

Comprehensive Future

**Comprehensive Future
White Paper briefing 1
30 November 2005**

We believe there are several provisions which need to be introduced to bring about fair admissions. We are writing to you about the most important -

- 1. A new Code of Practice on School Admissions is expected to be before the House shortly. Instead the current Code should remain until such time as it can be considered in the light of provisions in the Bill.**
- 2. Then a different Code of Practice should be introduced which schools should be required to follow.**
- 3. This new Code of Practice should specifically prohibit selection by aptitude and ability, except for banding, in all schools.**

Comprehensive Future was founded in 2003 to celebrate the achievements of over 30 years of comprehensive education. We have been campaigning since then to end all selection by ability and aptitude in England.

Both the 2005 Labour Party manifesto and the recent Schools White Paper state that more schools should become independent with the freedom to control their own admissions.

Both documents also state that they do not want a “free for all on admissions policies” or a “return to the 11 plus”. Both stress the need for “fair admissions”.

We welcome that. However fully selective schools still exist in over a fifth of all education authorities.

Partially selective schools remain in many other areas and more children now face selective entry tests either on ability or aptitude for their secondary education then when Labour took office. Academically selective schools routinely take far fewer children eligible for free school meals and from some ethnic minorities, compared to their local communities.

The number of autonomous schools, that control their own admissions, has also increased in the last 20 years. While many of these schools do operate fair admission policies and serve their diverse local communities, others use partial selection either on ability and aptitude and a range of other criteria.

Professor Anne West, of the London School of Economics, has carried out extensive research into own admissions schools. At a briefing for Labour MPs organised by Comprehensive Future in June 2005, (on our website www.comprehensivefuture.org.uk – seminar June 14 2005 in 'press releases and other documents') Professor West described how a higher proportion of schools that are autonomous report using criteria that enable them to “cream pupils”. They do this using a variety of overt and more covert socially selective criteria in the event of a school being oversubscribed.

Her research found that just under half of autonomous schools use at least one potentially selective criterion. This “cream skimming” ranges from tests which band children against the ability of those applying, the performance of siblings at the school, letters from priests and clergyman, using reports and attendance records from primary schools head and even interviewing prospective pupils.

We welcome the commitment in the recent White Paper to “fair admissions” as we believe that parents value a system that is objective, transparent and above all gives them some certainty about the outcome when they are contemplating the secondary transfer process.

However we caution that one school’s admissions criteria will inevitably affect neighbouring schools. The proposal that all secondary schools should become autonomous and have control over admissions could lead to at least 3000 different admissions authorities in the next decade. This would mean a system that is even more confusing and stressful for parents to navigate.

The government argues that The Code of Practice on School Admissions is designed to ensure that admission criteria are “clear, fair and objective”. However the Code is only guidance which schools must “have regard to”. They do not have to adhere to it. The result is that many admissions criteria do not accord with the Code of Practice.

A new Code of Practice on School Admissions recently consulted upon is expected to come before the House later this month. This should not happen before the forthcoming Education Bill is published. The new Code is clearly inadequate having been drawn up before the implications of all secondary schools being trust, foundation, voluntary aided or academy schools, setting their own admissions criteria, were thought through.

There is more information on our website and we are happy to provide more information to MPs who would like it
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