

Fair Admissions or Foul Play ?

Supporters of Comprehensive Future met in light of the recently published White Paper. In the morning they heard speakers Dr Philip Hunter the Chief Adjudicator and Dr John Coldron from Sheffield Hallam University, who has done extensive research on school admissions. In the afternoon supporters decided that Comprehensive Future should become an all party organisation. They also discussed a draft position paper on fair admissions.

Philip Hunter Chief Adjudicator

Dr Hunter leads a team of adjudicators, 9 from next April. The White Paper, he thought showed the effect of two different analyses of how to improve educational opportunities. There is a market system where competition between a range of independent providers (schools) drives up standards or a system where a bigger range of schools provides choice but the choosers (parents) are protected by statutory rights. The strands within the paper of independence but fair admissions and fair funding illustrate this dichotomy.

He differentiated between fair funding and common funding. There is much in the White Paper about the need to meet the difficulties of inner city schools. He welcomed much of the Comprehensive Future draft on fair admissions but emphasized the need to ensure that local authorities used their powers to complain to the adjudicator about unfair admission practices.

On banding and random allocation he had this to say -

"I was pleased to see that the White Paper gives a little boost to the use of random allocation (lotteries) and banding in school admissions. I want to make two points:

1. Random allocation and banding produce the same result in terms of the ability distribution of children accepted. Random allocation has three advantages: it is cheap and easy to administer; children do not have to take extra type tests; and it avoids the possibility of some parents calculating that they might stand a better chance of getting places in preferred schools if their children performed worse in tests than they are capable of. But the problem with random allocation is that it is truly a lottery. Parents might feel that the future education for their children should not be determined that way. We should find out more from parents how they think about this.

2. In a few inner city areas, general banding for school admissions can work well. For most of the country, however, banding or random allocation cannot be introduced at the expense of giving priority to local parents and children. There is nothing that infuriates parents more than being denied a place in their local school because the school has decided to take children who live further away. It is reasonable to allocate spare school places to parents who want them, even if those schools are a long way from where they live. It is not reasonable to deny places to local children who want them when those children would have to travel a long way to an alternative school. There must be a general presumption in favour of giving children places in their local schools, if that is what their parents want. There would be riots in the streets of many towns and villages on the edges of cities if some of their children had to travel into the city to make way for children travelling in the opposite direction. Many of these areas are situated in marginal parliamentary constituencies.

I am aware that this presumption leads to a position in which some schools serving posh areas produce better examination results than schools serving mixed areas. I do not regard that as a problem. The problems are:

- (i) How do we make sure that high performing schools that have met the needs of their local communities and still have spare places, do not cream off the brightest children from neighbouring areas? I believe that this is where random allocation or banding can have a useful place.

(ii) How do we define the “local community” for these schools? I do not think there is any single national way of doing this. In some areas, it is best done through a catchment area; in others, there should be a distance criterion; in Church schools, priority can be given to parishes and deaneries. These questions have to be settled locally between the school, the Local Authority and the admissions forum – with schools adjudicators called in where there is a dispute.

(iii) How do we deal with schools in areas where there is a very high proportion of difficult-to-teach children? I believe we have to do this through programmes, like the academies programme, which aim to make the schools popular and successful through extra support and resources. We would achieve nothing by forcing reluctant parents to send their children to those schools. Banding and random allocation do not work in reverse.”

**Professor John Coldron
Sheffield Hallam University**

What is the problem?

- The present admission procedures result in intakes that differ significantly socially and academically.
- Segregated intakes educationally privilege the already advantaged.
- They lead to the demonisation of already disadvantaged schools, families and children.

Some sources of the problem

- Some parents’ wish to segregate their children.
- The way in which government has chosen to talk about ‘good’ and ‘bad’ schools e.g. the unsophisticated use of exam results as the single measure of school success for policy purposes.
- Opportunities afforded by the regulations and procedures allows selection of various kinds.
- The aggregate of individual choice is collective injustice.

Parental motivation for segregation

A significant proportion of already advantaged or aspiring parents energetically seek to get their children into popular schools for a mixture of powerful reasons.

- Moral Anxiety: *drugs, attitudes to work, attitudes to adult authority, gang culture.*
- Anxiety about physical safety: *sustained bullying, physical attack.*
- The wish for their children to score better than others in the credentials game: *educational expectations from peers and school, high performing school better guarantees a high performing child.*
- To maintain (or develop) their family’s place in middle class social networks.

Each of these motivations demonises working class schools, families and children.

