

Survey of Parents in England 2008

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1 Background and Introduction

This nationally representative parental satisfaction survey was commissioned as part of the Local Authority Commissioning Pathfinders evaluation. The objectives of the overall evaluation are to:

- measure the impact and effectiveness of the commissioning role in different circumstances against the interim indicators outlined in the Brief - acknowledging the longer time period required to measure the full impact of the changes on outcomes; and
- identify and analyse particularly successful and less successful approaches to the implementation of the commissioning role.

In particular, the research is looking at the relationships between local authorities, schools and parents and how these affect choice and standards. The research methods being used for the evaluation are a range of material indicators (including the parental satisfaction survey) for 10 case study areas, and a literature and document review.

The evaluation will produce a series of outputs including a literature review, statistical baselines and findings from the Pathfinder case studies. The final report for the evaluation is expected in the autumn of 2009.

The results of the nationally representative parental satisfaction survey are being published separately as they may be of interest outside the context of the evaluation. They include a measure of parents' satisfaction with their child's school and reasons for dissatisfaction, parents' experiences and attitudes in relation to school choice, and their awareness of and attitudes towards two of the newer types of school, academies and trust schools.

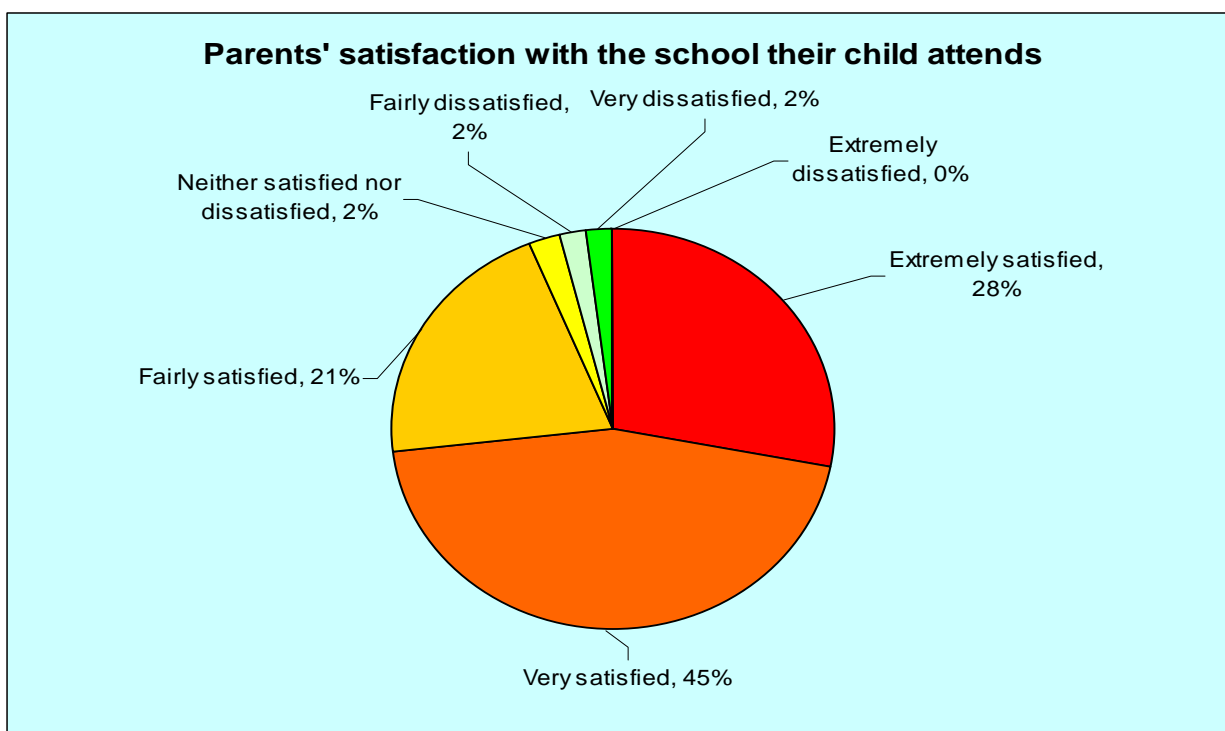
2 How the survey was carried out

GfK NOP carried out a survey of 1,999 parents and guardians of children aged 4 to 16 living and attending schools in England. The questionnaire was designed in conjunction with staff from the Department for Children, Schools and Families and SQW Consulting (which leads the Pathfinders evaluation). Fieldwork was carried out by telephone between 7 and 25 January 2008. A random digit dial (RDD) sample of telephone numbers was screened in order to identify households containing eligible parents and guardians. Where a parent/guardian had more than one child in the 4 to 16 age range who was attending school, one of the eligible children was selected by the interviewer and questions were asked about the parent's experiences in relation to that particular child. Quotas were set by Government Office Region (GOR), age band of child, social class and number of adults in household in order to ensure the representativeness of the parents interviewed. The survey data have been weighted by GOR, age band of child and social class.

