

RISE

RESEARCH AND INFORMATION ON STATE EDUCATION

Seminar
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School admissions – lessons from the evidence

A report and follow-up discussion

Does the English admissions system need to change?

Presentation: Professor John Coldron – Sheffield Hallam University

Responding: John Freeman CBE – Education consultant

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SCHOOL ADMISSIONS: LESSONS FROM THE EVIDENCE

John Coldron
March 2015

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**Sheffield
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Variety of concerns about admissions

Different concerns raise different but interconnected questions to be explored/ answered.

- fairness of procedures and outcomes
- efficiency of procedures
- facilitation of market relations
- segregation – ethnic, social, religious, attainment.

Time for a review

- Nearly three decades of parental choice
- Seasonal difficulties
- Continued segregation and problems of access
- New freedoms for schools to set own admission arrangements
- Changing power relations in local areas
- Changing relation of schools to local communities.

Lesson one: Regulation has worked to make admissions more efficient and procedurally fair and it needs to continue.

Lesson Two: Parents do not choose on the basis of educational attainment alone.

Lesson Three: System improvement (in terms of attainment) through competition for parental custom is unlikely to be achieved under current arrangements.

Lesson Four: Aiming to achieve more balanced intakes addresses a range of different concerns

Lesson Five: There are no easy answers and policy makers and campaigners should resist simplistic conclusions.

Regulation has worked to make admissions more efficient and procedurally fair and it needs to continue

- The annual admissions round works much better than it did.
- There is almost universal compliance by admission authorities with the letter of the law effectively policed by the OSA.
- Despite widespread suspicion there is little evidence of significant levels of illegal selection or parental fraud.
- But, the strong incentive on schools to select remains and therefore strong regulation is still needed.
- The recent weakening together with greater autonomy of schools is therefore worrying.

Aiming to achieve more balanced intakes addresses a range of different concerns

If intakes were more socially balanced then:

- From a market perspective, parents might be more likely to choose on academic criteria and the market would better drive system improvement.
- From the perspective of accountable professionals and local authorities, schools would be more equal, with a consequent reduction in the difference in performance between schools, and fewer failing schools.
- For those in favour of comprehensive education, schools would have a wider range of prior attainment and social background with associated social and educational benefits.
- For those responsible for the administration of admissions, there would be less local polarisation, demonisation of certain schools and management would be easier.

But, although balanced intakes are not incompatible with parental choice, they run counter to what many parents currently want - a school close by with children from families like theirs.

Parents do not choose on the basis of educational attainment alone

- Richer parents tend to choose a school with children from families like their own and to avoid schools with poorer children. These tend to be high performing schools.
- A proportion of poorer parents also choose to send their children to a school with children like themselves. These tend to be low performing schools.
- Both richer and poorer parents prefer a school that is closer to home especially at the primary stage.

There are no easy answers and policy makers, researchers and campaigners should resist simplistic conclusions

- The unfairness of admissions is not reducible to a market dysfunction that can be tweaked, or the result of a lack of "access" to "good" schools, or middle class monopolisation of high performing institutions, or working class incompetence, disengagement or lack of aspiration.
- To understand the problems of admissions we need to better acknowledge the complex dynamics of parental choice; social solidarity; social distance and inequality; and schools' responses to accountability.
- School segregation is a symptom of inequality rather than its cause. It is not the appropriate focus for mitigation of deeper social injustices.
- How children get allocated to schools is an aspect of the role that schooling plays in our society and different perspectives on the problem of admissions reflect rival moral and political visions of how education contributes to an ordered, just, prosperous and cohesive society.
- In these circumstances attendance to evidence is unlikely to be the determining factor in policy making.
- Future admissions policy needs to emerge from a more open and imaginative debate about the purposes of education than we have had over the last thirty years.

System improvement (in terms of higher attainment) through competition for parental custom is unlikely to be achieved.

- Residential segregation and proximity criteria are objective constraints on choice such that poorer parents are constrained to choose poorer performing schools.
- Parents of all social backgrounds choose mainly on non-academic criteria.

It is of course debateable whether system improvement should be narrowly equated with higher pupil attainment on high stakes tests.

