14% nationally.

The literature on the effect of ability selection is very clear: grammar schools and other academic selection process are associated with higher levels of social segregation between schools. First, the international evidence shows that countries with selective systems such as Hungary, Germany and Austria have much greater social segregation between schools than fully (or almost fully) comprehensive countries such as Finland, Sweden, Norway, Denmark and Ireland [8, 11]. Second, within England there is a very clear association between the amount of ability selection in an LEA and the level of FSM segregation between schools. This correlation can be consistently measured regardless of when segregation is measured and holds even when contextual factors such as the population density or the overall level of deprivation is controlled for [9, 10, 7]. Third, where ability selection is able to take place, it can be shown that the gap between segregation of housing in the LEA and school segregation is largest [1, 2]. One paper also finds that between 1994 and 1999 school segregation increased more in LEAs with grammar schools, but this finding has not been replicated by others using different years of data [7].

Own-admissions authority schools and social segregation

Several studies have reported that LEAs where a larger proportion of schools are their own admissions authorities – i.e. VA and foundation schools – also have above average school segregation. [9, 10, 7, 1] These findings can be replicated using the most recent schools data, even when controlling for other factors such as the population density and overall level of deprivation in the LEA. Furthermore, Goldstein and Noden demonstrated that between the years 1994 and 1999 there was a greater increase in segregation in LEAs where a larger proportion of schools controlled their own-admissions [7].

A recent study also finds that VA and foundation schools are associated with a larger gap between the level of segregation of housing in the LEA and segregation in schools [1]. The same study shows that many own-admissions comprehensive

schools have an intake that is significantly superior in terms of ability and family income to the intake they would have if they only took local pupils. This confirms that many voluntary-aided and foundation schools are not giving fair access to pupils from more disadvantaged backgrounds. A Sutton Trust report agrees that the high achieving 'comprehensive' schools are not taking disadvantaged pupils from their local area [13].

Parental choice, school choice and social segregation

The final set of findings provide some evidence that parental choice of school increases social segregation, though these studies cannot explain why this is the case. The authors may be isolating the effects of well-informed parents selecting the 'best' schools or being able to afford the costs of transport to a non-local school. Alternatively the studies might be simply identifying further evidence of some schools being able to choose their pupils (or a combination of the two).

Burgess et al. [2] shows that in more urban areas, where choice should be more possible, schools are much more socially divided than local housing.

Within local markets, research showed that initially high-ranking schools have been drawing to themselves the most advantaged pupils and improving their GCSE performance fastest [6]. Bradley and Taylor [3] agree that schools with good performance tend to experience falls in their proportion of FSM eligibility in subsequent years. In a separate study they also conclude that differences in the social segregation of schools have widened during the 1990s on the basis that schools with the poorest exam performance experienced a 5.8 per cent increase in the proportion of pupils whose fathers are in the lowest skills group compared to a 2 per cent decrease for schools with a very good performance [4].

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