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Ed Balls takes action on school admissions

or how a few things come to he who waits

On 11 March the DCSF announced that 81.6% of families had received an offer of their first preference school on the “national offer day”, 3 March this year. This is the first time that this data had been collected from local authorities.

However, press coverage mostly concentrated on the accompanying announcement that the Department had found from a sample of three local authorities – Northampton, Manchester and Barnet – that although a “large majority” of schools were complying with the School Admissions Code a “significant minority” of schools appeared not to be complying with the Code, of which a “disproportionate number” were voluntary or foundation schools.

Many who have watched the admission scene for many years will welcome this belated acceptance that where schools are their own admission authority unfair practices can more easily be introduced.

The practices identified included interviewing, failure to give priority to children in care, asking about marital status and asking for financial contributions. The Department wrote to the schools asking for specific information and on 2 April announced that, of the 110 schools contacted, 106 responded and, of those, 96 schools did not comply in one or more respects.

As a result Ed Balls announced further measures to strengthen the admission system:

- A reminder to local authorities of their duty to object to the Adjudicator when local schools do not comply with the Code. They must send a full set of admission arrangements and a report on their legality, fairness and effectiveness by the end of June. He will report to Ed Balls by 1 September.
- The tabling of draft amendments to the Education and Skills Bill at Report stage in the Commons. These will require local authorities to report to the Adjudicator on admission arrangements in their areas and will extend the powers of the Adjudicator to act where he considers that any admission arrangements are not compliant with the statutory requirements. This should mean that action will not in practice rely on complaints being made, a weakness *Comprehensive Future* has pointed out for some time. Another amendment will improve the process of consultation on admission arrangements in order to ensure that parents and communities can be more involved.
- The publication of a guide for parents on admissions and appeals which can be downloaded from the DCSF website. It includes advice on what parents can do if they have concerns about the legality of a school’s admission arrangements.

These amendments may offer a chance to us for parliamentary lobbying. Please keep in touch on this.

Ed Balls also plans to publish detailed proposals in the early summer on an improved process for consultation on admission arrangements and improvements to Admission Forums to ensure they “more effectively represent their local communities”.

These plans go some way to meeting what we have been campaigning for, but crucially much remains. Nonetheless, if you were a supporter in 2006 you may remember that during the passage of the Education and Inspections Bill our Chair, David Chaytor MP, tabled several amendments to the sections on admissions which the Government did not accept.

One would have required local authorities to produce a report on school admissions, including fairness and compliance with the Code; another would have required admission authorities not just to act in accordance with but “comply in all respects with” the Code.

Conference speakers explore the divisions

The conference was chaired by David Chaytor, MP for Bury North and Chair of Comprehensive Future. A full report of speakers' contributions is on the website.

Estelle Morris, Secretary of State for Education and Skills 2001-02, said that she thought changing admissions is not the only lever to bring about comprehensive education.

Talking about Labour policy she said the focus after 2002 seemed to have been to get poor children into "better schools", seeming to go along with a policy of escapism and to accept we could not have a system where all schools were able to deliver for their children. And for "better" schools we meant "middle class" schools, never seeming to suggest that middle class children could be bussed to some of the really excellent inner city schools!

She went on to explore ideas of extending schools to 14 and then at 14 young people at a good stage in their maturity could choose their paths in 14-19 establishments.

Chris Storr, Director of Education Roman Catholic Diocese of Southwark 1982-2001, explained the role of the Catholic Church in the community and in the search for social justice and the provision of education in this country.

Currently there are concerns about the need for faith schools to take children not of the faith, but a look at the history of school reorganisation does throw some useful light on this.

If the Church wishes to set up a new Catholic school there has to be evidence that there are sufficient Catholics in the area to fill it. Second, in the 1980s, when the declining birth rate led to large scale falling rolls nationwide, the church authorities agreed to take out surplus places in Catholic schools as many LEAs and non-faith schools were concerned about "poaching" from their schools. Schools, he said, should serve the community. If there is an identifiable Catholic community then this is what the schools exist to serve.

Tim Boyes, headteacher of Queensbridge School,

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Divided schools – divided communities?
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Birmingham, reflected as a Birmingham head on admissions and the comprehensive dream. He said there is much to be positive about in the past 10 years of policy and practice in education. Experience of three inner-ring Birmingham schools reflects huge improvements in standards, the clear fruit of improved funding for challenging inner-city schools.

He described his school, located amidst some expensive housing and unusually mixed, socially and ethnically. In a good location to fulfil the comprehensive dream it is however a school hampered by the market place within which it sits.

Looking at schools little more than a mile away these include two grammar schools, two very popular girls' schools, Birmingham's most over-subscribed Catholic secondary school and, a little further away, a foundation specialist school that uses the chance to select 10% of its intake with an entrance exam and then uses sibling criteria to develop a growing pyramid of middle class children from beyond its immediate neighbourhood.