3 Key findings of the survey

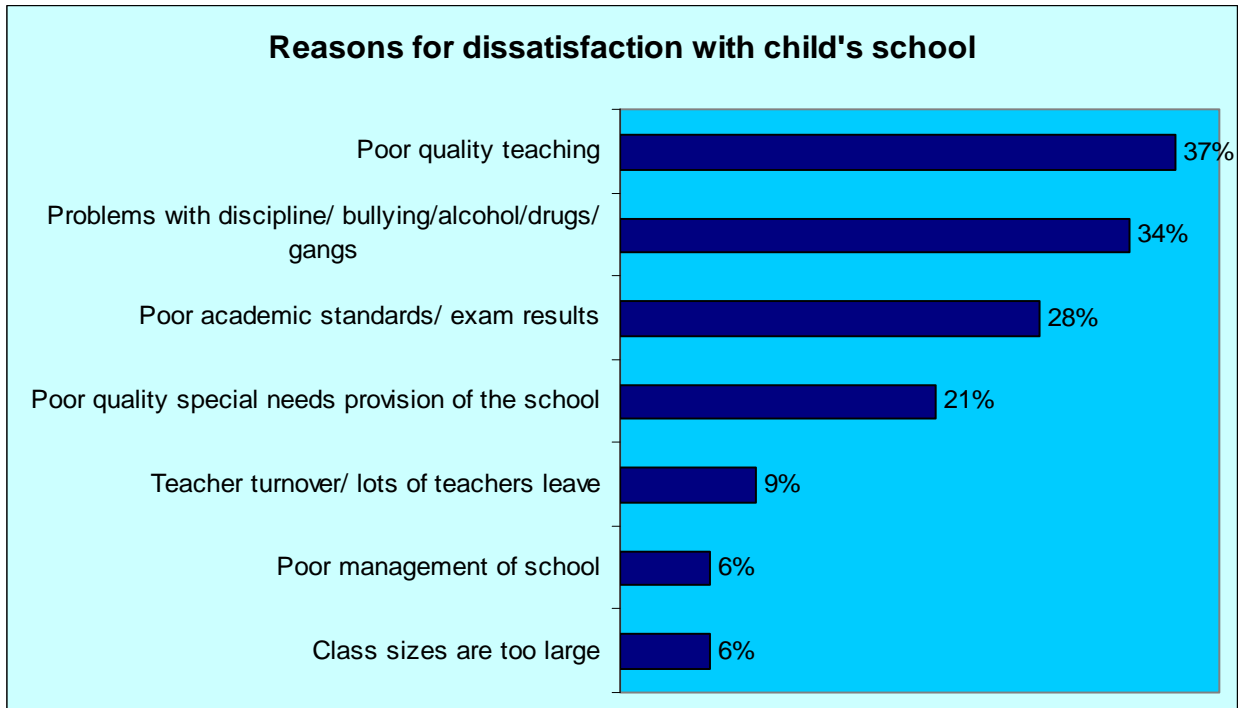
3.1 Satisfaction with the child's school and reasons for dissatisfaction

Parents were asked how satisfied or dissatisfied they were with the school that their child attends, on a scale between extremely satisfied and extremely dissatisfied. The vast majority (94%) of parents were satisfied, and in fact nearly three-quarters (73%) said they were either extremely or very satisfied. A fifth (21%) were fairly satisfied. Four per cent of parents were dissatisfied with the school; half of these (2%) were extremely or very dissatisfied.



Base: All parents (1999)

Parents who said they were dissatisfied were asked why they had said this. The main issues highlighted by these parents were poor quality teaching (mentioned by 37% of dissatisfied parents), problems with discipline, bullying or other forms of antisocial behaviour (34%), and poor academic standards or exam results (28%). Poor quality special needs provision was also an issue for a substantial minority of dissatisfied parents (21%).



