

ADMISSIONS TO SECONDARY SCHOOL

Towards a national policy?

Report prepared for The Research and Information on State Education Trust

A Discussion Paper
by:

Anne West, Hazel Pennell & Philip Noden

Centre for Educational Research
London School of Economics and Political Science

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Preface

The report that follows came about because the Trustees of RISE wanted to publish a discussion paper to examine the issues concerning fair policies for secondary school admissions. The Trustees invited individuals with expertise in this area to be part of a working party which met twice, initially to survey the topic, and subsequently to consider a working draft paper prepared by Dr Anne West.

The RISE Trustees are very grateful to Dr West and her colleagues for putting together the ideas of many individuals into this excellent paper. The Trustees hope that the background material and definite proposals will provide an opportunity for others to examine the present array of arrangements and consider how they might be improved for the benefit of all the children in state secondary schools.

Executive Summary

This discussion paper examines issues related to the introduction of a national framework for secondary school admissions. The process of admissions to secondary schools is described and relevant research studies discussed. Various proposals for changing schools' admissions are explored before presenting the necessary characteristics of a 'fair admissions policy'.

A number of features are required for such a policy, with the process needing:

- to be transparent to all who use it;
- to be predictable so that parents are able to assess the probability of their application being successful;
- to be based on clear rights for parents and children;
- to be able to be monitored;
- to take account of how it would affect parents and pupils in other local schools;
- to enable pupils to attend the nearest school if desired;
- to enable pupils to have access to the same school as their sibling if desired.

To ensure that admissions policies fulfil these needs a number of proposals to improve the current system are made:

- better information should be provided to aid parents making preferences for schools; this should include establishing independent education advice centres;
- regulatory mechanisms should ensure that admissions are being carried out in accordance with published admissions criteria;
- pre-admissions interviews should not be held;
- a central clearing house should be established in large conurbations to administer or co-ordinate the admissions process;
- the current fragmentation of schools' admissions should be reduced by having the same general admissions process and timetable across the country;
- selective admissions should be solely on the basis of written tests and not interviews;
- appeals should be carried out by an independent body with clear, transparent procedures and fixed criteria for appeal.

Three models are proposed that could form the basis of a national admissions policy. These are based on models already functioning well in England - a catchment area model, a preference model and a modified preference model aimed at obtaining a balanced intake.

The consideration of these proposals will help to further the debate about how best to ensure that secondary school admissions are transparent, predictable and fair.

Introduction

The 1988 Education Reform Act has had a significant impact on the education service in England. School admissions have been affected by the legislation relating to open enrolment, the right of parents to express a preference for a school of their choice and the publication of examination performance tables. The advent of grant-maintained schools, which are responsible for their own admissions, has also been a key factor. Whilst issues related to schools' admissions are not new, there has been an increasing concern about the way in which admissions policies function and the extent to which they can be considered to be fair.

This discussion paper examines issues related to the introduction of a national framework for secondary school admissions. The first section describes the secondary school admissions procedures currently in operation in England. The second section presents the main conclusions of research studies that have examined these policies. Following this, the third section explores various proposals for changing schools' admissions that have been put forward. The fourth section examines the necessary prerequisites of a 'fair admissions policy'. The final section presents a series of policy recommendations that could form the basis of a more transparent, equitable national secondary school admissions policy, whilst still allowing for a degree of local or regional variation.

1: Current Secondary School Admissions Policies

Admissions to secondary schools in England are the responsibility of different bodies or 'admissions authorities'. In the case of county and voluntary-controlled schools the local education authority (LEA) is the admissions authority whilst in the case of voluntary-aided or grant-maintained schools the governing body is responsible for admissions to the school. City technology colleges also administer their own admissions. The admissions authorities are required by law to admit children, on demand, up to the physical capacity of the school (except in the case of selective or religious schools)¹. If a school is oversubscribed - that is, there are more applicants than there are places - the school's published admissions criteria are used to determine which children should be offered places. Different mechanisms exist for secondary school admissions in England depending on the school type.

Comprehensive schools

Comprehensive schools have been the most common type of secondary school in England since the mid-1970s. In January 1995 there were 2,857 comprehensive schools out of a total of 3,204 secondary schools (89%). Admissions criteria in LEA county comprehensive schools and voluntary-controlled comprehensive schools vary although three main factors are generally used to allocate places - siblings already attending the school, medical or personal circumstances and distance between home and school (or catchment area), although the emphasis placed on each factor varies amongst LEAs.

According to recent research, the number of authorities using catchment areas has declined in the last ten years, from over 60 per cent in 1985 to 44 per cent in 1995 (Forrest, 1995). The change can be attributed to the open enrolment provisions of the 1988 Education Reform Act and the effect of a legal judgement (popularly known as the 'Greenwich judgement') which effectively prevents the use of catchment areas that coincide with an LEA's boundaries. Of those LEAs retaining catchment areas the policy operates in different ways. In one rural LEA, for example, the child is offered a place at the 'designated' school according to the catchment area and parents must notify the LEA if they wish their child to go to a different school (Derbyshire County Council, 1995). In another rural LEA parents are automatically sent a prospectus for their 'designated' school but then elect their preferred school which may or may not be the 'designated' school (West Sussex County Council, 1995). Instead of catchment areas, the majority of LEAs now operate an 'open preference system' in which parents are first asked which school(s) they would like their child to attend. The specified criteria (siblings, medical or personal circumstances and distance) come into play in the event of a school being oversubscribed.

Grant-maintained schools are responsible for their own admissions and the criteria each school uses are agreed with the Secretary of State for Education and Employment at the time self-governing status is granted and may subsequently be amended with his/her agreement. The stated criteria for grant-maintained comprehensive schools are generally similar to those used by LEA schools.

The situation in London is different. The 1988 Education Reform Act resulted in the abolition of the Inner London Education Authority (ILEA). The ILEA was unique in that it used a system of 'banding' to

¹ In addition the Education Act 1997 (if the commencement order is issued) will allow admissions authorities to refuse a place if the parent is unwilling to sign a 'partnership agreement' if this is a criterion for admission.

try and ensure that its secondary schools had an intake that was balanced in terms of ability. The banding system took priority over all other criteria (notably siblings, distance, medical/social need). A reading test was used as a means of determining an academically balanced intake to secondary schools and on the basis of the results the highest attaining 25 per cent were allocated to the top band, the middle 50 per cent to the second band and the lowest 25 per cent to the third band. Each secondary school was given a quota of places for each band and recruited pupils only up to that limit. Since the transfer of the education service to the inner London LEAs in April 1990 a number of changes in secondary schools' admissions policies have taken place. The most significant of these has been that the system of banding used by the ILEA has been discontinued by the majority of LEAs, although it is still used by four of them (see Pennell & West, 1995; West & Pennell, 1996).

