

Comprehensive Future

The campaign for fair admissions

Time to close the front door

The Government should now set a date by which the 11 plus should be ended.

In his press conference last month, the Prime Minister described a selective school system as an 'old-fashioned concept' which divided children up into 'successes and failures at the age of 11'. We agree that selective admissions have no place in a modern education policy. We also welcome Deputy Prime Minister John Prescott's recent commitment to a comprehensive school system 'based on fairness and social justice in which all pupils can achieve their potential.'

We welcome the news tonight that Government intends to make moves to end interviews – a means of back door selection used as a proxy for academic selection. This decision makes the Government's position on front door selection completely inconsistent. Fully selective schools still exist in over a fifth of all English education authorities. For many English children it is not a question of 'no return to the 11plus' – they have not left it.

Partially selective schools remain in many other areas. More children now face selective entry tests either on ability or aptitude for their secondary education that when Labour took office in 1997.

Academically selective schools routinely take far fewer children eligible for free school meals and from some ethnic minorities compared to their local communities. Selection leads to socially segregated communities.

The Education White Paper 'Higher Standards, Better Schools For All' called for a new type of trust school able to control its own admissions. Many autonomous schools that already have this freedom use partial selection either by ability or aptitude and a range of other criteria to 'cream pupils' most likely to enhance their exam results.

Schools should be obliged to comply with a new non selective Code of Practice on Admissions. The Education and Skills Select Committee, responding to the White paper, recommended that the government should state which admissions criteria should be prohibited in regulations. There are many forms of selection besides interviews. We would like to see selection by ability, aptitude, interview and the use of covert forms of selection for example primary head teachers' references or the use of year five attendance records specifically outlawed. A new Code should list the only acceptable admissions criteria.

The Select Committee also called for an end to selection by aptitude. Last November the Government in its response to a previous report by the committee said of specialist schools - 'there is increasing evidence of collaborative working to share expertise in their specialism across schools'. This supports our view that it is quite unnecessary for children to face aptitude tests to enter secondary schools. All children should have access to the specialist support they need and collaboration should bring that about, without children facing selection.

We support the proposal that local authorities and admissions forums should monitor admissions arrangements and make objections where the Code is not being observed.

6 February 2006

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