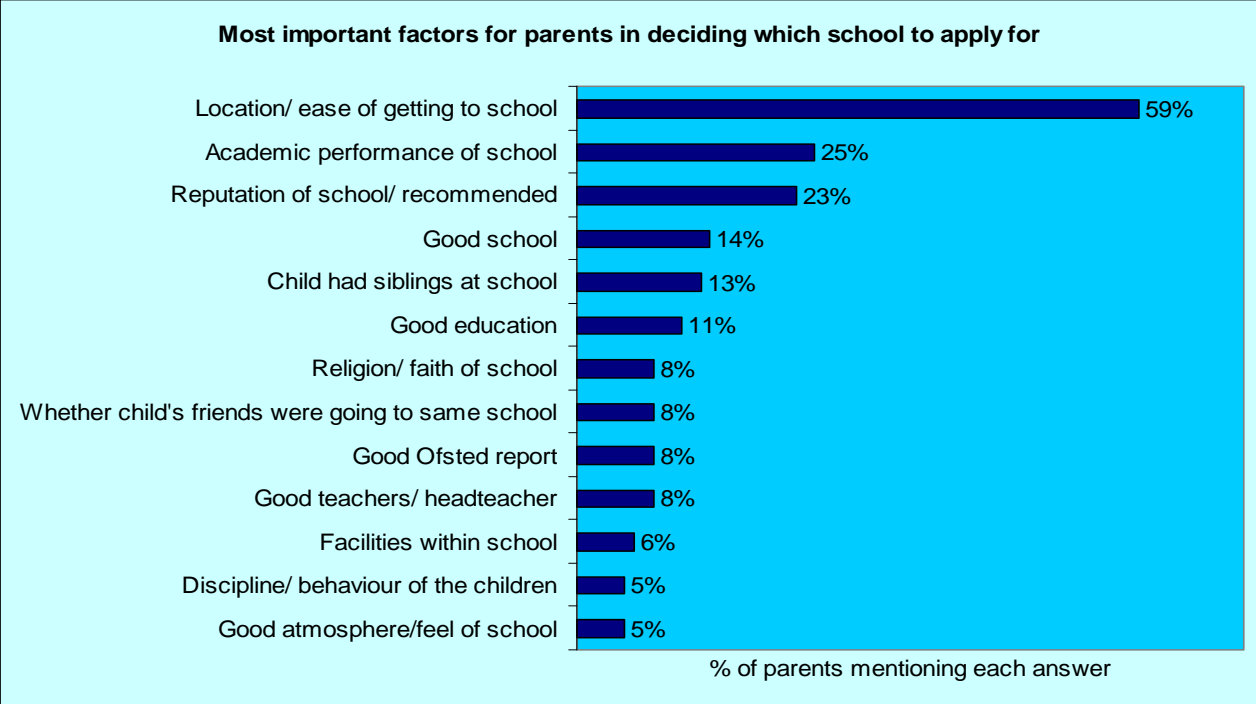
Base: Parents who are dissatisfied with the school their child attends (73). Answers given by less than 6% of dissatisfied parents not shown.

Parents were also asked how good they thought their child's school was at dealing with parents' concerns effectively. About three fifths (58%) of parents described the school as very good at this, with a further 29% saying it was fairly good. Five per cent of parents thought their child's school was fairly or very poor at dealing with parents' concerns effectively, while a further 5% chose the middle or neutral response.

3.2 Choosing a school and applying for a school place

Parents were asked a series of questions about their experience of choosing a school and applying for a school place. These questions were asked in relation to the application process they had been through most recently, so parents of children in year 6 were asked about their applications for a secondary school place. The sample included parents of children who were attending independent schools as well as state-funded schools, but the questions about the application process were only asked of those parents who had been through the experience of applying for a place at a state-funded school.

