



Low income pupils in high performing comprehensive schools

An analysis of free school meal rates at the highest performing non selective state schools over the last ten years

The Sutton Trust

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Executive summary

- This report looks at changes in the proportion of pupils eligible for free school meals (FSM) at i) the top 200 comprehensive schools on overall GCSE results ('overall top 200') for the last ten years, and ii) the top 200 comprehensive schools including maths and English GCSE results ('academic top 200') for the last five years.

Overall top 200 – ten year trends

- The proportion of pupils eligible for free school meals in the highest-ranked 200 comprehensive schools has risen from 5.9% to 7.6% in the last decade. This 1.7 percentage point rise compares with an overall drop in national FSM eligibility of 3.9 percentage points, from 17.5% to 13.6%.
- There are now 17,700 pupils eligible for FSM in the top 200 comprehensives, compared with 12,300 in 1998 – a *rise* of 44%, compared with a *fall* in national FSM numbers of 18%.
- In 2007, three-quarters of the schools in the top 200 were responsible for their own admissions, compared with just over half in 1998. These schools tend to be more socially-exclusive, with 7.5% of pupils on free school meals compared with 8.1% in local authority controlled schools, although Academies and CTCs have the highest proportions of low income pupils.

Academic top 200 – five year trends

- The analysis finds evidence of a divide between the overall top 200 schools and the academic top 200 schools when maths and English GCSE results are included.
- The proportion of pupils in the academic top 200 eligible for free school meals is just 5.1% - compared with 7.6% in the overall top 200 and 13.6% nationally.
- The free school meal rate of the academic top 200 has hardly changed in the last five years, rising by just 0.3 percentage points compared to a rise of 1.5 percentage points in the overall top 200. In fact, the gap in FSM rates between the overall top 200 and the academic top 200 has steadily increased since 2003, from 1.3 to 2.5 percentage points.

- One third of the schools in the overall top 200 do not make the wider list when English and maths are included – in other words there are 60 comprehensive schools with high league table rankings which depend on the inclusion of a wider range of GCSE and equivalent subjects for their position. However, the focus on maths and English has only been explicit in the league tables since 2006, and this may change as schools adjust to the new expectations.

Policy Implications

- The fact that there are more pupils eligible for FSM in the highest ranked schools at a time when FSM rates nationally have been falling is positive and, perhaps, a sign that the Government's increased focus on fair admissions is paying dividends.
- But too many of the top schools remain socially exclusive, and it is particularly worrying that the schools which do well when English and maths GCSEs are included contain even fewer low income children – particularly when these core academic subjects are so important in determining future work and education pathways.
- The Trust believes that the focus going forward should be two fold:
 - ensuring that the highest-performing schools are opened up, so that poorer students can benefit from the opportunities on offer; and
 - creating a more even school system overall, with fewer pockets of affluence and deprivation which stands the best chance of raising standards overall.
- Rigorously enforcing the new school admissions code, an increased role for school admissions ballots (in conjunction with other criteria) and a consideration of fair banding in local areas, have important parts to play.
- The Government should also consider providing more incentives for comprehensives to encourage students to focus on subjects that will be of most value in university applications later on, for example, maths and English, plus individual science subjects and languages.

Summary table

	Top 200 Comps	Top 200 Comps (Eng and Maths)	National
Free school meal rate 1998	5.9% (n=12,300)		17.5% (n=540,000)
Free school meal rate 2003	6.1% (n=13,600)	4.8% (n=11,000)	14.5% (n=483,000)
Free school meal rate 2007	7.6% (n=17,700)	5.1% (n=12,000)	13.4% (n=445,00)
% change in FSM numbers (1998-2007)	44%		-18%
% change in FSM numbers (2003-2007)	30%	9%	-8%

Introduction

In 2006 the Sutton Trust published a report which showed that free school meal (FSM) eligibility at the country's highest ranked comprehensive schools was well below the national average and lower than the postcode areas in which the schools were sited¹. This evidence of social selection and sorting – which meant that many of the highest-performing schools were not being accessed by poorer children, even when they lived nearby – influenced the 2006 Education and Inspections Act and policy developments such as a strengthened school admissions code, the introduction of choice advisers and the extension of free school transport.

Although it is too early to gauge the impact of these developments, this report takes a longer term view, to measure whether highly-ranked schools have opened up to a wider social mix of pupils in the last decade and, connected to that, whether there are signs of a weakening in the link between pupil performance and background, with schools with a more diverse social profile heading up the league tables. By looking through the lens of the highest ranked schools we also hope to shed some light on issues of social segregation in the school system as a whole.