Some important issues not addressed

- Admissions post-16.
- The role of faith schools in the system.
- The concern over religious and ethnic segregation and its effects on community cohesion.
- The effects of different kinds of legal selection such as by aptitude and gender.

Speakers' biographies

John Freeman CBE is an independent consultant, commentator and writer on education and children's services. He has been a Director of Education and Director of Children's Services, and had a national role with the Local Government Association (LGA). He was formerly Joint President of the Association of Directors of Children's Services and was elected as Chair of the ADCS Associates Network for the year from April 2015.

Dr Elizabeth Passmore OBE is the Chief Schools Adjudicator. Previously one of the team of adjudicators, she was appointed as Chief Adjudicator in 2011. Following a career as a science teacher, she became a science specialist HMI (Her Majesty's Inspector) who went on to lead teams of HMI specialist curriculum advisers. From its inception in 1993 she was head of Ofsted's school improvement division and then Director of Inspection until 2003.

Professor John Coldron is Emeritus Professor at Sheffield Hallam University's Centre for Education and Exclusion Research. He has researched and published widely on education including on admissions to schools, the causes and effects of segregated intakes and their relation to educational outcomes. He has carried out government-funded research on school admissions.

Response by Dr Elizabeth Passmore

The title of the RISE review is *School Admissions: lessons from the evidence*. I note that some evidence in it has come from OSA Annual Reports, written by my predecessors and by me. My observations on the review are solely from the perspective of an adjudicator. The remit for an adjudicator is to test determined admission arrangements (not the whole admissions process) against admissions law and the School Admissions Code.

Many things concerning admissions have changed over the years, some significantly. Some matters have come and gone. A significant change is that now we can look at the whole set of admissions arrangements. It was very frustrating initially when we could look at something on which a lawful objection had been made, but saw something else three lines down which was much worse and we could not do anything. Now at the end of the process of considering arrangements, through the determination, we can point the way to the admission authority to what should be fully lawful admission arrangements.

The aim of work on admissions and the overall principles have not changed: to try and achieve fair admission arrangements. We come to a view of what is fair overall (like Professor Coldron). But, of course, if you are the individual mum or dad your perception might be very different from what is considered fair overall.

The RISE review does refer to all those changes in admissions law and some of those are quite substantial. Adjudicators can now look at objections to faith criteria and admissions in academies. So the remit of the OSA is for all state-funded schools in England, bar one. One is still not included under the current legislation.

Coming to my evidence, this is drawn directly from the cases we have looked at and made a determination. There were 274 objections in the last school year, most from individual parents. Again this is significant evidence of change as it used as a requirement that objections had to be from 10 eligible, individual parents, and only on limited aspects of admission arrangements. I agree with the review's recommendation that strong regulation should continue. You might say that is unsurprising, but actually I wish it weren't necessary, but at the moment it still is.

I can also draw on some indirect evidence. For the Annual Report I must look at reports from 152 local authorities on what is happening locally on school admissions. The Code sets out what must be included (para 3.23) but also allows local authorities to report on other things. So an evidence base is being built up on what local authorities say is happening in their area. I have produced a template for local authority reports. I also now invite local authorities to suggest other things for inclusion. Data on fraudulent applications, for example, was included after a suggestion from some local authorities. The draft template for next year's report is due to go out shortly and will include a further request for information on fraudulent applications. This is often reported by the press as a huge issue, but when the numbers were collected this last year fortunately it appears to be less so.

Too many arrangements referred to us are far too complex and complicated.

My evidence is recorded in my Annual Report to the Secretary of State, which is then published. This year, for example, I reported again on schools not determining on time and lack of compliance on sixth form admissions, some things which are seen as technical breaches. On sixth forms the report is solely on state-funded schools with sixth forms. It is not for me to comment on some of the aspects which Professor Coldron comments on in his paper. What I have commented on is to say that too many arrangements referred to us are far too complex and complicated. Why should this be when the admission arrangements for many of our schools – community

and voluntary controlled schools – are simpler to understand and follow? I have been able to raise this as a concern with the Department and Ministers. For example, I have been able to raise as a concern schools with a large number of oversubscription criteria – 17 criteria in one case.