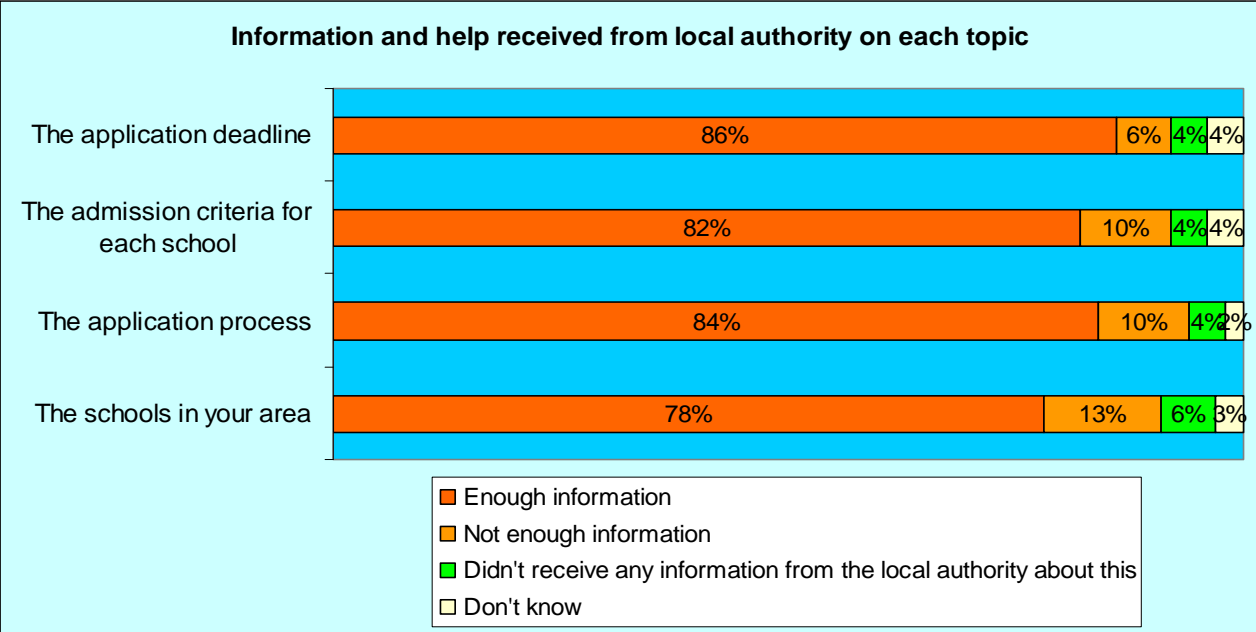
The first of these questions was which two or three factors had been most important to them, when they were trying to decide which school to apply for. This was asked of all the parents in the survey. One factor was mentioned by a clear majority of parents - this was the location of the school or ease of getting to the school, which 59% said had been among the most important factors in choosing a school. A quarter of parents mentioned academic success or success in exams (25%) and a similar proportion mentioned the overall reputation of the school or whether the school had been recommended to them (23%).



Base: All parents (1999). Answers given by less than 5% of parents not shown.

Seven out of ten parents (71%) said they felt they had had a choice of good state-funded schools within their own local authority area; a quarter said this had not been the case, with 10% of parents saying there was only one good state-funded school within their local authority area, 6% saying there were no good state-funded schools within their local authority area, 5% saying there had only been one school available to send their child to and another 5% saying no but not supplying any further information.

Parents who had applied for a place at a state-funded school for their child were asked whether they felt they had received enough information and help from their local authority about the schools in their area, the application process, the admission criteria for each school and the application deadline. Over three-quarters of these parents said they felt they had received enough information and help from their local authority on each of these topics - the percentages ranged from 78% up to 86%. A proportion of parents felt that their local authority had not provided enough information and help - 6% of those asked felt they had not received enough information and help in relation to the application deadline, 10% felt this in relation to the admission criteria and the application process and 13% felt this in relation to the schools in their area. In each case, a small minority of parents (between 4% and 6%) said they had not been aware that the local authority was supposed to provide information and help on these topics.



Base: Parents who applied for a place at a state-funded school (1850)

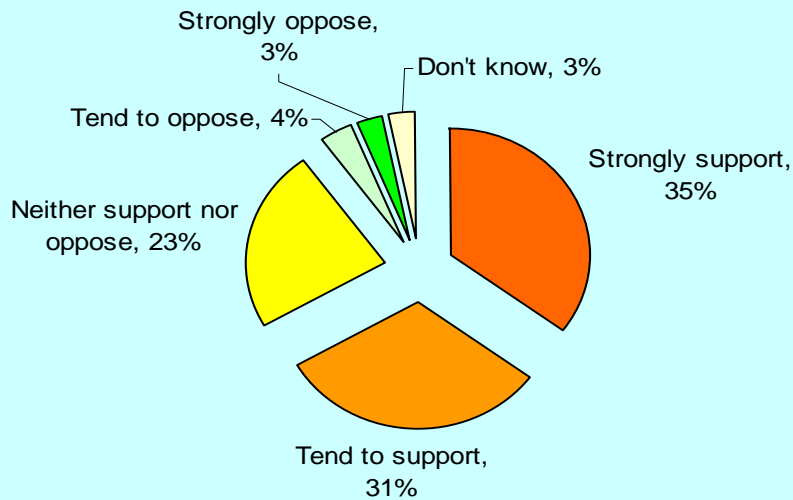
About five sixths (86%) of parents who had applied for a place at a state-funded school for their child said that they had been offered a place at their first choice of school; 5% said they had not heard yet (the fieldwork was carried out in January, well before the March date for the allocation of secondary school places) and 9% said they had not been offered a place at their first choice of school.