Methodology

The data used in this report is an assimilation of school performance tables and free school meal data files, which were obtained from the Department for Children, Schools and Families. National figures are taken from the relevant Schools Census.

The rankings of the top schools were compiled on the basis of the percentage of pupils with five GCSEs or equivalent at grades A*- C (tables 1 and 2) and five GCSEs or equivalent at grades A*- C, including maths and English (table 3). The latter has become the main basis on which school league tables have been compiled since 2006. In cases where there were a number of schools on the same percentage score, schools were selected on a simple alphabetical basis. The report does not consider grammar schools; only those with a comprehensive admissions policy.

The phrase 'top 200' is used in this report as shorthand for those schools meeting the above criteria. The Trust recognises that there are other schools – for example those with high contextual value added (CVA) scores – which fall outside of this group but which are nonetheless high achieving in challenging circumstances.

¹ See: <http://www.suttontrust.com/reports/FreeSchoolMeals.pdf>

It should be noted that the criteria for recording free school meal eligibility changed in 2001. Prior to 2001, the numbers eligible for a free school meal were those pupils whose families were receiving income support or income based job seekers' allowance or support under the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999. From 2001 onwards this definition was modified to include only pupils whose parents had indicated that they wished for their child to have a free school meal and had confirmed benefit receipt with the local authority or school.² For a child to be eligible for free school meals, their parental annual income must be below £15,575.

² DfES Statistical First Release

Overall top 200 – ten year view

Table 1 below shows that the number of children eligible for free school meals at the top-ranked 200 GCSE schools has *grown* by a significant 44% in the last ten years, from 12,000 to almost 18,000, during a period when national FSM numbers *declined* 18%.

Over the same period, the proportion of pupils in the leading comprehensives eligible for free school meals has risen by 1.7 percentage points, from 5.9% to 7.6%. This contrasts with a national fall in eligibility for free school meals of 3.9 percentage points, from 17.5% in 1998 to 13.6% today. There is a clear pattern of a fall in the FSM rates at the top schools from 1998 to 2002 and a rise thereafter.

Table 1³

	1998	2000	2003	2004	2006	2007
Overall⁴						
Pupil numbers	3,090,000	3,200,000	3,330,000	3,350,000	3,350,000	3,330,000
% increase on 1998		4%	8%	8%	8%	8%
FSM numbers	540,000	527,000	483,000	484,000	459,000	445,000
% increase on 1998		-2%	-11%	-10%	-15%	-18%
FSM rate	17.5%	16.5%	14.5%	14.4%	13.7%	13.4%
Top 200						
Pupil numbers	209,000	213,000	224,000	226,000	231,000	232,000
% increase on 1998		2%	7%	8%	11%	11%
FSM numbers	12,300	12,400	13,600	14,500	15,900	17,700
% increase on 1998		1%	11%	18%	29%	44%
FSM rate	5.9%	5.8%	6.1%	6.4%	6.9%	7.6%

Another notable trend is that the leading schools are educating greater numbers of pupils – up from 209,000 pupils in 1998 to 232,000 in 2007 – meaning the average size of a top 200 school has risen from 1,045 to 1,160 pupils. As these schools are popular with parents, this suggests there may be slighter greater flexibility in admissions leading to greater opportunities to access them.

³ Please note that the 2003 figures are slightly different than in our 2005 report (5.6% vs. 6.1%) because a more complete database was used in this analysis.

⁴ These national figures include young people educated in City Technology Colleges and Academies who are not always included in overall FSM figures

Make-up of top 200

Although Community, Foundation and Voluntary Aided schools continue to make up over nine-tenths of the top 200 list, there have been a number of changes since 1998. In particular, the list now contains significantly more schools in charge of their own admissions policies (those in the shaded boxes - up from 111 to 146 schools), including five Academies – although it should be noted that four of these are CTCs that converted to Academy status.

Table 2

	1998		2007	
	Number	FSM rate	Number	FSM rates
Community*	80	5.2%	51	8.3%
Voluntary Controlled	9	6.9%	3	2.2%
Foundation / Grant Mntd **	64	5.0%	31	5.2%
Voluntary Aided	39	7.2%	101	7.1%
CTC	8	14.6%	9	11.8%
Academy	n/a	n/a	5	23.2%
Own admissions	111	6.4%	146	7.5%
LA admissions	89	5.3%	54	8.1%

**Includes County Schools for 1998*

***Not all GM schools took on Foundation Status – some became Voluntary Aided schools*

In 2007 schools in charge of their own admissions were, overall, slightly more socially exclusive with 7.5% of pupils on free school meals, compared to 8.1% in local authority schools. In 1998 the reverse was the case, with local authority schools having relatively fewer FSM pupils than schools which were their own admissions authorities (5.3% versus 6.4%).