Recent changes to comprehensive school admissions

More generally, the 1988 Education Reform Act and accompanying legislation have resulted in a number of significant changes to schools' admissions. With the advent of grant-maintained schools, more individual schools now have responsibility for admissions to their school. In addition, a number of schools have changed their admissions policies so that they have a guaranteed intake of academically-able children. Some have become 'bi-lateral' schools, selecting part of their intake by means of tests administered by the school, and some have re-introduced a form of banding (see West & Pennell, 1996). There is evidence to suggest that these changes were introduced because the admissions criteria - siblings, medical/social need and proximity - were not guaranteeing what was perceived to be an intake with a 'fair proportion' of academically able pupils. One reason for seeking such an intake is undoubtedly the publication by the Department for Education and Employment (DfEE) of annual performance tables of public examination results, which are used by some parents to assist with the choice-making process (David, West & Ribbens, 1994; Edge, West & David, 1996) and which serve to encourage schools to compete with one another for pupils able to enhance their reputation. Whilst some schools have sought to change their admissions policies to improve their 'market position', others have done so reluctantly in response to the action of others.

As well as new types of school the government has encouraged existing schools to specialise in particular curriculum areas such as music, art, drama and sport (DfE, 1992). A model for this development is provided by a special music course, established many years ago before the Education Reform Act, which 'exists to provide an intensive musical education for students who want music to be a specially important part of their lives' (City of Westminster, 1994). The setting aside of a small number of places² for pupils with a particular aptitude has been taken up by a number of schools around the country with specialist places being offered in a variety of subjects such as modern foreign languages, music, arts, sport and drama. This policy of specialist schools has also been promoted by one inner London LEA (see Wandsworth Borough Council, 1992). Whilst there is some information about the number of grant-maintained schools that select a proportion of their pupils on the basis of aptitude there is no such information for schools maintained by LEAs.

Grammar schools

Just over 40 per cent of the 119 LEA areas in England still retain at least one academically selective school albeit generally alongside non-selective schools. Only around 160 grammar schools exist out of a total of 3,204 secondary schools (5%). Attendance at a grammar school is based on performance in an examination (usually known as the '11-plus') taken prior to transfer to secondary school. In practice, a range of different tests are used and there may be formal as well as informal elements of the assessment. In one rural LEA, for example, the procedure for entrance to secondary education 'relies heavily on the professional judgement of [primary] school headteachers, carefully balanced with formal assessments,

2 Ten per cent until 1996 (DfEE Circular 6/96) when it was increased to 15 per cent. This 15 per cent can be selected on the basis of a specialism in a particular area of the curriculum or the basis of general ability.

including reading comprehension and mathematics tests, and discussion with parents about their child's progress' (Kent County Council, 1995). Across this LEA, approximately 25 per cent of year 6 pupils will subsequently transfer to a grammar school. The advent of grant-maintained schools has complicated the picture. For example, in one outer London LEA (Sutton), which had an academically selective system, all the grammar schools have now obtained grant-maintained status leaving the LEA responsible for only the non-selective schools.

Voluntary schools

Voluntary schools (either 'aided' or 'controlled') can be either academically selective or comprehensive. The vast majority of voluntary-aided schools have some religious affiliation (usually to the Church of England or the Roman Catholic church) and the church or other body provides a small proportion of their funding. Voluntary-aided schools are generally responsible for their own admissions policies and there is more variation in the methods used than in schools maintained wholly by the LEA. The majority of these use religious criteria in the selection process. Interviews with pupils and/or their parents are also an important part of the process for most schools where their main aim is to confirm the religious affiliation of the applicant. Voluntary-controlled schools, on the other hand, have the same admissions procedures as county schools.

City technology colleges

City technology colleges are required to admit pupils 'spanning the full range of ability' (Whitty, Edwards & Gewirtz, 1993) and to admit pupils representative of the ethnic and social composition of their catchment area. However, they are also expected to serve a substantial catchment area and to recruit pupils that are 'demonstrably willing and able to benefit from the special character of the education' they offer (Whitty et al., 1993); interviews are used to establish whether or not the child fulfils these criteria. The admissions policies of city technology colleges are unique in terms in that they are the only type of school that is required to have a pupil-intake that is academically balanced and representative of the area from which they recruit.

2: Research Evidence

A variety of different research studies and papers have addressed either explicitly or implicitly the problems associated with 'parental choice' and admissions to secondary schools. In this section, papers by Adler (1993) and by Walford (1993) are outlined. A range of different studies are also discussed - these relate to the extent to which parental preferences are met, the administrative efficiency of current schools' admissions procedures, appeals, covert selection, the problems associated with admissions to city technology colleges and the effect on parents when they are not successful in gaining a place for their child at their preferred school.

The Scottish experience

Adler (1993) reports on the impact of parental choice in Scotland, where a form of 'open enrolment' has existed for over a decade. Overall, he reports that 11.5 per cent of pupils in their first year of secondary school were the subject of 'placing requests' (that is, their parents expressed a preference for a school other than their designated school). Earlier research carried out by Adler et al. (1989) found higher rates of placing requests in urban authorities. In several cities the rate reached 20 to 25 per cent and in some it was over 50 per cent. These requests came from across the social spectrum. Avoidance of the local (catchment area) school was important for the majority of parents who made a placing request. On the whole the schools that gained most pupils were former academically selective schools in middle-class areas, while schools that lost most pupils were those that served local authority housing schemes in deprived areas. There was also considerable evidence of 'bandwagon effects' and little evidence of the market functioning as a self-correcting mechanism; success in attracting pupils often led to further success, while schools that lost pupils found it difficult to stop the outflow continuing.

Who is selecting: schools or parents?