When asked whether the school they identified as their first choice was actually the school they ideally wanted their child to go to, or the best school available under the circumstances (a pragmatic choice), about three-quarters (78%) of parents who applied for a place at a state-funded school said their first choice had been the ideal school for their child while 19% said it had been a pragmatic choice.

3.3 Support for having a range of types of school in each area

In order to test the level of support for the concept of choice in school provision, all parents in the survey were asked how strongly they personally would support or oppose having a range of types of school in each area for parents to choose from. Overall, two-thirds (66%) of parents supported this idea - and in fact just over a third (35%) said they strongly supported it. Seven per cent of parents said they opposed this idea, 3% were strongly opposed. Most of the remainder (23%) were neutral, saying they neither supported nor opposed this idea.

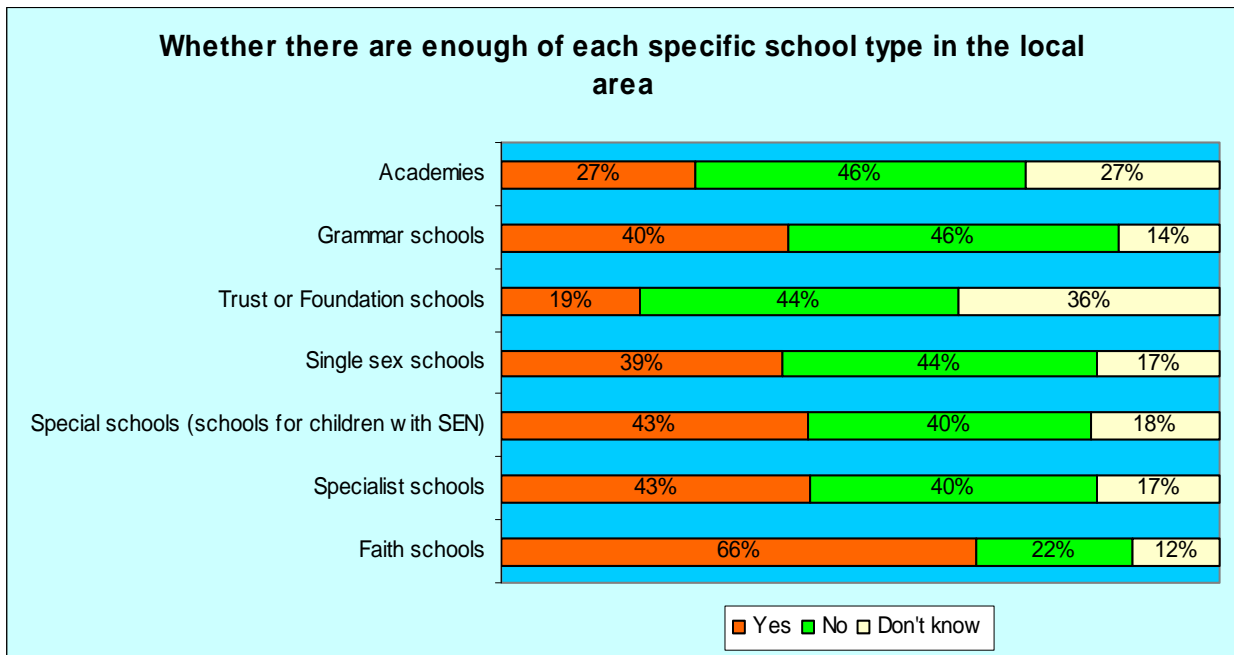
Support for range of types of school in each area



Base: All parents (1999)

Parents who had said they supported having a range of types of school for parents to choose from were then asked to say whether they thought there were enough schools of particular types in their local area. The seven types of school asked about were specialist schools, faith schools, single sex schools, grammar schools, Academies, Trust or Foundation Schools and special schools.