Government’s way of talking about ‘good’ and ‘bad’ schools

- Concentrating on outcome (exam performance) and virtually ignoring the impact of intake leads to a systematic and unjust denigration of working class schools, parents and children.
- Schools are given a powerful reason for managing their intakes through selection and exclusion.
- It legitimises and reinforces parental anxiety and the motivation to segregate.
- This one-dimensional measure is still at the heart of government policy.

Selection of various kinds

- The proximity criterion is widespread and therefore social selection by mortgage is common.
- Selection by ability is retained for a minority of pupils in wholly selective local authorities (9.2%), freestanding grammar schools (0.8%) and partially selective schools (0.1%).
- Selection by aptitude is available to all specialist schools.
- Selection by over-subscription criteria (including aptitude) in over-subscribed schools.
- Selection by interview or reference in faith schools.
- All leads to a social-segregation of intakes.

Calderdale: the admissions problem in miniature

Schools available to parents:

2 private schools taking secondary children

15 mainstream state maintained secondary schools made up of:

- 2 Foundation grammar
- 2 Voluntary aided comprehensive
- 5 Foundation comprehensive
- 6 Community comprehensive

Halifax is the population centre with substantial small towns and village communities up to 15 miles away served by a local school.

There is a rigid hierarchy of schools in the minds of those parents who responded.

How Calderdale admissions operate

- The grammar schools take a large proportion of the currently higher attaining children and, assuming these grammar schools are typical in their intake, FSM lower than the LA average.
- There is a low level but intense competition over intakes. Until they were ruled against, all of the comprehensives attempted to retain some of their most able pupils by deterring them from applying to the grammar schools through a first choice OSC.

Some schools manage more easily than others to have a relatively privileged intake.

- Because they serve a relatively affluent community.
- 6 of the 7 over-subscribed comprehensives have control of their admissions criteria.
- One uses aptitude in a specialist subject as an OSC.
- Being oversubscribed they can claim to be full when harder to educate children require a place.

Other schools are less well placed.

- 5 of the 6 undersubscribed schools are community schools
- They recruit from catchment and serve multiply disadvantaged communities.
- A significant proportion of active choosers are using whatever procedures are to hand to avoid them because they have a poor local reputation.

This situation creates 'failing' schools, winners and losers.

- In Calderdale some schools must be at the bottom of the hierarchy and it is the Ridings.
- The problems at the Ridings are created and made worse by the way unbalanced intakes are allowed to continue in Calderdale.
- Staff, parents and children are unjustly demonised and made to pay the price of unfair admissions policy.
- This is replicated with local variations in many areas in England.

But...Simple answers are not easy to come by.

- Local circumstances are extremely diverse and what would be a solution in one place could compound injustice in another.
- The neighbourhood 'comprehensive' has roots in its community but often reinforces selection by mortgage.
- Some schools with harder to educate intakes are models of inclusive learning communities *because* of their intake.
- Selection *within* schools (setting and streaming) is widespread. A balanced intake (fair admissions to schools) does not guarantee respect and equal access to education for children if internal organisation does not do so.
- The strength of motivation of middle class parents to maintain segregation should not be underestimated, nor the purchase of their apparent 'common sense' arguments with a wider group of parents.
- If fair admissions is achieved there will be (there already is) a powerful move to ensure selection *within* schools and that argument may be even harder to win than fair admissions.

We need to

- Challenge all forms of overt and covert selection including within school
- Challenge the one-dimensional measure of school quality
- Strengthen the Code by making it a requirement
- Strengthen the role of monitoring agencies like the Office of the Schools Adjudicator and the LA
- Manage a political process of monitored local determination towards fair admissions and schooling

Some initial comments on the White Paper

There are some powerful levers for change to admissions:

- BSF and Academies money
- Pressure on LAs to close 'failing' schools
- School Commissioner
- The Code, the adjudicator and LA's duty to object

Some changes merely cosmetic

- Choice advisors and more information likely to have little effect (deficit model)
- Extension of free school transport is OK but probably marginal
- The dual catchment could be a double edged sword

Deep problems

- Leaving admissions to schools and the Code as non-statutory are misconceived.
- The unit of negotiation should be the relevant area with a requirement to balance intakes.
- Popular schools don't want to expand and unpopular schools don't want to close.
- The Commissioner will be intervening in detail in local struggles.
- The grammar schools have been left in place.
- Selection within schools is explicitly endorsed.
- The mis-guided way of thinking about educational/school success remains and its effect reinforced.

Comprehensive Future
PO Box 44327 London SW20 0WD
www.comprehensivefuture.org.uk

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