Walford (1993) provides a historical background to the current debate about selection. He notes that academic selection did not disappear when the comprehensive system replaced the former tripartite system of selective (grammar and technical) schools and secondary modern schools. In his view selection changed to become both less overt and so potentially more unfair. This was because of two main reasons - first, some LEAs called the bulk of their schools comprehensive but retained a few small highly selective grammar schools, and second, the voluntary-aided and voluntary-controlled schools (generally affiliated to the church) offered a different type of school even when all schools were comprehensive. Walford comments that many parents saw these as closer to grammar than county (LEA-maintained) comprehensive schools. He charts the changes to comprehensive schooling towards the establishment of new types of school and notes that at oversubscribed schools the fact of selection has now become even more established, but the criteria on which pupils are selected have become even more varied and confused. The case of city technology colleges is cited which are oversubscribed and so have to select amongst those who apply. They are not allowed to select those that are the most academically able but research (Walford & Miller, 1991) indicates that they are selecting those whose parents have most interest in education.

Meeting parental preferences

Morris (1993) found that there was little clear evidence that since 1989 the probability of parents obtaining a place at their first choice school has either increased or decreased, particularly in the case of schools in rural local education authorities. However, in London and other metropolitan areas, there was evidence of a declining trend between 1989 and 1992 in the number of successful first preferences at transfer to secondary school. In another study, Forrest (1995) examined the new admissions systems that have come into force since the 1988 Education Reform Act and he suggests that LEAs that do not use catchment areas are experiencing greater parental dissatisfaction than those that have retained them.

The Audit Commission³ (1996) recently completed a major study on the supply and allocation of school places. As part of this, a survey of 1,029 parents whose children had recently transferred to secondary school was undertaken. The parents lived in five areas - in inner London, in a large city, in a large but sparsely populated rural area, in a medium-sized industrial town and in a small city in a semi-rural part of England. The survey found that around 10 per cent of parental preferences could not be met by the bodies with responsibility for admissions. In addition, 9 per cent of parents did not express their genuine first preference (this was for a number of reasons, the most common of which was the belief that their application would not be successful) so that overall around a fifth of the sample did not get a place for their child at their genuine first preference school. Moreover, there were very marked geographical variations in terms of the success in meeting preferences. The percentage of parents not getting their stated first preference ranged from 3 per cent in a large city, to 32 per cent in inner London.

There is increasing evidence that where the education market is most developed, particularly in parts of London, for instance, parents are finding it difficult to find a place for their child at their local school. Parents from outside the area appear increasingly to be taking up places in these schools. In the London Borough of Bromley, for example, there is a net 'import' of pupils; the proportion of pupils drawn from outside the borough has risen during the 1990s such that in 1996 23 per cent of the year 7 entrants to secondary schools came from outside Bromley (Funding Agency for Schools, 1997).

In 1996, one comprehensive grant-maintained school in Bromley published a statutory notice to change its admissions criteria in order to select 25 per cent of its intake by ability. In response all other comprehensive schools in the borough have changed their admissions criteria to select up to 15 per cent of their intake by academic ability or technological ability from September 1997 (Funding Agency for Schools, 1997). An education officer in Bromley, commenting on steps being taken by the grant-maintained schools to introduce partial selection by ability, was quoted as follows:

'You are going to have people criss-crossing all over the place. It is raising the chances for parents of able pupils at the expense of less able children. It really is an absolute shambles'. ('The Guardian', 2 September 1996)

This relates to the issue of equity. In terms of parents' success in securing a place for their child at their preferred school, Fitz et al. (1993), in case studies of two local education authorities, found that households where the father was not in paid employment were the least likely to have gained access to a preferred school (either grant-maintained or local education authority). Those who were most successful were in professional occupations. These findings have not, however, been replicated in a recent study carried out in London (Noden et al., 1997) which found that parents in different social groups were opting for different types of schools when making their preferences. Parents from higher socio-economic groups were more likely than others to opt for private schools and for academically selective (grammar) schools. In general, the schools that parents from higher socio-economic groups selected as their 'first choice' had higher attainment levels (in terms of five or more GCSEs at grades A to C) than those selected by those from

3 The Audit Commission is responsible for appointing and regulating the external auditors of local authorities in England and Wales.

lower socio-economic groups; the schools that their children went on to attend also had higher attainment levels.⁴

This has important implications, given the moves towards selection promoted by the last Conservative government and also relates to another issue, namely how the introduction of market principles affects intakes to schools, in a context where there is an increasing fragmentation of the school admissions process, with little, if any, strategic planning across a given area.

Covert selection and perceived exclusion

Another major problem area in relation to equity is the coexistence of different admissions policies and practices. In the case of schools controlled by the local education authority, the authority is responsible for admissions. However, in the case of voluntary-aided or grant-maintained schools, the governors of the school are responsible. In some cases, grant-maintained schools require parents to complete detailed application forms that have little or no bearing on the school's published admissions criteria (which generally relate to having siblings at the school, distance between home and school, and medical or social need). Such schools seek information about parental occupation, the child's hobbies and achievements both in and out of school and so on. If schools are oversubscribed, these forms may be used to make decisions about who should be accepted or rejected. This may mean that children from less advantaged backgrounds are less likely to be accepted. This is because children from more privileged backgrounds are more likely to be high achievers in public examinations, aiding the school's position in the published performance tables and in turn enhancing its reputation.

Even if schools do not use application forms to covertly select 'desirable' pupils, Gewirtz et al. (1995) note that such a form gives the appearance of selectivity, and might result in some parents not applying to a school as it gives the impression that if they did apply their application would be rejected. They also explore the various mechanisms that schools have at their disposal for informally selecting pupils. 'Our evidence suggests that the market is increasing the potential for [informal selection] to occur.' (p. 161). They cite a senior teacher at a secondary school that became grant-maintained during the course of the project and which was located in a local authority that had deregulated the admissions process:

'People who were keen to get their children in here, put us as first choice, they understood they had to do that, and ... if they couldn't get a place, filled in the forms for appeal... It does operate subtly against people who ... maybe English isn't their first language'. (p. 161-2)

Recent research involving 222 grant-maintained schools (Cauldwell and Reid, 1996) explored the reflections of headteachers of grant-maintained schools on opting out of local education authority control. The survey examined, amongst other issues, admissions policies. They found that 25 per cent of schools 'claimed to have changed this policy (33% claimed no change and a surprising 41% declined to comment)' (p. 250). This failure to respond appears to indicate a lack of openness about the admissions process in some grant-maintained schools and possibly that admissions are not being carried out according to the published criteria. An earlier survey of the 100 first grant-maintained schools by Bush et al. (1993) found that around a third of oversubscribed grant-maintained comprehensive schools were discriminating between applicants on the basis of parent and/or pupil interview.