The majority of schools in charge of their own admissions are Voluntary Aided and Foundation schools, where free school meal rates have remained more or less static over the last decade at just over 7% and 5% respectively. However City Technology Colleges and Academies, which are also free from local authority control, actually have the highest proportions of low income students, at 11.8% and 23.2% respectively. It is interesting to note that CTCs have tended to use a system of banding⁵ to achieve a fairer intake, while Academies, some of which use banding or ballots, have their admissions policies regulated

⁵ Under banding, all applicants to a school are banded on ability and the school takes a proportion from each band. Banding can also operate on an area wide basis.

through their funding agreements with the Department for Children Schools and Families. Voluntary Aided and Foundation schools, in contrast, are more likely to use traditional admissions policies based on, for instance, religious affiliation or distance criteria.

Interestingly too, there is a core of 86 schools which feature in the top 200 lists in both 1998 and 2007. These schools are noticeably more socially exclusive than the list as a whole – with 4.6% of pupils on FSM compared to 9.9% for the remaining 114 – and almost four fifths are their own admissions authorities.

Top 200 with maths and English – five year view

One explanation for the change in the composition and social mix of the top 200 is that the introduction of more vocational subjects has boosted the league table rankings of schools - often serving deprived communities - which offer these types of qualifications. A GNVQ ICT Intermediate Course, for example, is worth the equivalent of four GCSE passes at grades A*-C. Critics have argued that these qualifications can skew league table results and mask under-performance in core academic subjects (such as maths and English) which pupils need to make headway in the labour market and further and higher education. It is certainly the case that students without good GCSEs in key academic subjects are unlikely to be accepted by the most selective universities – a principal concern of the Sutton Trust.

This was one reason the Government changed the focus of the league tables in 2006, so that schools are given credit for achieving five good GCSEs including English and maths, whereas before an A*-C or equivalent in any subject was sufficient. We have therefore also looked at changes in the make-up of the top 200 schools ranked on the basis of the proportion of students gaining five good GCSEs including maths and English (the 'academic top 200'). This data is only available for 2003 onwards.

Table 3

	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007
Total pupils	227,000	228,000	231,000	234,000	235,000
% increase on 2003		0.4%	1.8%	3.1%	3.5%
FSM pupils	11,000	12,100	11,500	11,900	12,000
% increase on 2003		10%	5%	8%	9%
FSM rate	4.8%	5.3%	5.0%	5.1%	5.1%

It is clear that the top 200 schools on this ranking are more socially exclusive than those in table 1, with only 5.1% of pupils eligible for free school meals in 2007 compared with 7.6% in the overall top 200.

Table 4

	Top 200	Academic Top 200 (maths and English)
2003 FSM rate	6.1% (13,600 pupils)	4.8% (11,000 pupils)
2007 FSM rate	7.6% (17,700) pupils	5.1% (12,000 pupils)
% point increase	1.5	0.3
% rise in FSM pupils	30%	9%

The change in the social makeup of the academic top 200 has also been less pronounced: the rise in FSM pupil numbers between 2003 and 2007 was 9%, compared to 30% in the overall top 200. This translates as almost no relative growth in the proportion of pupils on free school meals since 2003 – 0.3 percentage points for the top 200 with maths and English, but 1.5 percentage points for the top 200 overall. In fact, the gap between the top 200 overall and the academic top 200 has grown from 1.3 percentage points in 2003 to 2.5 percentage points in 2007. Of course, the fact that the number of pupils eligible for free school meals in these schools has grown at all at a time when overall FSM numbers have been declining is noteworthy.

Table 5

	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007
FSM rate overall top 200	6.1%	6.4%	6.9%	6.9%	7.6%
FSM rate top 200 academic schools	4.80%	5.30%	5.00%	5.10%	5.10%
% point gap	1.3	1.1	1.9	1.8	2.5

Although the makeup of the two rankings is remarkably similar in terms of school type (see table 6 below), only 132 of the 200 schools are the same. That is to say, one third of the schools in the top 200 when all subjects are counted do not make the list when maths and English are included. It is too early to say, though, what the impact of the 2006 reforms will be on schools' behaviour in the long term, and whether this will push more schools to focus on core academic subjects.