Only in one of these categories, faith schools, did a clear majority of parents feel that there were enough schools of this type in their area (66% of those asked said there were enough while 22% said there were not enough). In relation to both specialist schools (schools specialising in particular subjects such as Arts, Music or Science) and special schools (schools for children with Special Educational Needs), the proportion of parents who felt there were enough of these was very similar to the proportion who felt there were not enough (43% and 40% respectively in each case). In the case of grammar schools, parents who felt there were not enough slightly outnumbered those who felt there were enough (46% and 40% respectively), and the picture for single sex schools was similar (44% and 39% respectively). When it came to Academies and Trust Schools, parents who felt there were not enough of these types of school clearly outnumbered those who felt there were enough already, though they did not constitute the majority of the parents asked. Forty-six per cent of parents who were asked said there were not enough Academies in their area while 27% thought there were enough. Forty-four per cent of parents asked said there were not enough Trust Schools in their area while 19% thought there were enough. For each type of school, substantial minorities of parents said they did not know whether there were enough or not - these ranged from 12% of parents in the case of faith schools, up to 27% in the case of Academies and 36% in the case of Trust or Foundation schools.

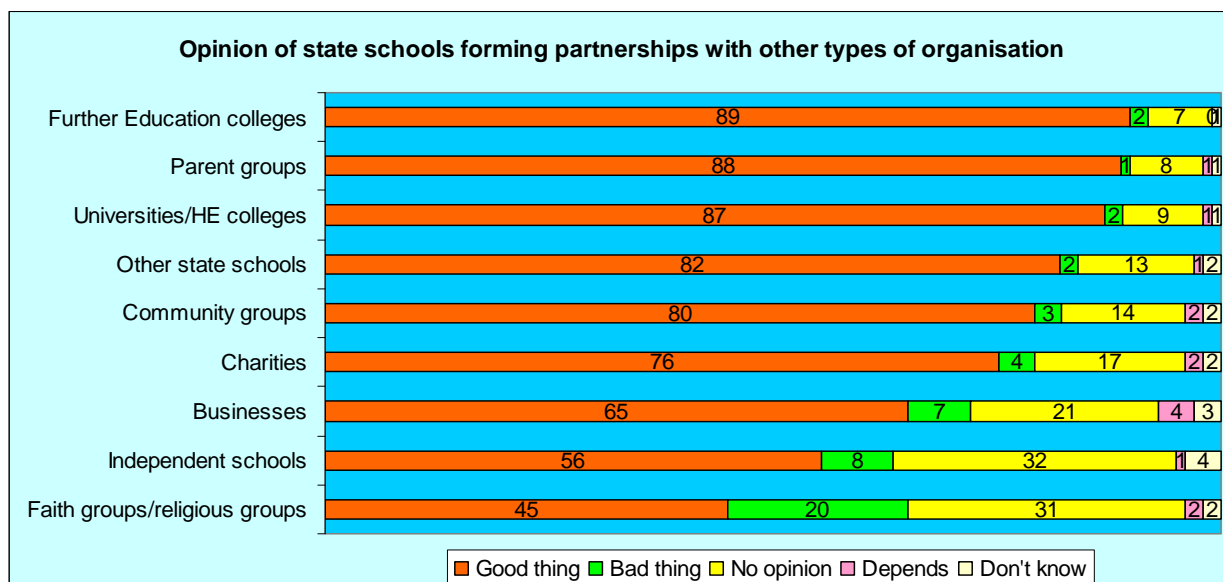


Base: Parents who support having a range of types of school for parents to choose from (1316)

3.4 Attitudes towards external partners for state-funded schools

During the survey it was explained to parents that the Department for Children, Schools and Families is now encouraging schools to have partnerships with different sorts of organisations such as businesses, charities, Further Education colleges and universities. Parents were asked how they felt in principle about state schools forming partnerships with each of nine types of organisation: businesses, charities, Further Education colleges, Universities and Higher Education colleges, independent or private schools, faith groups/religious groups, community groups, parent groups and other state schools.