One concern I have is about fair banding, often suggested as a solution for fair admissions. As an adjudicator I have a question over how it is used at the moment. For example, I get very cross when I see admission arrangements which say 'all applicants must take the test', to which the answer is a very firm 'no'.

First, if a school is not oversubscribed every child who applies must be offered a place; the second 'no' is that a child with a statement must be admitted whether they take the test or not and the third 'no' is that looked after or previously looked after children must be offered a place whether they take the test or not. Banding only has any currency if the school is oversubscribed and then the first oversubscription criterion must be looked after or previously looked after children, which operates before any banding.

One concern I have is about fair banding, often suggested as a solution for fair admissions.

Then there is the hurdle for all the other children to take the test, and I ask myself which children do not turn up on a Saturday to take the test?

I know from evidence from the LSE and the Sutton Trust that some children take the test in their primary schools, but for the ones I have looked at the children have to turn up to the school on a Saturday morning and take the test.

Then I look at the proportions. My understanding is that that ability in the population is not spread equally across the full range in five neat 20% bands. Then I see a school which gives 30% to the top band, 50% to the middle and then 20% to the bottom band, and another with 25%, 50% and 25% – both schools in the same area. How is this fair?

So I think admissions are better than they were. There are many, many schools which admit children using totally fair and open criteria. But there are other schools where my colleagues and I think the admission authority may be being a bit naughty, but we have to stick to our remit to look at the determined admission arrangements and test them against the Code.

Our remit as adjudicators is to check whether the principles of the Code being met – are parents able to express a preference and pupils to have the highest preference place made available to them?

Also we have to remember that we are speaking today in London. Recently, I have been looking at free school meal data for a number of schools in different localities. Remembering that most parents in urban areas have a realistic choice of at least two or three schools, and often can give six preferences on their application form, there are many parts of the country where parents have only one local school and no other within a reasonable distance. Looking at my own area, there are relatively low levels of income, but also low levels of FSM. As FSM can be taken into account in admissions, this is an area where more research may be needed.

In conclusion, when arrangements are brought to the attention of an adjudicator, it is for the adjudicator to test the arrangements to assess whether they are clear, fair and objective. We have to rely on people to refer objections to us. It is not our job to go hunting for admission arrangements that do not comply with the Code or to check that the allocations of places are ranked as the admission arrangements say they will be.

So, we play our part in the admission process as set out in law, but it is only part of the admission process and I have been glad of the opportunity to look at more of the overall process through the publication of this review.

Response by John Freeman

I write as an ex-education director and ex-children's services director, as a current chair of a secondary school governing body and a consultant to local authorities on admissions issues. I contributed to the RSA research report on in-year admissions, *Between the Cracks*.

This note is intended simply to be a commentary on the research report, not a recipe or manifesto for improvement!

School admissions are contested terrain:

- They are high profile with the local and national media, with national stories every year about the percentage of disappointed parents, focusing on hotspots of perceived difficulty, and local stories where parents have received apparently perverse decisions. There are also regular stories about fraud and underhand behaviour by schools and parents.

Tens of thousands miss out on their first choice school

Headline, Guardian, 3 March 2015

Nearly half of pupils missing out on place at chosen school

Headline, Daily Telegraph, 3 March 2015

- Parents do genuinely worry about school admissions and can become emotional and sometimes litigious when their expectations are not met.
- As a consequence of the high profile, school admissions have become an increasingly politicised issue.

Cameron's 'joy' over school for daughter

Headline, Daily Telegraph, 5 March 2013

Because school admissions are so contentious and high profile, governments have regulated through primary legislation and regular updating of the Admissions Code to deal with perceived abuses, and we have a Schools Adjudicator to hold the ring. The present government has acted to simplify the Admissions Code, in part by assuming that schools and other parts of the system will, and do, work to the common good. However, no-one believes that the present Admissions Code has solved all the problems and there will, no doubt, be more political attempts to do so in future Parliaments.