Chris Healy, headteacher of Balcarras School, Cheltenham, spoke of the real importance of speaking up for comprehensive schools. Gloucestershire does not have a comprehensive system of education. There is one grammar school in Cheltenham, two in Stroud and four in Gloucester. The ripples of selection go way beyond this; children travel to Pates in Cheltenham, for example, from Oxford, Bristol and Worcester. There seems, he said, to be an attitude on the part of government that grammar school education is best.

The DCSF seems to have been persuaded of this by lobbying from grammar schools and the influential Sutton Trust. In his area there is now a possibility of children facing further entry tests as one "comprehensive" plans to select 10% by language and 90% by fair banding. So the pecking order will become even more stratified.

Select committee looks at diversity

The Children, Schools and Families select committee has recently been holding some meetings to look at diversity of provision, including academies and faith schools, and social mobility.

It has taken oral evidence from a wide variety of witnesses, including the Schools Commissioner, the School Adjudicator, NFER, London University Institute of Education and LSE. Much of what was discussed is relevant to school admissions. You can read the reports of the sessions on their website at www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm/cmchilsch.htm

Particular sessions of interest were on 16, 23, 30 January, 25 February and 12 March.

Education and Skills Bill

The Education and Skills Bill, which started in the Commons in November last year, has finished the Committee stage in the Commons.

Report and Third Reading stages are expected soon and it will go to the Lords then. As the Government is introducing amendments about admissions and local authorities there may be a chance to lobby for more changes. We will keep you posted.

Anti Academies Alliance publications

Two recent publications from the Anti Academies Alliance have information relevant to school admissions.

They are *We pay the piper – they call the tune, the story of the Specialist Schools and Academies Trust* by Francis Beckett and *A Report on the MPs committee of enquiry into academies and trust schools*.

Both are available from the Alliance, priced £3 each or £5 for both. Contact the Anti Academies Alliance, PO Box 14412, Birmingham B11 9DZ Tel: 07528 201697; Email: office@antiacademies.org.uk

Northern Ireland continues to make progress

In December Catriona Ruane announced to the Northern Ireland assembly the progress on change in the post primary (secondary) system. She said:

“As I proceed with the reform of our education system, equality will be at the centre of everything I do. I plan to lay down a foundation that will ensure educational excellence and greater participation in the future, where everyone will have equality of access and opportunity.”

She went on to say : “We will move away from the outdated 1947 education model, which has divided children into just two school types, either grammar or non-grammar. We do have academic successes to be proud of, but too many of our young people are failed by the current system.

“Making fundamental educational determinations for children at 11 is wrong as such decisions can become irreversible.

“By moving the transition point to 14 and by introducing more flexibility and agility into structures, we make it possible for the transformed educational system to facilitate the needs of all children.

“The key point is not simply that academic selection is unjust, but that it is unnecessary and unjust.”

The key decision-making time will change to age 14 and these decisions at 14 will not be by test, which the Minister said is not the best way to inform key decisions at 14 about a young person’s future educational and career pathway.

Such decisions, she said, should

be based on a process of formal, structured election. It will take account of the outcomes of three years of post-primary education and teacher and parental guidance, in addition to careers education, information, advice and guidance, resulting in the matching of children to suitable provision.

There will be no 11+ Transfer Test in the 2009-10 school year and subsequent years and, following a period of consultation, regulations will be brought forward governing the operation of post-primary transfer for 2010.

Ms Ruane said she hoped that all grammar schools would see a positive future for academic education in her vision for education. If any school, however, chooses to operate independent admissions arrangements that lie outside the new system of transfer, she made it clear that there is no obligation on her department to assist with funding.

This resolution is now about to be tested as Lumen Christi College, a Catholic grammar school, in Londonderry, has just announced plans to introduce an entrance test. The Catholic Bishop of Derry has criticised the plan saying that he had been supporting the efforts of schools to end the tests as they did not offer an equal opportunity to all.

Ms Ruane has said that schools considering a breakaway entrance exam should be aware of the considerable legal and financial risks they take if they proceed and confirmed that the Department would not provide funds.

Policy is agreed on admission to faith schools

At our last AGM the following policy on admission to faith schools was agreed.

Comprehensive Future is of the view that local accountability for all school admissions is essential in consultation with all relevant stakeholders. We support the co-ordinating role for the local authority in “ensuring fair access to educational opportunity” and the monitoring role of the Admissions Forum in “ensuring a fair admissions system that promotes social equity” as set out in the School Admissions Code.

Regulations allow for the administration of all admissions (ie determining whether an applicant meets the admission criteria) to be carried out by the local authority even if the criteria are set by the school. Comprehensive Future wishes to see this as a requirement on all publicly funded local schools, including those that are currently their own admission authority.

Comprehensive Future believes that no school should set its own admission criteria in isolation and that all admission criteria for all publicly funded local schools should be agreed by the admission forum.

Comprehensive Future recognises the contribution that faith groups have made and continue to make to the education of Britain’s children. It seeks the support of all faith groups in securing an equal chance for all children and in the ending of selection by both ability and aptitude. Comprehensive Future welcomes the adoption by some faith schools of an open admissions policy which welcomes all children regardless of faith.