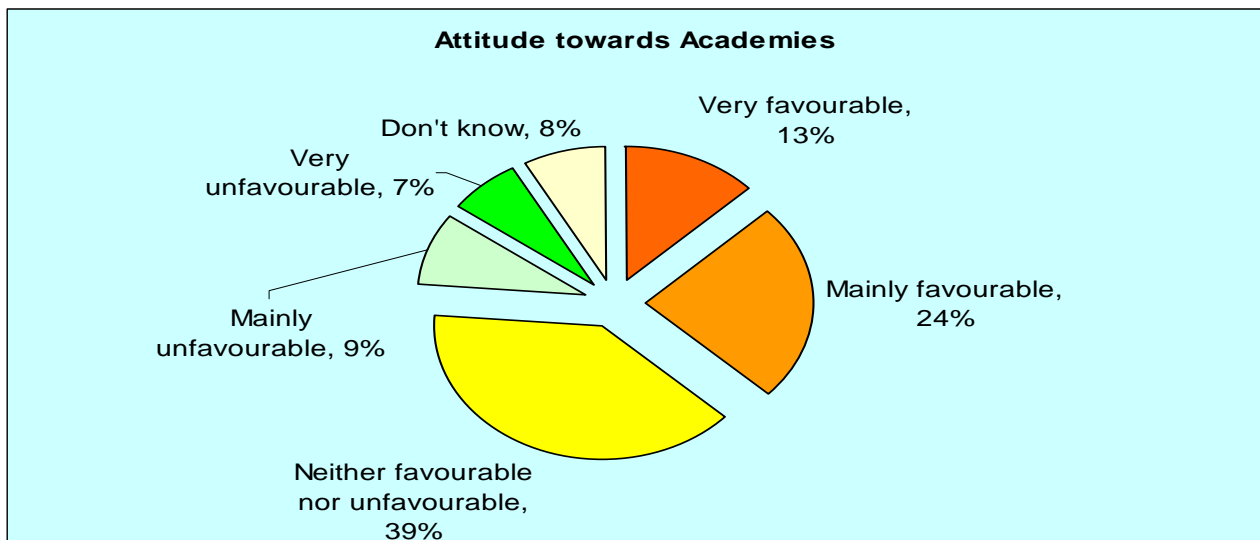
The vast majority of parents seemed to endorse the idea of state schools forming partnerships with Further Education colleges (89% said this was a good thing), parent groups (88%) and universities and Higher Education colleges (87%), with only one or two per cent of parents indicating that they thought such partnerships would be a bad thing. Approval of the idea of partnership with other state schools and community groups was also strong, with 82% and 80% of parents respectively saying these were a good thing and again small proportions indicating disapproval. Three quarters (76%) of parents said they thought partnership with charities was a good thing and two thirds (65%) said the same about partnership with businesses. Parents as a whole were less sure about partnerships with independent schools; 56% said they thought they were a good thing, 8% said they thought they were a bad thing, but a third of parents (32%) said they had no opinion either way. On partnership with faith groups/religious groups, the parents who thought this was a good thing were a minority at 45%, though they clearly outnumbered the 20% who thought it was a bad thing; again a third (31%) of parents had no opinion either way.



Base: All parents (1999)

3.5 Awareness of and attitudes towards Academies and Trust Schools

Parents were told that that new types of school such as Academies and Trust Schools had been introduced in some parts of England; just over half (55%) of parents said they had already been aware of this. These parents were then given a description of Academies (“publicly funded schools established by sponsors from business, faith or voluntary groups”) and asked how favourable or unfavourable they personally were towards Academies, using a scale ranging from very favourable to very unfavourable. About two fifths (37%) said they were favourable towards Academies (13% very favourable and 24% mainly favourable). Sixteen per cent of these parents were unfavourable towards Academies. However, a substantial minority of parents had no opinion either way, as two fifths (39%) were neither favourable nor unfavourable while 8% said they did not know.