The interviews that are carried out by some schools that manage their own admissions procedures involve either the pupils or their parents or both. They may be simply to establish that the child fulfils the admissions criteria in terms, for example, of their religious affiliation. However, once obtained the

4 It is interesting to compare these findings with those of Willms and Echols (1992) who found that parents in Scotland (where there is a separate education system and legal framework) who exercised choice were more highly educated and had more prestigious occupations than those who sent their child to the designated school. Choosers tended to select schools with higher attainment. Their results suggested that the choice process is increasing between-school segregation.

information may be used to select particular types of children - for example, the more able or those from higher socio-economic groups (West and Pennell, 1996; West and Pennell, 1997; West et al., 1997)⁵.

In the absence of a regulatory body with responsibility for ensuring that admissions to schools are carried out as stipulated in the published admissions criteria, the evidence above suggests that admissions are not always carried out fairly and transparently.

Research on city technology colleges

A rather different situation exists in relation to city technology colleges. As was noted earlier each of these is required to serve a substantial catchment area; the intake should be representative of the community they serve; and the college has to aim to admit pupils spanning the full ability range in the catchment area. This requirement for what might be called 'a balanced intake' is unique amongst the new types of school created by the previous Conservative government. The colleges must also be made up of pupils who are 'ready to take advantage of (and likely to benefit from) the type of education offered in CTCs [city technology colleges]' (Murphy et al., 1990, p. 3) and of pupils whose parents are 'committed to full-time education or training up to the age of 18, and the CTC curriculum and ethos' (Murphy et al., 1990, p. 3).

The research carried out by Murphy et al. (1990) details the problems that colleges have had in meeting the various admissions criteria - a lack of data about the range of ability in the city technology college catchment areas; a lack of an operational definition of what 'representative of the community' means; problems of defining who is likely to benefit from the education on offer; and of establishing parental commitment. On the basis of case studies at four colleges they reached the conclusion that there was no evidence that the first year intakes to these four Colleges represented the 'full ability range in the catchment area that they served - no college had access to or collected any data about the ability range of any pupils other than those actually applying for places at the city technology college' (p. 16).

Although the colleges attempted to match certain other characteristics of their catchment area, such as gender balance, ethnicity and social class background Murphy et al. found 'little convincing evidence that they have been able to do this in anything other than a very approximate way' (Murphy et al., 1990, p. 16). The role of interviews in the selection process for city technology colleges was felt by the researchers to be very limited and there was concern about the lack of appropriate training for interviewers. More recent research by Barber and McCallum (1997) also notes that 'most CTCs interview parents but for a variety of reasons, not all of which were explicit in responses'.

Appeals

There has been an increase in the number of parents appealing when they do not get a place at the school of their choice and the evidence suggests that the proportion of appeals which are successful is falling (Morris, 1993). The Audit Commission (1996) also found that the number of formal appeals against admissions decisions is rising sharply. Between 1991/92 and 1994/95, the number of appeals increased by 58 per cent in primary schools and 35 per cent in secondary schools. These national trends mask the problems faced by some, mainly urban, authorities. 'Appeals may be concentrated in 'hot spots', where either a shortage of places or a desire by parents to avoid the area's poor schools leads to dramatically higher rates than the [local education authority]-wide 'average' (Audit Commission, 1996, p. 21).

5 It is interesting to note that the percentage of pupils known to be eligible for free school meals (an indicator of poverty) in England is highest in county schools (22.6 per cent); in voluntary-aided schools the figure is 20.0 per cent and in grant-maintained schools 13.5 per cent (1995-1996 figures) (answer to parliamentary question by David Blunkett, 10 February 1997).

Administrative efficiency

One of the consequences of the reforms is that in those parts of the country where the admissions process has become fragmented following the introduction of grant-maintained schools and city technology schools, parents are able to make multiple applications to schools. The Audit Commission (1996) noted that: 'parents in some parts of the country can express a so-called 'first preference' for up to seven types of secondary school - and more than one preference within some of these types - and be offered places at all of the schools to which they have applied'.

In such areas (including parts of Birmingham and parts of London) where there is no co-ordination by the bodies with responsibility for admissions, parents can hold on to their offers, not discarding unwanted preferences until the start of the new school year. 'This situation causes problems for schools, for parents further down the priority list, and for [local education authorities] and other admission authorities' (Audit Commission, 1996, p. 20).

In these areas the admissions authorities will clearly have an increased administrative workload. In particular, local education authorities, which have a statutory responsibility to ensure that all children resident in the authority are educated, have to ensure that they know which school each child will be attending. This may be extremely time consuming if parents have applied to many different schools as they are doing in certain parts of the country (Noden et al. (1997), for example, found that parents in London were applying to up to eight secondary schools). Further evidence of increased administrative workload comes from Bartlett (1993). In a study of one education authority between 1990/91 and 1991/92, he found that the authority funded 600 hours of extra overtime dealing with excess applications to oversubscribed schools.

Parents and admissions policies

One issue that is not addressed frequently is parental attitudes towards the admissions procedures. However, Jowett (1995) highlights the anxieties faced by parents who go through appeal procedures and West et al. (1995) have also reported on the high anxiety levels produced by the choice-making process. An editorial in 'Education' (6 October 1995) discussing research carried out by the NFER (Jowett, 1995) made the following points:

The aim of a fair and open admissions policy should be to minimize anxiety and dissatisfaction. Although 85 per cent of the parents surveyed by the NFER were satisfied with the current procedures, this is lower than it should be and conceals some powerful frustrations. One of these is the mystery surrounding admissions in many GM schools, particularly those based on interviews (p. 1)

More specifically in relation to admissions to grant-maintained schools, Mayet (1996) highlights the difficulties faced by parents:

The lack of freely available information from GM schools obfuscates the picture for parents. The need to duplicate admissions further confuses the situation. Where further options of voluntary-aided and single-sex schools are added there is even more difficulty. Varying forms of selection (without clear methodology) compound incomprehension and distress amongst parents.

The lack of accountability of GM schools is already impeding parents in exercising their preferences and in gaining access to fair appeal hearings (p. 176).

The evidence explored in the preceding sections indicates the extent of the problems that now exist in relation to school admissions. The next section examines various proposals for change.