As a consequence of the contested nature of school admissions and the continued attempts of government to regulate (or more recently, to de-regulate) the activities around school admissions, the whole area is extraordinarily complicated and very few professionals (in local authorities, academies, and maintained schools) understand the fine detail, and even fewer parents understand how the whole system works. This leads to errors in interpreting and applying the Admissions Code by the ever-increasing number of admissions authorities. Even when the system is properly administered, parental lack of understanding leads to widespread confusion and dissatisfaction when parents are not allocated a place in the school of their choice.

So why is the school admissions process such contested terrain? The reality is that there is no simple answer when it comes to designing a fair admissions process. Like 'squaring the circle', a task on which mathematicians from antiquity struggled, but which was proved as late as 1882 to be inherently impossible, a school admissions system cannot, either in principle or practice, keep everyone happy.

The fundamental reason for this conundrum is that children will always have to be turned away from over-subscribed and popular schools and sent instead to less popular schools. The impact of this inevitable position is amplified by the curious differential between the political rhetoric of 'choice' – '*parents can choose a school for their children*' – and the statutory position that parents may only '*express a preference*'. Since unconstrained choice is simply not possible, many parents

will have what they see as their legitimate ambitions thwarted – ambitions that have been validated by the political rhetoric. And, of course, the parents who are satisfied will not make a fuss, while aggrieved parents will make a lot of noise, and this is what is picked up by the media.

School admissions are also contested because there are many contradictory incentives operating. Schools and academies have, and are expected to have, distinctive visions about how they will serve their communities – and this almost always translates into how children should be selected for the school or academy. The school accountability framework – Ofsted and performance tables – is, as it is intended to be, a powerful driver of school behaviour. But very often it drives school admissions to become selective – often covertly, for example by choice of apparently fair oversubscription criteria which in practice disadvantage potentially low-achieving pupils. Their actions may even be unlawful, either unwittingly, or, at worst, deliberately.

So what are the key issues?

1. School admissions processes embody values as well as being a technical matter – but there *are* technical concerns and these are often dealt with improperly through lack of knowledge or understanding, or, in some cases, a wish to subvert the intentions of the Admissions Code.
2. This leads to two issues about fairness at a local level. First, there is fairness of process: 'Is the system being carried through properly in an administrative sense?' Then there is fairness of policy: 'Is the system designed to ensure that all children of whatever ability or background have a fair chance of being admitted?' In both cases, socially disadvantaged families may lose out to the 'sharp elbowed middle classes' who are more likely to challenge process, to complain and to appeal.
3. School admissions policy is a policy area rife with unintended consequences. The previous Secretary of State is on record as saying that the Pupil Premium would encourage good schools to admit more poor pupils. The evidence is that this has not happened. Another example is that as the secondary performance tables start to include progress measures – that is, progress from Key Stage 2 to Key Stage 4 – there will be an incentive for secondary schools to admit bright but under-performing children from primary schools.
4. While there is much anecdotal evidence of deliberate manipulation of the system, through schools selecting unlawful or improper oversubscription criteria, by encouraging less-desirable parents to seek a school elsewhere, or by parents falsifying addresses, for example, there is relatively little hard evidence of abuse when detailed investigations are carried out. The system is relatively weakly integrated, involving local authorities, schools and academies, parents and the Schools Adjudicator, but any structural change – for example, giving the Schools Adjudicator more resources to police the system more proactively – may not have the desired impact in improving outcomes.
5. In-year admissions are a scandal – far too many children who move school during the school year are out of school for a period of weeks or months, while schools and academies drag their feet. A child who has been out of school will have fallen behind, will have lost the habit of learning and will be at increased risk of all sorts of abuse.

Conclusion – Questions not answers!

What are the problems that school admissions policy are designed to solve? Are they to do with 'fairness', with 'school autonomy', or with 'the greater good', for example? And what are the problems with the present system? Are they to do with abuse of policy or practice? Can these problems be solved by (for example) a new Admissions Code? Is it possible to conceive of a school admissions system in which all parents are satisfied?

Report of the seminar

Does the English admissions system need to change?

An invited audience of people working to administer admissions, campaigning about admissions or researching admissions discussed John Coldron's RISE review on admissions.

