



Rates of Eligibility for Free School Meals at the Top State Schools

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Summary

- This study looks at the proportion of pupils eligible for free school meals (FSM) at the top 200 secondary state schools¹ (6% of schools), and – to gauge the extent to which these schools reflect their local areas – the levels of FSM eligibility in the postcode sectors in which the schools are sited.
- The study finds that the overall rate of FSM eligibility at the top schools is 3.0%, compared to a national secondary school average of 14.3%. Only 6 schools – or 3% - within the top 200 have FSM rates which are equal to or above the national average; two thirds have 2% or fewer of pupils eligible for FSM. The intake of the top 200 is significantly more affluent than the school population as a whole.
- The findings also suggest that the top schools do not reflect the social make up of their immediate areas: the average rate of FSM eligibility in the postcode sectors of the top 200 schools is 12.3% - almost 10 percentage points and more than four times higher than the schools' average rate. In only 11 of the top 200 schools does the FSM eligibility rate reflect that of their local area.
- Eighty-percent of the top schools are grammar schools, and although these were found to be more socially exclusive - with an overall proportion of pupils eligible for FSM of 2.1%, compared to 6.0% at the comprehensives - much of the difference can be explained by the fact that grammar schools are sited in more affluent areas, with average FSM rates of 11.7%, compared to 15.7% for comprehensives. The overall gap between school and area rates is similar for both school types – at just under 10 percentage points – indicating that the intakes of both are similarly unrepresentative of their local areas.
- The reasons for the under-representation of children from poorer backgrounds at top state schools are undoubtedly complex. It is clear, though, that the admissions system is not operating equitably and is in need of review, and that more needs to be done to raise standards earlier down the educational chain. The unevenness of the state school system serves to exacerbate existing inequalities, and we see its consequences in the under-representation of those from lower social classes and poorer areas in higher education, particularly at the leading universities.

¹ Defined on the basis of percentage of pupils gaining 5 or more GCSEs at A*-C grades in 2003. Only schools with complete FSM data were included on the list.

Methodology

In order to assess the extent to which the socio-economic profile of pupils at the top state schools reflects local and national patterns, we looked at the ratio of pupils eligible to receive free school meals (FSM) in each of the top 200 maintained schools alongside eligibility rates for FSM in the schools' local areas. The proportion of pupils eligible for FSM is the standard measure of the level of deprivation within a school population.²

The data were supplied by the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) from the National Pupil Database³, but the views expressed in this report are those of the Sutton Trust. The top 200 schools are defined on the basis of the percentage of students gaining five or more GCSEs at A*-C grade and include state comprehensives, grammar schools and City Technology Colleges (CTCs) for which complete data are available. The local area of each school is defined as being the postcode sector in which the school is sited⁴. Because the results are generated using individual pupils' postcode data, for reasons of confidentiality it is not possible to name individual schools.

In reviewing the results it is important to recognise that a school's postcode sector is not necessarily the same as its catchment area – which may be larger – and a school may not be situated in the middle of its postcode sector. It is also the case that the pupil intake in some schools, particularly grammar schools, is not dependent on the location of a child's house, but academic performance in an entrance test or some other entry criterion.

Other research has shown that children from higher social grades tend to perform better at school, and so we would not expect there to be a completely even distribution of pupils eligible for FSM at the top schools. However, we believe it is reasonable to expect top-performing comprehensives to reflect to a large degree the population that surrounds them, not least because families are unlikely to want to incur the cost and inconvenience of travel if their local school is one of the best-performing in the country. And we also think that grammar schools should be doing all they can to attract bright students from poorer backgrounds, particularly those in their local vicinity.

² Free school meals are available to children whose parents receive Income Support, Income based Job Seekers Allowance, Child Tax Credit, and have a taxable income of not more than £13,910 per annum.

³ The data supplied relates to 2003, the last year for which complete data is available.

⁴ A postcode sector is defined as being the first half of a postcode, plus the initial digit of the second half, e.g. SW15 2xx. These are areas which are similar in size to an electoral ward and, in this analysis, typically contained 6,600 inhabitants in 2,760 households.

Overall FSM rates at the Top 200 schools

The analysis shows clearly that the intake of the country's top schools reflects neither national levels of deprivation as measured by FSM eligibility, nor the rates of local deprivation in the areas in which the schools are sited.

Table 1: Overall FSM rates at the top 200 secondary schools

Average FSM rate (schools)	3.0%
Average FSM rate (schools' postcode sectors)	12.3%
Average percentage point gap (Difference between school FSM and area FSM rates)	9.3%
Average national FSM eligibility (2004)	14.3%

The overall proportion of pupils eligible for FSM at the top 200 schools is 3.0%, compared with a national secondary school average of 14.3%⁵. The postcode sectors in which the top 200 schools are situated are also found to be only marginally more affluent than average, with 12.3% of pupils eligible for FSM. Even so, there is a gap of almost 10 percentage points between overall FSM rates at the top schools and the rates of the areas in which the schools are found, and the overall FSM area rate is over four times greater than the school FSM rate.