3: Proposals for Change

Options proposed

Walford (1992) proposes a well funded comprehensive system with a broad and balanced curriculum for all children up to the age of 14 followed by some degree of specialisation. Each school should offer a range of specialisms in most of the academic, technological and creative areas. He proposes clarifying the choice-making process and introducing clear, simple and unbiased selection criteria for oversubscribed schools with all families being required to select three or four schools in order of preference and no child being allocated to a school⁶. He also suggests that funding should be made available for travel and other incidental costs to ensure that reasonable choices are not restricted by family income. A further suggestion is that independent information centres and advisers should be established to encourage all families in this decision-making process.

It is proposed that where there are fewer applications than places available, the first preference would be automatically granted. Where schools are oversubscribed, successful applicants should be selected randomly from those who apply. Clearly, however, Walford's proposals would be likely to introduce a new set of perverse outcomes. For example, in the knowledge that places at oversubscribed schools would be allocated by drawing lots there would be greater incentive for families living further away to apply to popular schools and, concomitantly, local children would be excluded from the nearest schools.

Adler (1992) puts forward another approach. He emphasises the need for a better balance between the rights of parents to choose schools for their children and the duties of education authorities to promote the education of all children. His alternative consists of five proposals. First, all schools should, within limits, be encouraged to develop their own distinctive characteristics although all would provide a common core curriculum. Second, school catchment areas should be abandoned to ensure the widest possible access to a range of schools with different characteristics. Third, decisions about school allocation should seek to promote children's interests (rather than parental preferences) and would involve teachers and in the case of older pupils, the pupils themselves, as well as parents. Fourth, decisions about school allocation would be made for all children by setting up procedures for assessing their needs and identifying the schools at which they are most likely to thrive. Where the number of applicants for a school is greater than the number of places available, priority would be given to those whose cases are most strongly supported. Finally, local authorities would be expected to formulate admissions policies for schools. However, whether placing greater power in the hands of educational experts would promote either greater equity or efficiency is unclear.

West & Pennell (1996) put forward a number of proposals in order to improve the administration of the schools admissions process. They suggest that parents should have access to information about schools in the vicinity, regardless of the LEA area in which those schools are located; that only schools that are clearly designated as selective should act in a selective manner; that parents should not have to complete a multitude of application forms and that only information relevant to the admissions criteria should be requested; that information about appropriate schools - in terms of their admissions criteria and preferences for different types of school - should be available from an advisory service; and that the background of

6 Unless, presumably, there are no places available at the preferred school(s).

applicants to schools and those offered places should be routinely collected (by a body other than an individual school) to discourage covert selection and this should be accompanied by appropriate audits of practices as they relate to policies. West et al. (1997) reinforce the need for regulation. At a minimum level, transparent admissions policies and audits of applicants and successful applicants are needed to ensure that practices are fair for all categories of applicant. In addition, the admissions process could be restricted to LEAs or another agency instead of individual schools. Glatter et al. (1997) reinforce this point noting:

Close and regular monitoring is needed to provide up-to-date information of key indicators such as the proportion of parents obtaining their first preference school and the volume of, and success in, appeals. These data should be collected and published by the Department for Education and Employment ... and they should be classified by LEA area and cover all publicly-funded schools. (p. 201)

Further proposals for improving secondary schools admissions procedures have been put forward by Newsam (1995a) and Local Schools Information (n.d.). Newsam (1995a) discusses the ways in which pupils can, in theory, be admitted to oversubscribed schools. He suggests that there are only five ways, or combinations of them, to determine which applicants to an oversubscribed school are to be accepted and which rejected: by lottery; by order of application (as happens with some of the élite private schools); by schools doing the choosing; by a system of feeder schools; by some variation of a distance criterion. In deciding whether a publicly-determined system of feeder schools or some distance-based system can be made to work four points need to be noted. First of all, according to Newsam, feeder school and distance-based systems cannot be run in close proximity to each other; second, distance criteria need exact wording; third, the issue of siblings needs exact definition; and finally, the issue of special aptitudes needs to be clarified either nationally or locally.

Local Schools Information (n.d.) notes that the present secondary school admissions system is not fair and does not offer equitable access to all the kinds of educational provision that would meet the aspirations of the majority of parents and students. Progress could be made by making admissions arrangements simpler and clearer; by insisting on more uniform, objective criteria for the allocation of places; and by having a single authority (they suggest the LEA) responsible for administering admissions and appeals for all local schools, with appropriate safeguards to protect the religious character of schools. 'This would greatly assist parents in exercising whatever choice exists locally, and increase their faith in the fairness of the system by reducing the opportunity for discrimination of any kind' (p. 21). A further proposal, made by Local Schools Information, is for a form of banding, perhaps using the results of national assessments for the previous year.

Newsam (1995b) also notes one of the requirements of a genuine comprehensive system is that it should combine in a single institution 'something like the full ability range in any given locality'. Whilst there has been media attention to 'flight from inner city comprehensives', Newsam observes that:

Anyone who supposes that comprehensive schools which manage to remain comprehensive are unpopular obviously has not had to try and get a child into one recently. Such schools tend to be popular with all elements in society ...

As already noted, in some inner London LEAs there is a banding system in operation to try and ensure that schools have a balanced intake. In addition, a number of voluntary-aided and grant-maintained schools have instituted their own system of banding to try and ensure that they have such an intake (see Pennell & West, 1995; West & Pennell, 1996). However, there is no monitoring of these systems to ensure that they are banding for this purpose rather than selecting an intake that is skewed towards high achieving pupils. The admissions policies to city technology colleges are unique, but although they are required to admit pupils across the full ability range and reflect the social and ethnic composition of their catchment area, as we have seen, in practice this has not proved to be achievable. Nevertheless the policies in CTCs are open to more scrutiny than the policies in other schools that are responsible for their own admissions.

4: A Fair Admissions Policy

Necessary characteristics of a fair admissions policy

It is clear then that there needs to be a major overhaul of the admissions process for secondary schools. Above all the process needs to be fair. In addition, consideration needs to be given to children's safety, to social cohesion, to transport costs and to the effects on the environment by travel to and from school. A number of features are required for this to be achieved. The process needs:

- to be transparent to all who use it;
- to be predictable so that parents are able to assess the probability of their application being successful;
- to be based on clear rights for parents and children;
- to be able to be monitored;
- to take account of how it would affect parents and pupils in other local schools;
- to enable pupils to attend the nearest school if desired;
- to enable pupils to have access to the same school as their sibling if desired.