Below is a summary of the points made by members of the audience and the panel during the discussion. Although different views were expressed there was general agreement amongst the audience that the English admissions system needs to change.

The English admissions system needs to change

1. Why should schools be admission authorities? What is the public policy purpose? Why do we have a system where it is possible for publicly funded schools to pick and choose which taxpayers' children to admit, when in effect publicly funded hospitals have to take allcomers?
2. We need a system which allows parents to express a preference by a managed and brokered system rather than a sum total of individual preferences.
3. In considering admissions we have to balance fairness and autonomy. Recent changes have made admissions even more problematic, especially because of the increasing number of own admission authorities and emphasising diversity when there is no real evidence that this is what parents want. Policy makers need to be resisted.
4. Appeals are a burden for some schools that have become own admission authorities.
5. If parents saw the process was fair and understood it they would be satisfied. Parents do not understand the system. This must not be under-estimated; even well-educated parents find it very difficult, for example, to grasp the concept of equal preferences and voluntary aided schools with complicated admissions arrangements. Parents must be able to understand on what basis places are offered. So many appeals could be avoided if parents had clearer explanations. Parents cannot judge easily the likelihood of getting into the school.
6. The system is far too complex. Many schools in the same local authority have different admission arrangements. Many headteachers, as well as parents and even some education officers, do not understand the system. In fact it is becoming more complex and unfair.
7. Some thought that parents do understand when equal preference is explained to them and local authorities provide good information. But academies and free schools are using an ever broadening menu of choice. There is more work to be done with new schools.
8. Inadequate place planning makes admissions even more of a problem. How can a village primary be too small when these children were born many years earlier? Some of the problem over place planning has been the insistence of governments in the past on removing surplus places. Now there is lack of money to provide for expected future growth.

Parental choice

9. A system which puts a burden on parents to make the 'right choice' is not right.
10. Research indicates that most parents choose schools not on academic achievement but on whether the child might be happy there, proximity and 'discipline', i.e. is the behaviour good or is it too 'rough'? Mothers may choose for their children but also select a social group for themselves. They ask, in effect, whether there are other mothers like them at the school. Parents of all social classes

may either choose aspirationally or choose schools with which they feel more comfortable.

11. Primary school experience, i.e. most parents sending their child to the local school, is almost utopian compared to what happens when children go to secondary school – why? One parent's London experience was of grammar schools dotted round, faith schools, free schools and selection on aptitude. Politicians are the only people who can change this. Parents and the media do not appear to think the admissions system is fair.
12. There is a difference between a popular school and a good school. Certainly, in the past some parents might have chosen a school in which they felt comfortable but that was not academically successful, i.e. coasting, but for example had middle class children. In a related point another participant said that one aim a school in special measures has to have is to raise the aspirations of its parents.

Selection at 11

13. One participant asked why so many people rejected by the 11-plus do not protest. A response quoted Brian Simon, who, in writing about selection, said that selection was a perfect system of social control, i.e. geared to making people accept that they are failures. There is no doubt that the anger over rejection at 11 remains with people long into adulthood.
14. Illegal selection is that not allowed by the Code. Covert selection has been defined as selection within the Code, ensuring a more favourable intake by, for example, changing the school's catchment area.

Policy

15. For years policy makers have focused on 'choice' and 'diversity' with little evidence that this is what parents want. There is a huge difference between choice and preference, yet Ministers constantly refer to choice. The choice genie is out of the bottle. Eventually it may be that, if we continue without change, Ministers will be forced to take action because so many parents will be disillusioned.
16. There seems to be more concern with choice in England than in other countries. Are admissions such an issue in other countries? We need international comparisons. There is some evidence that choice and the market, and thereby their effect on admissions, is seeping in internationally, in Finland and France for example. It is unclear why this is when the evidence is that it does not seem to result in increased attainment overall.

The 'market'

17. The introduction of the Pupil Premium has not encouraged schools to take children who are eligible, now the introduction of Progress 8 could mean that schools deliberately take children from low performing primary schools.
18. The effect of the market is that in schools with falling rolls there is less money to spend on improvement, so improving becomes even more difficult.