In order to give a clearer picture of the spread of FSM eligibility rates amongst the top schools, we have broken down these overall figures into bands.

Table 2: Distribution of top 200 schools by FSM eligibility rate

FSM eligibility rate	Number of top 200 schools
0-2%	125 (62.5%)
3-5%	53 (26.5%)
6-8%	13 (6.5%)
9-11%	2 (1.0%)
12-14%	1 (0.5%)
15% plus	6 (3.0%)

⁵ *Statistics of Education, DfES, 2004*

As the above table shows, almost two thirds of the leading schools have FSM rates at or lower than 2%. Similarly, only 6 schools – or 3% – within the top 200 have FSM rates which are equal to or greater than the national average of 14.3%. So the relative affluence of those attending leading state schools is a consistent pattern, and is not confined to a number of extreme cases.

The data have also been analysed according to the percentage point gap between a school's FSM rate and that of its postcode sector, to gauge the extent to which individual schools reflect – or fail to reflect – the characteristics of their local areas. Again, this shows a clear pattern of the under-representation of children from poorer families.

Table 3: Distribution of top 200: gap between FSM area and school eligibility rates

Percentage point gap between area and school FSM rates	Number of top 200 schools	
30 plus	7	(3.5%)
25-29.9	5	(2.5%)
20-24.9	6	(3.0%)
15-19.9	15	(7.5%)
10-14.9	33	(16.5%)
5-9.9	54	(27.0%)
0.1-4.9	69	(34.5%)
Less than 0	11	(5.5%)

Only 11 schools in the top 200 have FSM rates which match, or are greater than, the FSM rates of the postcode sectors in which they are found. One third of the top schools appear to be significantly non-representative of their areas, with gaps above 10 percentage points, including seven schools with differences of over 30 points. Only one school has a 'positive gap' of three percentage points or more, indicating that it is taking a significantly higher percentage of pupils from poor backgrounds than live in its local vicinity.

Grammars and Comprehensives

The data also allows us to breakdown the overall figures for the top 200 by school type, to ascertain the extent to which academic selection affects the profile of the intake.⁶

Table 4: FSM rates at the top 200, by school type

COMPREHENSIVES (n = 39)	Average FSM rate (schools)	6.0%
	Average FSM rate (schools' postcode sectors)	15.7%
	Average gap between school and area rates	9.7%
	Average % of pupils gaining 5+ A*-C GCSE	93.0%
GRAMMARS (n = 161)	Average FSM rate (schools)	2.1%
	Average FSM rate (schools' postcode sectors)	11.7%
	Average gap between school and area rates	9.6%
	Average % of pupils gaining 5+ A*-C GCSE	97.6%

Unsurprisingly – considering that, by definition, they select on ability – grammar schools make up 80% of the top 200. Grammars also, on average, perform higher, with 97.6% of pupils gaining at least 5 GCSE passes at grades A*-C, compared to 93.0% at the top comprehensives. Indeed, all but three of the 164 existing state grammar schools feature in the top 200.

Although fewer pupils at the grammar schools are found to be eligible for FSM than at the top comprehensives (2.1% compared to 6.0%), much of this difference can be explained by the fact the grammar schools are sited in more affluent areas, with FSM rates averaging 11.7%, compared to 15.7% for the comprehensives. Overall, then, the intake of grammars within the top 200 can be said to reflect – or fail to reflect – the local neighbourhoods in which they are based to the same degree as the comprehensives, with differences between average area and school rates of just under 10 percentage points for both. This is born out by an analysis of the distribution of schools of either type on the basis of the percentage point gap.

⁶ The Comprehensive category includes 7 other secondary schools, mainly City Technology Colleges (CTCs) which have all-ability intakes. The data indicate that, taken on their own, these 'others' within the top 200 have relatively high FSM rates: their average FSM rate is 14.5% - about the national average – and the rates within their postcode sectors is 26.7%.

Table 5: Distribution of top 200 schools by FSM rate gap and school type

Percentage point gap between area and school FSM rates	Comprehensives	Grammars
30 plus	4 (10.3%)	3 (1.9%)
25-29.9	0 (0%)	5 (3.1%)
20-24.9	0 (0%)	6 (3.7%)
15-19.9	2 (5.1%)	13 (8.1%)
10-14.9	5 (12.8%)	28 (17.4%)
5-9.9	12 (30.8%)	42 (26.1%)
0.1-4.9	10 (25.6%)	59 (36.7%)
Less than 0	6 (15.4%)	5 (3.1%)

There is little clear difference between the spread of the two school types, with 85% of comprehensives and 83% of grammars with gaps of 15 percentage points or less between the FSM rates of their intake and their postcode sector. Of note, though, is the greater proportion of comprehensives (10%) with gaps of over 30 percentage points: these four schools have FSM rates of 1, 3, 5 and 8%, yet are sited in areas with FSM eligibility levels of 30, 41, 42 and 36% respectively.