The criteria for admissions

The research and proposals that have been outlined in this paper vary in that they have different starting points. In the case of oversubscription there are suggestions that a random process should be used or that the 'strongest cases' be admitted. There are difficulties with both of these proposals from the point of view of predictability, in that parents will not have any confidence about where their child will be accepted. Moreover, it is not certain that the concept of 'strongest cases' would be seen to be sufficiently transparent - it may be that more articulate parents would be better able to negotiate with the school to ensure that their preferences are adhered to.

An additional difficulty is that in rural areas it is unlikely that there would be a large enough range of schools within a given locality for an admissions procedure to function effectively if it relied on a diverse range of schools. Whilst Adler and Walford propose significant changes to the current system, they are not practicable for many rural parts of the country where there is no effective choice. Moreover, the concerns about the way in which school admissions are working appear to be more of an urban phenomenon - and are particularly acute in the large conurbations and especially in London where 31 per cent of secondary schools are grant-maintained (Funding Agency for Schools, 1997) and so are responsible for their own admissions.

The research by Forrest suggests that the problems with schools admissions are more acute in areas without catchment areas - generally urban areas. The catchment area criterion would seem to be vital in rural areas. Such systems are likely to be predictable, transparent and fair. Moreover it is possible to devise policies where parents can have the security of knowing that their child has a place at the school in whose catchment area they live even if they decide to apply to another school (this is what currently happens in Staffordshire LEA). The system used in Edinburgh could be taken as a model (see Appendix A).⁷

7 It is also interesting to note that it is common in other European countries with a comprehensive education policy for pupils to be admitted to schools in their own municipality (see Appendix B).

There is, then, a need for parents to have the security of knowing that their child has a place at a local school, even if they choose to apply to other schools. However, given the close proximity of schools in many urban areas, a preference system may be more feasible in these areas - although catchment areas are also used in both Glasgow and Edinburgh.

In urban areas, and in London in particular, there is a concern at the school and LEA level about ensuring that schools have an academically balanced intake. This should be respected particularly given the research findings that relate to the aggregate advantages of a balanced intake (e.g. McPherson & Willms, 1987). In addition, in the interests of fairness, it is important that the administration of tests should not be left to individual secondary schools.

It is clearly highly desirable that all admissions are dealt with by a single body so that there is a co-ordinated, transparent approach, which can be monitored. In practice this may not be achievable, particularly as voluntary-aided schools have long been responsible for admissions⁸, city technology colleges have always been responsible for their own admissions and grant-maintained schools cherish their autonomy in this area (see Bush et al., 1993).

However, these various problems could undoubtedly be overcome if there were a political will to do so. The LEA would seem to be an appropriate body to deal with admissions; where agreement for the LEA to act on behalf of all the schools in the area cannot be achieved, the responsibility for school admissions could be delegated to groups of schools or to individual schools; however, their practices should be subject to scrutiny by an independent body and any breaches of criteria should result in financial penalties. All evidence used to make decisions would be documented and similarly subjected to external scrutiny. This would, of course, mean that interviews could not be used as they cannot be monitored - nor are they transparent or predictable.

8 However, admissions to Roman Catholic schools in Edinburgh are co-ordinated by the LEA (see Appendix A).

5: A Suggested National Framework for Admissions

The admissions process

The following section outlines a national framework that could be adopted at minimal cost to ensure that admissions systems are transparent, predictable and fair. When proposing an admissions policy it is important to address not only the criteria used but also the necessary precursors to enable the policy to work clearly and fairly. These are of such importance that there should be national legislation to enforce them, supported by DfEE circulars. Once agreed, the national framework would be implemented at a local level taking account of the unique characteristics of particular localities. In the following part of the report we examine the various ways in which the features listed in Section 4 could be achieved.

Information

Parents need to have adequate information about the secondary schools in their area and the likelihood of obtaining a place at these schools. Information centres or 'education advice centres' have been proposed by a number of research studies and should be established to provide independent information about accessible schools. It is important that information booklets contain details of all non-fee paying secondary schools in a given area or region (including county, voluntary, grant-maintained, city technology colleges). In large urban conurbations, schools covering a wider area should be included.

Regulatory Mechanisms

Admissions should be carried out in such a way that the procedure can be monitored or audited. They could be carried out by a local education authority, which would ensure democratic accountability, or by a consortium of schools (provided that all schools in a given area participated). This would ensure that there is less scope for covert academic or social selection by schools that are deemed to be comprehensive. However, if schools are to be responsible for their own admissions, there must be disincentives (e.g. fines) to act in ways that breach the stated admissions policies.

Interviews

There should be no pre-admission interviews. In the case of schools that are affiliated to the church, written supporting evidence from the vicar/priest should be provided along with the application form, as happens with medical/social needs in many LEAs. This currently happens in Edinburgh and would seem to be a way of trying to ensure that all parents and pupils have an equal chance of gaining admittance to their first-choice school (see Appendix A).

Central Clearing House

In the case of some areas, and London in particular, admissions should be co-ordinated by a central clearing house. Its role could either be to administer or to co-ordinate the process; in the latter case, it would pass applications to the school to make the decision, whilst in the former it would actually allocate places (this would be the preferable model). In both cases the clearing house would notify parents of the outcome. Such a system would mean that the admissions authorities - particularly in urban conurbations - would be able to function more efficiently; the LEAs (which have a statutory responsibility to provide education for

children resident in their LEA) would know that all the pupils for whom they are responsible have places in a secondary school. Parents would also know at an early stage whether or not their child had gained a place at their preferred school and the practice of holding multiple places would be ended.

Reducing the fragmentation

The same general admissions process and timetable should operate across the country, with parents receiving information about schools in their area, together with an application form, at the same time, and being required to return the form by the same date. Parents should only be required to complete one application form; multiple applications should be co-ordinated by a limited number of admissions authorities or, in the case of urban conurbations, by a central clearing house.

Selective schools

The issue of selective school places⁹ exacerbates the problems associated with school admissions. Any selective admissions should be determined solely on the basis of written tests and not interviews. It should be compulsory for documentary evidence (including retaining completed test papers) to be kept by the admissions authorities to ensure that they are held accountable for decisions made on applicants offered and refused places. For schools with a proportion of specialist places there seem to be few arguments for the school selecting pupils. Rather, it would be the parent who makes a preference for that school in the knowledge that there is a particular specialism on offer. This should be made explicit to all in the admissions policy information that is produced by admissions authorities.

Appeals

The most appropriate body to deal with appeals would be the LEA or an independent body acting on behalf of all schools in a given area. Clear, transparent procedures and fixed criteria for appealing should be employed. Independent guidance for parents should be provided by education advice centres.