The need for accurate information

19. There are varying levels of oversubscription. There is a tendency for schools to claim that being oversubscribed or with a high number of appeals is a sign of popularity. We need accuracy over claims made about the number of preferences as these can include, for example, third or fourth preferences.

The need for simplification

20. We must simplify the whole system. Schools must show

how many have applied under each criterion. London schools with their complicated admissions must not dictate the whole system; in other areas across the country the criteria are much simpler. We do need simpler criteria, for example why do we have a situation where schools can differ about how they define distance from school?

21. So called 'fair banding' is an example of the system being in a mess. Different schools can adopt different ways of doing it. We must have some degree of coordination. It should be done across the whole area not individual schools' intakes.

Compliance with the Code

22. Apart from changes to the Code itself, the only way change can come is via a complaint to the adjudicator. It is better now that members of the public can object to the adjudicator about a school's admission policies but for most that is too complicated. Parents would need to look at the criteria a year in advance to be able to object and perhaps influence whether their child could be admitted.
23. Surely there is a lot of non-compliance? When the Fair Admissions campaign objected to only a fraction of faith schools' arrangements, over 1,000 code breaches were uncovered. This is not the way to police the system. Local authorities have conflicts of interest and the DfE cannot do it. We need more proactive policing of the system.
24. More than 10,000 letters a year go to the DfE about admissions. This does have some influence. But if the Department is getting 10,000 letters a year it shows there needs to be simplification.
25. The system is evolving and more objections are being made to the adjudicator. This is a powerful tool. Local authorities are getting better at challenging schools on unfair admissions. There is a difference between inadvertent technical non-compliance and deliberate attempts to manipulate the school's intake, for example an aggressive use of a combination of different methods. The coordination of admissions across London has worked well.
26. If aggressive policing is needed this is an indication that the whole system is wrong. Surely there is still a residual value system across most schools about wanting to do the best for all children, not just those in their own school. However some of the incentives now in place undermine this.

Faith schools

27. There is great concern about the direction of travel as more and more faith schools are set up, resulting in religious segregation. Why should schools that are being paid for by the taxpayer be able choose their intake?

In-year admissions

28. There was a shared concern about in-year admissions, which are a huge problem – one in five admissions is in-year. Many children are out of school. This must be tackled. There is a big safeguarding issue here. Taking the responsibility away from local authorities after such a short time was a mistake. Most schools operate fairly but some do not. Some schools will not provide their local authority with an estimate of their spare places. Legislation is needed on 'directing' schools to make enforcement easier.
29. Schools must comply with fair access protocols even if they have not signed up.

What is needed

30. We need a system based on schools taking whoever walks through the door and a default system for anyone who wants anything different. Give every local parent a place and let them appeal if they don't want it. Does the Scottish system operate like that?
31. Although it might be difficult, providing a list of the only admission criteria which can be used would make a huge difference. The aim of a menu of permitted oversubscrip-

tion criteria was supported by several speakers, some working in admissions.

32. Own authority schools spend a lot of time and energy on appeals. This is a waste of public resources. A simple change now would be to take admissions appeals for all schools centrally to the local authority.
33. New faith schools can only take up to 50% of their intake based on the faith of parents. Maybe that should be extended to existing faith schools. But a similar change was resisted in the past.
34. We need to resist and rebut any politicians who claim that choosing a school is vital for your child's future. There is more variation within schools than between them. Parental involvement is vital; parents can help schools improve. Parents at secondary level seem to say 'over to you'.
35. Huge geographical areas are a problem; there is virtue in local authority catchment areas. We need a simple and fair system that parents can understand. Random allocation might be an improvement in some areas. Banding works well in some areas, in others it could make things worse. It needs to be locally tailored. A participatory democracy based on a middle tier would help.
36. The language and expectations must change and exaggerated emphasis on choice abandoned in favour of parents expecting to be allocated a place at a local school. Years ago most schools would not have dared not to take local children. The effect of Ofsted and league tables have made this difference.