Conclusions and Comment

The intake of the top 200 schools is significantly more affluent than both the school population as a whole and the local areas in which they are sited. Or, to look at it another way, poorer children are much less likely to benefit from a top quality state education than their better-off peers, even if a leading maintained school is on their doorstep. The consequences of this are far-reaching, but are seen particularly in the country's poor staying-on rates post-16 and in the inequalities of access to Higher Education.

Grammar Schools

It is perhaps no surprise that the intake of the grammar schools in the top 200 is markedly less deprived than both national and area averages. Other educational research has established a link between pupil attainment and socio-economic status, and so, for a range of reasons, children from better-off homes are more likely to pass a selection test at 11 and thus gain a place at a grammar school. But it may also be the case that middle class children are more likely to sit an entrance exam in the first place, for example because their parents have higher aspirations or are more familiar with the admissions system.

Neither explanation is a reason for complacency. We need to ensure that bright children of all backgrounds apply to selective schools, and that all families are aware of – and feel comfortable with – the admissions process. Likewise, it is in all our interests to break the link between attainment and socio-economic class,, by raising standards earlier on in the educational chain, and directing support to where it is most needed. This is exactly the purpose of the Sutton Trust's curriculum enrichment project at Pate's Grammar School in Cheltenham.

Comprehensive Schools

In the case of comprehensive schools, the issues are clearly different: these take pupils of all abilities, and so any link that may exist between attainment and deprivation should not have a bearing on their intake. However, our analysis still finds that the proportion of students eligible for free school meals at the top comprehensives is considerably lower than the average for their area, and the national average.

It seems likely that two factors in particular explain why this is the case. Firstly, schools with lower levels of poverty amongst their student body are more likely to perform highly, which, in turn, attracts families and pushes up property prices in the schools' catchment area.⁷ Clearly, it is only richer families that can afford to pay that property premium, which pushes out less affluent families and further reinforces the top schools' social exclusivity. This trend is reflected in the fact that 26 of the 39 comprehensives in the top 200 are sited in neighbourhoods with deprivation rates beneath the national average. In other words, to a certain extent, their intakes reflect the relative prosperity of their local areas.

But this does not tell the whole story: 85% of the top comprehensives are sited in postcode sectors with higher FSM rates than those of the school, and a handful are in areas of extreme deprivation. So some other factor, aside from location, is acting to discriminate against poorer pupils from local homes to the benefit of those with better off parents. Again, self-selection could be a reason, but it also seems likely that other forms of selection are employed by the schools – for example interviewing prospective parents and students, selecting on the grounds of faith – which, intentionally or not, have the effect of skewing the schools' social profile.

This analysis is a pointed reminder of the unevenness of the state system, which serves to reinforce existing divides. If the Government is serious about school choice it needs to offer the option of excellence to all parents, not just those with the financial and cultural resources to access it. Reviewing the way the admissions process works is central to achieving this, as are initiatives aimed at raising the attainment and aspirations of those from poorer backgrounds. The Sutton Trust also believes that improving school transport can be a key means of giving all children access to the school most suited to their needs and abilities, regardless of where they live or their family's wealth.⁸

The underlying reasons for the findings of this study are undoubtedly complex and fall at the feet of us all, not just the schools included in this analysis. It is crucial that we look to identify and address them as a matter of urgency.

⁷ Research by Nationwide showed that a typical home near a school where test results for 11 year olds are 5% above average costs £2,000 more than elsewhere (see news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/education/3662116.stm, 16 September 2004)

⁸ See 'No More School Run – Proposals for a National Network Yellow Bus Scheme in the UK', at www.suttontrust.com

Appendix 1: Summary of main findings

Rates of eligibility for Free School Meals (FSM) at top 200 state schools

COMPREHENSIVE ⁹ (n = 39)	Average FSM rate (schools)	6.0%
	Average FSM rate (schools' postcode sector)	15.7%
	Average gap between school and area rates ¹⁰	9.7%
	Average % A*-C GCSE	93.0%
GRAMMAR (n = 161)	Average FSM rate (schools)	2.1%
	Average FSM rate (schools' postcode sector)	11.7%
	Average gap between school and area rates	9.5%
	Average % A*-C GCSE	97.6%
Total average FSM rate (schools)		3.0%
Total average FSM rate (schools' postcode sector)		12.3%
Total average percentage point gap		9.3%
Average national FSM eligibility (2004)		14.3%

⁹ The Comprehensive category includes 7 other secondary schools, mainly City Technology Colleges with non-selective intakes.

¹⁰ The average gap is the percentage point difference between the school and area FSM rates