Admissions models

Each of the following models is known to work effectively in the English context. It would seem appropriate for details of the precise set of admissions criteria to be established by local education authorities acting in partnership with the schools within its boundaries and, where appropriate, with surrounding local education authorities.

A significant way in which these proposals would differ from those currently in operation would be in terms of the admissions authority's role in co-ordinating, monitoring and regulating the admissions to all state maintained schools, including CTCs and grant-maintained schools. This role could be carried out by the LEA or by an independent body acting on behalf of all schools in a given area. For each area, a local decision would be taken to adopt one of three models for admissions criteria to be applied *in the event of a school being oversubscribed*.

9 Selective places as used here refers to places that are either based on academic ability or aptitude in a specific subject area (e.g. music, technology).

Model 1: Catchment area model

One named school is the pupil's designated secondary school. The parent can also name an alternative preferred school.

Criteria

- 1 Catchment area
- 2 Siblings currently attending secondary school
- 3 Medical/special/personal need (supported by documentary evidence)

If the non-designated school is a religious school: religious criteria (with documentary support from priest/vicar)

If the non-designated school is selective: written test criteria

Model 2: Preference model

The parent lists, for example, three schools in order of preference.

Criteria

- 1 Proximity to school
- 2 Siblings currently attending secondary school
- 3 Medical/special/personal need (supported by documentary evidence)

For religious schools: religious criteria (with documentary support from priest/vicar)

If the preferred school is selective: written test criteria

Model 3: Preference model for a balanced intake

Parents make three preferences for schools.

Criteria

Attainment level - standardised tests (e.g. in English and/or mathematics) could be used to form three or more groups of pupils (e.g. above average, average, below average)¹⁰. The same test should be used for the whole area. Within each group the following criteria would then be used to allocate places:

- 1 Proximity to school
- 2 Siblings currently attending secondary school
- 3 Medical/special/personal need (supported by documentary evidence)

For religious schools: religious criteria (with documentary support from priest/vicar)

If the preferred school is selective: written test criteria

10 In the event of a school being undersubscribed in a particular group, it would be important to fill all places to comply with the open enrolment provisions of the Education Reform Act 1988 (now part of the 1996 Education Act); this could be done by allocating places using the criteria listed irrespective of test score.

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Appendix A

Secondary Schools' Admissions In One Scottish City



THE CITY OF EDINBURGH COUNCIL DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

Placing in Schools

Guidelines

1 GENERAL

These guidelines have been approved by the Education Committee for dealing with placing requests. They are also intended to help parents making a placing request. Other leaflets give advice on submitting placing requests. They are available from the Pupil Placement Section (see the end of these guidelines) and from schools:

Placing in Schools: General Information
Placing in Schools: Starting School
Placing in Schools: Early Admission to Primary School
Placing in Schools: How to Enrol Your Child in a School

2 PROCEDURE

- (i) All placing requests will be acknowledged. If you have not received an acknowledgment within 14 days, you should contact the Pupil Placement Section.
- (ii) If there are no grounds for refusing a placing request, it will be granted.
- (iii) If the school you specify has more requests than places, the following priority order will be applied in granting requests:
 - (a) Pupils living in The City of Edinburgh will have priority over those living elsewhere.
 - (b) In the case of pupils from the City of Edinburgh, those living within a school's catchment area will have priority. However, no pupil who has been properly admitted to a school will have to transfer against the parent's wishes to let a pupil who has subsequently moved into the catchment area be admitted. A "proper" admission is one made under the Committee's policy on the basis of correct information from the parents.
 - (c) In the case of Roman Catholic schools, where applications from those living within the catchment area exceed the number of places available priority will be given to those applicants who declare an affinity with the religious beliefs of the school. In such cases, it must be established that the pupils concerned have been baptised in the Roman Catholic Church.
 - (d) Where there are more placing requests than places in a school, the following factors will be taken into account in allocating places. This will be done according to the particular circumstances of each individual case. While the factors will be taken into account, it is not guaranteed that a request will thereby be given priority, or agreed.

Certified medical reasons
Access for the disabled
Brother or sister continuing to attend the school requested
Educational course available only at the school requested

Parents' kind of work or place of work
 Behavioural problems
 Road safety
 Ease of travel
 Nearness of home to school
 Attendance at associated primary school (S1 requests only)
 Parents' affinity with the aims and philosophy of the school
 Pupils having suffered, or likely to suffer bullying or racial harassment
 Parents' affinity with the religious beliefs of the school.

- (iv) Before a placing request is refused, it will be considered by a Sub-Committee of the Education Committee in the case of entry to primary school (P1), secondary school (S1), or early admission to primary school, and by the Head Teacher in all other cases. They will consider written information supplied by you when making your request. It is therefore in your interest to include any information relevant to the factors listed in (iii) above when making a request. If your request is refused, you will be given the reasons.
- (v) In considering placing requests, the Education Sub-Committee or Head Teacher will take into account the following factors and will consider their influence in relation to the order, discipline and educational well-being of the pupils attending the school requested:
- (a) the design capacity of, and physical education space in the school requested in terms of:
- The School Premises (General Requirements and Standards) (Scotland) Regulations 1967
 - Legislation on Health and Safety, Building Control and Fire Precautions.
 - Other relevant safety standards relating to school accommodation.
- (b) the appropriate normal maximum class size as defined in the Conditions of Service for Teaching Staff, which form part of the Authority's contract of employment with an individual teacher.
- (c) the educational desirability of normally not creating additional composite classes.

3 APPEALS

As required by law, the Authority has set up an Appeal Committee to consider appeals from parents against the Authority's decision to refuse a placing request. Parents can present their case to the Appeal Committee in person, or with the help of a representative or friend. Details of the appeals procedure will be available to parents if the Authority refuses their request.

4 FURTHER INFORMATION

For further information, parents should contact:-

Pupil Placement Section
 The City of Edinburgh Council
 Department of Education
 40 Torphichen Street
 EDINBURGH EH3 8JJ

April 1996

Mrs E M Reid
 Director of Education



THE CITY OF EDINBURGH COUNCIL
DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

Placing in Schools

How To Enrol Your Child In A School

The City of Edinburgh Council has agreed a policy on placing requests. This leaflet explains the policy and sets out how to make a placing request. A copy of the policy is available on request.