RESEARCH AND INFORMATION ON STATE EDUCATION March 2015

School admissions: lessons from the evidence

John Coldron Sheffield Institute of Education, Sheffield Hallam University

Concerns shaping policy and research

Admission policies to schools over the past two decades have been designed to serve a variety of purposes and research into those policies has sought answers to a variety of questions.

There is an enduring concern about the fairness of admissions. It is the case that higher performing schools are attended more often by children from richer families while poorer children are more likely to attend a school that is performing less well. One interpretation of this is that the admission system is not ensuring that each parent has an equal opportunity to gain access to the best schools, when in fact it leads to their lower attainment and restricted social mobility (see Forewords by Sir Peter Lampl in Cribb et al., 2013).

Policy, regulation and campaigning have therefore been aimed at helping poorer parents to gain better access. Research has sought to monitor how far the intakes of schools differ and whether some types of schools are more socially segregated than others, and to identify causes.

A concern for fairness overlaps with a concern to ensure the efficiency of procedures such that the admission system optimally matches parents' preferences with places available and better ensures equality of opportunity for parents to gain their most preferred school. The greater diversity and opportunity to choose has made the process of admissions more complex for parents and administrators and in the early years of implementation there was considerable inefficiency (Audit Commission, 1996) with the process being complex and unpredictable for parents. Research has sought to address the issue of design, monitor the proportion of parents gaining their preferred school and gauge the level of parental satisfaction.

Another concern has been with the effectiveness of the admissions system in facilitating policy aims. Successive governments have been committed to the introduction of market relations between schools and parents as a way of improving the education system. One purpose of the regulation and legislation on admissions has therefore been to establish and maintain effective market relations. It has, for example, reduced the power of local author-

Key points

- Admission policy serves a variety of purposes and therefore research has sought answers to various questions – about fairness, efficiency, policy aims and segregation.
- Strong regulation needs to continue.
- Parents do not choose on the basis of educational attainment alone – competition for parental custom on academic criteria does not act as an effective driver of system improvement.
- Evidence from different perspectives suggests that the aim of policy should be to achieve more balanced intakes to schools.
- There is increasing disruption at ground level of the regulatory regime due to the reduction in the role of LA's and an increase in the number of own admission authority schools.
- Policy makers and campaigners should resist simplistic conclusions that the unfairness of admissions is a market dysfunction that can be tweaked, or is the result of a lack of access to 'good' schools, or middle class monopolisation of high performing institutions, and make policy in full acknowledgement of the complex dynamics of parental choice, social solidarity and schools' responses to accountability. School segregation is a symptom of inequality rather than its cause.
- How children get allocated to schools is an aspect of the role that schooling plays in our society reflecting moral and political visions of how education contributes to achieving an ordered, prosperous and cohesive society.

ties (LA's) in relation to education in their local area, required schools to provide adequate information about their performance and admission arrangements, allowed different providers of schools, allowed popular schools to expand and freed some failing schools, with colour. Research has attempted to find how far optimum market conditions exist, what criteria parents use and whether system performance has been affected. A critical strand of this research has looked at unintended effects.

Another focus of concern is the danger to the stability and cohesiveness of communities when children from different religious or cultural backgrounds are educated separately. Faith schools are a historical feature of the English system where the Roman Catholic Church and the Church of England have provided schools for members of their religious communities and there have been a very small number of Jewish schools (Allen and West, 2009). These have recently been added to a small proportion of schools for other faiths. In addition, because immigrants from the same part of the world tend to cluster for a period in the same areas of cities, non-faith schools can have a large proportion of children from a particular religious community. The concern is that this exacerbates tensions between different social groups and fuels social unrest.

The regulation of admissions

In 1998, the new Labour government passed the School Standards and Framework Act, establishing a new legal framework for school admissions, which, amended and strengthened by subsequent acts, remains the foundation of current official practice.

The Secretary of State is required to issue codes of practice on admission arrangements, the latest of which came into force in December 2014. The evolving codes have been powerful instruments for governing admissions practice. Admission authorities (AAs) (including academy trusts) LA's must comply with (not just have regard to) the codes. The Office of the Schools Adjudicator (OSA) makes binding adjudications on objections, reviews reports from LA's and occasionally conducts research on relevant topics.