Table 6

	Top 200	Top 200 maths and English
Community schools	51	51
Voluntary Controlled	3	4
Voluntary Aided	101	101
Foundation	31	35
CTCs	9	6
Academies	5	3
Total	200	200

Policy issues

As we commented in our 2006 report, it is perhaps no surprise that the highest ranked comprehensives are socially exclusive, given the close connection between academic performance and socio-economic background. Put simply, schools with better off pupils are more likely to perform better and thus feature highly in league tables. However, the Trust does not believe it is inevitable that those from low income homes can not succeed academically given the right opportunities or that they should be less likely to access comprehensives with high academic standards, particularly when – as is often the case – these schools are on their doorsteps.

There are some positive signs in this analysis: the fact that there are more pupils on free school meals in our highest-performing schools - absolutely and relatively - is a step forward, particularly over a period when national FSM numbers have been falling. It could be argued that this is partly attributable to an increased focus on fair admissions by Ministers, particularly in the last few years, even though the impact of the revised admissions code and some of the connected reforms will not be reflected in this data.

However, there remain considerable challenges. Schools which excel at the core academic subjects (indicated by gaining five good GCSEs with maths and English) are not only likely to have lower proportions of children eligible for free school meals, but they are also less likely to have opened up over the last few years, with a consistent free school meal eligibility rate of 5% - well below the national average of 13.4%. It is also a concern that the 'gap' between the academic top 200 and the overall top 200 appears to be widening. If young people are to access high level jobs and stand a chance of entry to leading universities, then achievement in these core subjects is critical.

This trend resonates with the wider concern that non privileged youngsters are becoming less likely to have access to pathways – for instance a foundation of academic GCSEs followed by academic A levels, the International Baccalaureate or the new Pre-U exam – that are emerging as the clearest routes to highly-selective universities. Until such chances are available to all, it is crucial that the opportunities which currently exist are equitably spread and it is not just the affluent that have the chance to benefit from academic courses.

There have been important steps along this path: the focus on English and maths in GCSE league tables may already be beginning to change the focus in schools; the expectation that bright pupils should have an entitlement to study individual science subjects may have a similar impact. But the Government should consider whether sufficient credit is given to schools for high achievement in a range of core subjects, including in the CVA scores. If, for example, extra credit were given for physics or languages, might this encourage more schools to offer them at GCSE? This is a subject requiring further analysis.

So in this context the Government is also right to focus on admissions and on ensuring that schools reflect the communities they serve. The Trust has long advocated action on two fronts. Firstly and pragmatically, we should be opening-up the highest-performing schools to those from poorer backgrounds, so that non privileged students have a chance to benefit from the teaching on offer and the positive effects of a high-attaining and aspirant peer group. More widely, we should be looking to create a school system that is more balanced and in which there are as few pockets of affluence and deprivation as possible, as this stands the best chance of raising standards overall.

The admissions code of 2007 was a positive step forward in this regard and it is crucial that it is properly enforced and its impact monitored. The effectiveness of admissions forums in challenging schools in breach of the Code and in ensuring overall fairness in their local areas is particularly crucial. And the promise of an extension of free school transport to lower income families and the introduction of choice advisers could also benefit children from poorer homes.

But there are other specific measures which warrant further consideration. Fair banding – whereby schools are required to admit equal proportions of pupils from each band of ability - has been used successfully in a number of individual schools and there is scope for it to be used more widely across local areas. The Trust has also advocated the use of admissions ballots as a more equitable way of allocating places at oversubscribed schools. Survey work the Trust undertook in 2007 suggested that parents accepted the use of such admissions lotteries, when they were combined with other criteria, such as distance to school and religion.⁶

Deciding which pupils get in to which schools is high stakes and controversial, as coverage in the media proves. Some commentators say that the real issue is not admissions, but increasing the supply of good school places. Of course that is the right aspiration. But we need to be realistic too: choice is always going to be limited by the fact some schools are more in demand by parents than others, and this in turn is influenced by the intake of those schools. So we cannot afford to ignore the issue of admissions - including which pupils get in to the most high-performing schools - if we are interested in breaking the link between family background and educational performance, which so stubbornly persists in the UK.

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⁶ <http://www.suttontrust.com/reports/BallotsInSchoolAdmissions.pdf>