We will be sending this policy for information to faith school organisations.

Charity Commission and public benefit

The Charity Commission is now consulting on supplementary guidance on Public Benefit and the Advancement of Education, and Public Benefit and Fee-charging.

These are relevant to the situation of private schools which select pupils and offer bursaries for them. The consultation documents are only available online at www.charitycommission.gov.uk/publicbenefit/default.asp

The consultation ends on 30 June 2008.

Local selection stories wanted

Our website has a section on the effect of local admission policies including selection. See www.comprehensivefuture.org.uk/PDF/Selection.pdf

We are keen to add to this section. If you have local information about your area, or know someone who has, please get in touch with Margaret Tulloch on 020 8947 5758 or email mtulloch@poptel.org or info@comprehensivefuture.org.uk

Research calls for action on admissions

At the end of January the DCSF published a report on Secondary School Admissions by Professor John Coldron and colleagues from Sheffield Hallam University and the National Centre for Social Research.

Researchers looked at admission arrangements for secondary schools, surveyed parental views and investigated how many parents gained their first preference in September 2006.

Admissions criteria were drawn up before the recent School Admissions Code required some schools to change their criteria, however the report is highly relevant to our campaign. It concludes:

- Admissions were better co-ordinated and regulated than in 2000.
- About 85% of parents got their first choice of school, in London it was 72%.
- 25% of parents said their child did not attend the nearest school.
- The study found no association between getting their first choice and socio-economic status of parents.
- Schools which were their own admission authorities were less likely to comply with the Code and covertly

select.

- The most highly selective local authorities had more socially segregated schools, fewer parents getting their first preference and more appeals.
- Admission forums, local authorities and admission authorities will need to take action to avoid social segregation.
- Policy options should aim to bring about balanced intakes. This could include measures such as a body setting criteria for all schools in the area, banding, and ending selection.
- It would be fairer if local authorities managed appeals for all schools.

DCSF Secondary School Admissions Research Brief (DCSF RB020) available free from DCSF publications, PO Box 5050, Sherwood Park, Annesley, Nottingham NG15 0DJ Tel: 0845 60 222 60.

Full report (DCSF – RR 020) priced £4.95 from same address. Cheques payable to DfES priced publications, or go to www.dcsf.gov.uk/research/ (Published 31 January 2008).

Support and donations are still needed

We are very grateful to the supporters who sent donations after our last appeal.

We rely entirely on donations to carry on our campaign for fair admissions and an end to selection and do not have a membership fee.

A membership fee involves a lot of administration for a voluntary organisation, sending out reminders etc.

So, if you can, please send a donation – or you might like to do as some supporters have done and take out a standing order to make an annual or monthly donation. This gives us a regular cash flow, which is very helpful.

You can do this by contacting your bank to pay to *Comprehensive Future*, Barclays Bank PLC, Wimbledon Business Centre, Sort code 20 96 89, a/c number 40008869 giving them your bank account details, the amount you wish to pay and how often.

To make a single donation please make your cheque payable to *Comprehensive Future* and send to our address. We also welcome more supporters!

Please encourage your friends to join by going to the website www.comprehensivefuture.org.uk/support.htm or sending their contact details to our address.

Steering group lobbies the politicians

The steering group continues to press for a meeting with Ed Balls. We hope this might happen in the next few months.

Recently members of the steering group had a useful meeting with David Laws, Children, Schools and Families spokesperson for the Liberal Democrats. The party is shortly to consult on education policy and we hope to meet David again later in the year.

The Conservative Party has produced its policy document on education – *Raising the bar, closing the gap*. It proposes that many more schools be set up – however, they would be non-selective.

The policy paper can be downloaded from the website at www.conservatives.com/pdf/New%20opportunity_proof.pdf

Mark the date for 2008 conference

This year our Annual Conference will be held on Saturday 11 October in London at NUT Headquarters, Mabledon Place near Euston and Kings Cross.

We are really pleased that our speakers will be Alan Parker, one of the team of School Adjudicators, and Francis Beckett, steering group member, journalist and author of *We pay the piper – they call the tune, the story of the Specialist Schools and Academies Trust*.

As previous years this will be an opportunity to discuss the campaign and meet other supporters. Further details in the Summer newsletter.

Fringe meetings at party conferences

If you are going to a party conference please look out for *Comprehensive Future* at fringe meetings. We cannot afford to hold fringe meetings at every conference but aim to have a presence where we can.

Last year we held a fringe meeting at the Liberal Democrat conference. This year we hope to arrange one at the Conservative Conference (28 September-1 October.) Details in the next newsletter.

We are also sharing a fringe with the Socialist Education Association at the Labour conference in Manchester in the evening of Monday 22 September in the Friends Meeting House. Professor Richard Pring, President of the SEA, and Fiona Millar, Vice Chair of *Comprehensive Future*, will be speaking and our Chair, David Chaytor MP, will chair.