England now has one of the most highly regulated admission systems (for comparison see the Mapping in Practice in Europe website, www.mapping-in-practice.eu/) in addition

John Coldron's RISE review
School admissions: lessons from the evidence
 is available from the RISE website
www.risetrust.org.uk/admissions

Post-seminar reflections and proposals

John Freeman

School admissions – Improving the system

Most of my writing is concerned with making the education system operate effectively as it is, rather than with proposing fundamental changes. This note, however, is a response to the presentations and seminar discussions, and in it I propose a number of improvements to the school admissions system.

The key focus is on improving perceived fairness – noting that no admissions system can avoid turning children away from popular schools. How can this be done most fairly?

I start from three premises, the first two of which could be challenged:

1. **The political genie of ‘choice’ (or ‘preference’) is out of the bottle and cannot be put back.**
2. **School admissions *cannot* ensure that all schools serve equivalent populations.**

Neither of these premises is inevitable, but any proposals for change would be highly politically contentious, and the improvements suggested below are founded on what might realistically be achieved.

3. **Everywhere in England is different.**

Rural Somerset, metropolitan Dudley, central Birmingham and inner London all have distinctive characters and school admissions (I have worked in all these areas . . .). The school admissions system needs to be customisable to meet local needs and expectations. Just to give two comments. In Somerset the school transport budget in 2000 was in excess of £10 million, and that was only delivered through an efficient network of buses; unconstrained choice would have resulted in a huge increase in costs, while in London transport is not so much an issue with an effective and highly-subsidised public transport network.

So, the proposals below are based on local approaches within a national framework.

In this note all references to ‘schools’ include all state schools, that is, maintained schools and academies.

Proposal 1

The school admissions system should be based around a simple statement that **every child should have the automatic entitlement to attend their local school**, but their parents should have the right to seek a place in another school.

(‘Local’ would be defined in each area to meet community needs and expectations. However, note that in an urban area this may be less contentious than in a rural area, where parents’ ability to provide transport could lead to selection by car ownership.)

Proposal 2

In each area of the country (perhaps a local authority area, or a smaller area) the **local authority and local schools should come together to agree and set local admissions arrangements for all schools in the area**. Where agreement cannot be reached, the Schools Adjudicator should have authority to impose local admissions arrangements based on the entitlement set out in Proposal 1.

(This is similar to the previous arrangements for Admissions Forums but there would be the power to impose arrangements when this is necessary to the common good.)

Proposal 3

Local areas should be required to set **admissions arrangements based on choice from a restricted menu of over-subscription criteria**, with all local schools using the same (or, at the least, consistent) criteria and methodologies.

(So, for example, any distance criterion would be assessed using the same methodology – as the crow flies, or shortest safe walking route, for example. The emphasis would be on criteria that made sense in local circumstances and are simple and transparent to users.)

Proposal 4

Each area should **publish the local integrated admissions arrangements and promote them** to parents and the wider community.

(This is an extension of existing practice but emphasises the need for explaining and describing, rather than simply publishing the arrangements in formalistic language.)

Proposal 5

Each area should **publish the outcomes of the local arrangements each year**, so that parents can see how the arrangements are working in practice and make their judgements based on reality rather than school gate anecdote or myth.

(Again, this should happen already, but the practice needs to be made universal.)

Proposal 6

Each area should have a **single centralised admissions service** whose task is to administer all admissions and appeals across the area.

(This would be a very much more efficient and effective approach than allowing every school to manage its own admissions process, and would reduce costs. The admissions service would provide expert technical advice to schools and would operate the system, but would not have decision-making capacity about admissions arrangements. Appeals would continue to be a feature of the system but if the overall system is seen to be fair and simple, then it is likely that, over time, the volume of appeals would reduce.)

Proposal 7

For in-year admissions, each area should be required to have a binding Fair Access Protocol which ensures that any child not placed in school after (say) two weeks from the application for a place is placed in school with immediate effect.

(This could be backed up by a system of fines or penalties on schools that do not cooperate with the Fair Access Protocol. Each area should have arrangements for ‘alternative provision’ paid for by the schools in the area.)

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