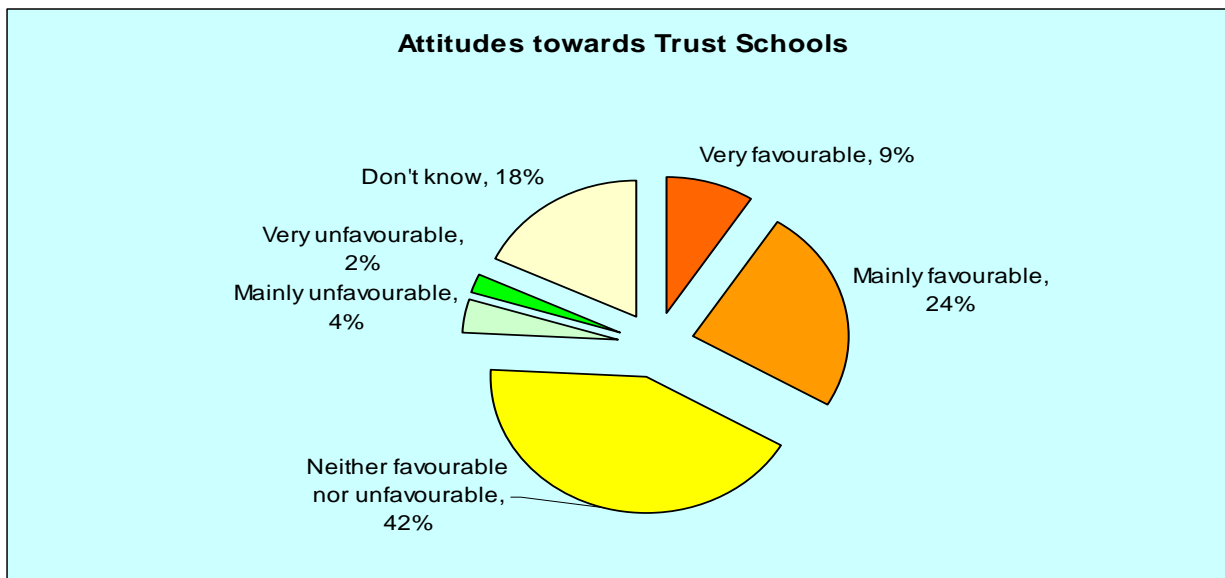


Base: Parents who are aware of new types of school (1104)

Parents who had expressed either a favourable or unfavourable view of Academies were asked to explain the reasons for their views. Some parents who were favourable towards Academies could not give specific reasons why they felt this way and just said they were generally in favour (29% of those who were favourable) but specific reasons mentioned included the belief that they would raise standards in failing schools (23%), that the quality of teaching was good (14%), and that they had good facilities or buildings (14%). About a tenth of those who were favourable thought that Academies would benefit disadvantaged communities (9%) and a similar proportion (8%) said they thought the involvement of external partners in running schools was a good thing.

When parents who had said they were unfavourable towards Academies were asked why this was the case, a substantial minority (24%) were similarly unable to give specific reasons, saying they were just generally not in favour, but where parents could be more specific, the objections they raised were that they thought Academies were selective or would cherry-pick pupils (18% of those who were unfavourable), that they should be run by the local authority not by external partners (14%) and that they received more funding than other schools (13%).

Parents who were aware of new types of school were then asked equivalent questions about Trust and Foundation Schools, which were described to parents as “supported by a charitable Trust which aims to raise standards through the expertise of external partners such as businesses, charities, universities FE colleges and other schools”. One third (33%) of the parents who were aware of new types of school said they were favourable towards Trust Schools - 9% were very favourable - and only 7% expressed an unfavourable attitude, but two fifths (42%) said they were neither favourable nor unfavourable and 18% said they did not know. The high level of neutral opinions probably reflects the fact that Trust Schools are a newer development than Academies.



Base: Parents who are aware of new types of school (1104)

Parents who had expressed either a favourable or unfavourable view of Trust Schools were asked to explain the reasons for their views. As with Academies, some parents who were favourable towards Trust Schools could not give specific reasons why they felt this way (32% of those who were favourable) but specific reasons mentioned included the belief that they would raise standards (25%), that they thought the involvement of external partners in running schools was a good thing (13%), that Trust Schools would benefit disadvantaged communities (10%) and that the quality of teaching was good (9%).

When parents who had said they were unfavourable towards Trust Schools were asked why this was the case, a substantial minority (30%) were similarly unable to give specific reasons, saying they were just generally not in favour, but where parents could be more specific, the main objection they raised was that they thought Trust Schools should be run by the local authority, not by external partners (27%).

3.6 Asking for a new school

All parents in the survey were asked whether they personally had any reasons for wanting to approach their local authority to ask for a new school. Ninety-three per cent of parents said they had not. About six per cent of parents in total said they did have reasons - two per cent of parents mentioned poor standards at existing schools and one per cent each mentioned the lack of a nearby school, lack of places at a nearby school, lack of provision for a particular faith or educational philosophy and lack of provision for their child's needs (including special needs). Other reasons were given by less than half of one per cent of parents.

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