

Customer Voice Research Admissions and Ethos

Sherbert Research



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DCSF-RW081**

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Admissions and Ethos

Objectives

To explore the views of parents in relation to proposals set out in the national School Admissions Consultation 2008:

- To allow schools to use ethos statements as part of the school admissions process and allow admissions authorities to prioritise applications to schools on the basis that parents had signed the admissions statement as part of the application for the school;
- The other main proposed changes concerning the application and allocation process of school places in England; and
- Information for parents about school admissions and appeals, including the booklet *Primary and Secondary School Admissions and Appeals: A Guide for Parents*.

Respondents

Parents who had just been through the admissions process or were about to (parents of “rising 4s”, Reception, Year 1, Year 6 and Year 7).

- Four, one hour, paired depths with parents (mum and dad together).
- Two, one hour, single parent depths.
- Four groups with parents each lasting one and a half hours (both mums and dads, 7 respondents per group).

Locations: Lincoln, North London, Sussex and rural Hampshire.

Key Findings

- Applying for a school place heralds a time of significant stress and anxiety for parents. Mums largely take responsibility for the applications process. Dads do get involved with significant decisions but rely on their partners to do the ground work.
- Currently word of mouth is the most readily available source of information regarding school admissions. However, it is often the least reliable source for establishing correct procedures, which can lead to hearsay and anxiety. Increasingly parents are using the internet for information, especially to access Ofsted reports. School open days were often praised for being the most informative and useful sources of information on school admissions.
- Parents who had been through the school admissions process recently often found it to be complicated, time consuming and stressful. Major criticisms centred on a lack of communication, complex application forms, a lack of official support and a lack of support for those with specific needs including children with Special Educational Needs. Many parents who were approaching the process this year were expecting it to be a daunting and challenging experience.

- All parents called for school admission processes to be simplified, supporting a more efficient and stress free experience for parents and children. Suggested changes included:
 - A standard school application form across the country;
 - Standardised rules and criteria across Local Authorities;
 - A single closing date for applications “*Just like tax.*” (Advertised locally)
 - Information on applications to be sent to parents in plenty of time (possibly at the end of, or during Year 5); and
 - Information on key dates and the broad process made available in the ‘red health book.’

School ethos statements and admissions - The proposal that admission authorities be allowed to prioritise applications to schools on the basis that parents had signed the school’s ethos statement as part of the application process (without any associated practical commitment) was strongly rejected. Ethos was a distant and formal sounding word for most and they could not comprehend the rationale for introducing this system, unless it was linked to proving faith. The lack of a compelling rationale for this idea meant that many parents were sceptical if not a little paranoid of it. The major barriers centred around the following:

- All parents would probably sign it to get their child into a school. It would therefore not be an effective admissions criterion;
- Parents were concerned that it could increase schools’ power (which they could abuse); and
- Faith schools could sound extreme and intimidating. Putting many parents off these schools, fearful that their child would have religion forced upon them.

Ultimately, parents want to experience the ethos of a school when they visit on an open day, they don’t want to read about it and be committed to signing up.

Changes to the primary application process - Parents largely accepted bringing the primary application process in line with the secondary one; to submit applications only to the “home LA” and to standardise the number of school places parents can express a preference for (three preferences). Explanation of this new process did bring to the attention of some parents the available option to apply to schools outside of their home LA. Generally parents wanted clearer and more accessible communication from their LAs regarding applications and the choices they have. Some parents rejected this proposal on the grounds that they did not believe that LAs would be able to fairly or efficiently process applications to schools outside of their control.

Infant class size appeals - The concept of providing parents with an independent and qualified reviewer was well received and thought to be a sensible proposal, there was also strong support for providing this type of support for all parents considering appealing.

In-year applications - All parents supported the proposal to always submit applications to the LA rather than schools.

Primary and Secondary Admissions and Appeals: A Guide for Parents - Overall the guide was well received (particularly by mums) and is working well on a number of different levels.

- Parents supported the design and the accessible tone that it gives to the guide
- The content was felt to be written in a simple way, using accessible language
- Many supported the diagrams which provided a relatively simple summary of key process and procedures
- For many it was what they had been looking for, but had not come across. All urged the government to send it out to parents and / or communicate the availability of an online version.

Some parents were more critical of the guide. They felt that it was too general and would have preferred more specific details regarding what to do within their LA. Dads often found it too dense and thought that their partners would probably read it first and direct them to the most important information; they preferred the idea of a one page summary. All parents felt that a 'one pager' could be useful way of quickly grasping key dates and steps in the process.

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