1 ENROLLING YOUR CHILD

If you would like a place for your child at:

- **A nursery school** - Contact the school direct to place your child's name on a waiting list after his or her second birthday.
- **Primary or secondary school**
 - The local school** (often referred to as the "district" school) - Contact the school direct.
 - A non-district school** (for a place in first year: P1 or S1) - Write to the Pupil Placement Section (address at end), if possible before 31 December. This is a placing request. Your letter will be acknowledged.
 - A non-district school** (for other than first-year places) - Contact the school direct.

2 GRANTING A REQUEST

The policy of the Education Committee is to grant a placing request wherever possible. By law it is obliged to do so. While most requests are granted, in certain cases this is not possible, either because it would involve spending extra money or because the education of the child or of the other children at the school would suffer. Once a pupil has been offered a place, the offer will not be withdrawn (unless the place was obtained on the basis of false information). A pupil moving into a catchment area cannot take a place from a non-district pupil already admitted to the school.

3 PRIORITY FOR SCHOOL

In general, pupils living in the City of Edinburgh have first call on places over those from outwith. Those living in a school's catchment area have priority over those from outside. Roman Catholic children living in the catchment area of a Roman Catholic school have priority over non-Catholics (for fuller details please see the leaflet - "Placing in Schools: Guidelines").

4 METHOD OF DEALING WITH REQUESTS

When there are fewer requests than places available, all the requests are usually granted. When there are more placing requests than places available, a special Sub-Committee (for new P1 and S1 intakes, and early admission to primary school) or Head Teachers (for all other stages), will decide who gets a place. Parents are not interviewed. However, each individual case is examined and the circumstances mentioned in the written application are taken into account. All the information a parent considers relevant should be included in the written placing request.

5 REASONS GIVEN BY PARENTS FOR PLACING REQUESTS

The Education Committee has decided that the following factors may be taken into account:

Certified medical reasons for wanting a particular school
Access for the disabled
Brother or sister already attending the school requested
Educational course available only at the school requested
Parents' kind of work or place of work
Behavioural problems
Road safety
Ease of travel
Nearness of home to school
Attendance at the district primary school (for a secondary school request)
Parents' agreement with the religious beliefs of the school
Having suffered or likely to suffer bullying or racial harassment
Parents' agreement with the aims and philosophy of the school.

Parents do not have to mention any of these if they do not wish to. Alternatively, they may give one or even several reasons. Mention of any of these factors does not, of course, guarantee a place.

6 REFUSALS

If a request is refused, the reasons are given. These reasons have to be the same as those in the law which governs placing requests. This law (passed in 1981) states all the grounds on which a place may be refused.

7 OTHER MATTERS CONSIDERED BY THE SUB-COMMITTEE

When requests are being considered, other factors may need to be taken into account, apart from the reasons given by parents. These include:

- legal requirements affecting the school building and accommodation
- maximum class size
- the effect of admission on composite classes (classes containing pupils from more than one school year).

8 APPEALS

The Authority has set up an independent Appeal Committee, as required by law. This Committee hears cases and considers written evidence. You can appear in person, alone or with the help of a friend or representative. If your placing request is refused, you will be given details of the appeals procedure.

9 FURTHER INFORMATION:

Pupil Placement Section
The City of Edinburgh Council
Department of Education
40 Torphichen Street
EDINBURGH EH3 8JJ

April 1996

Mrs E M Reid
Director of Education

Appendix B

Secondary Schools' Admissions in Selected EU Countries

(Taken from 'Structures of the Education and Initial Training Systems in the European Union', Second Edition, EURYDICE & CEDEFOP, Brussels: European Commission, 1995)

Denmark

In Denmark there are nine years of full-time compulsory education, between the ages of 7 and 16 years. This education mainly takes place in municipal schools (Folkeskole). Following this, pupils can opt to stay on in the 10th year. The Danish system does not differentiate between primary and lower secondary education.

Upper secondary education is divided into general upper secondary education (provided mainly in Gymnasia) and vocational upper secondary education. Gymnasia are separate institutions which offer education at post-compulsory level only. The schools provide a three-year course normally for children between 16 and 19. They are intended for academically able pupils aiming to enter higher education.

Pupils are admitted to a Gymnasium of their choice (usually the one closest to their home) provided that they have completed the 9th year on the basis of a statement issued by their Folkeskole on whether they are 'qualified' or 'perhaps qualified' for studies at this level. Provided the school has enough capacity, qualified applicants must be admitted to the public school of their choice. If the school does not have the capacity, some applicants will be transferred to the school of their second choice. 'Perhaps qualified' students are tested at the school they apply to and if the Gymnasium decides that the test results are satisfactory, they are admitted.

To be admitted to a vocational education and training course, pupils must have completed compulsory education. Admission does not take place on the basis of leaving certificates. In addition to the basic vocational training courses, technical and commercial schools also exist. These are school-based and end with an examination; they also qualify pupils for employment and admission to higher education. Admission to courses at these schools is open to pupils directly from the Folkeskole.

Finland

Nearly all Finns attend a comprehensive school for nine years. This provides general education from the ages of 7 to 16. There are no entrance requirements. A pupil is free, within certain limits to choose his or her own comprehensive school within his or her home municipality. All pupils who complete the comprehensive school are equally qualified to continue their studies at upper secondary school or vocational school. After leaving comprehensive school, pupils can choose any educational institution in the country to continue their studies. This is possible because the pupil's home municipality is obliged to cover upper secondary or vocational education costs not covered by government subsidies.

France

Secondary school begins in the collège. This is comprehensive and admits all pupils for the first four years of secondary school (theoretically ages 11 to 15). Upper secondary education continues in a general and technical lycée or a vocational lycée. Collège leavers usually attend lycées in their own school districts, unless the family opts for private education or the specialism chosen (e.g. foreign language is not included at the local school, or a European section is wanted) involves attending a school further away.

Germany

The transfer to one of the different types of non-comprehensive lower secondary school types where pupils remain until the completion of their full-time compulsory education (generally until the age of 15) is dealt with differently depending on the Land legislation. Decisions regarding the pupil's future school career are taken on the basis of the recommendation of the school which the pupil is leaving. This is accompanied by detailed consultation with parents. The final decision is taken by the parents or by the school or the school supervisory authority.

Ireland

Lower secondary education (12 to 15 years) usually takes place in the Junior Cycle of one of the main types of second level schools - secondary, vocational, comprehensive, community schools or community colleges. Parents are free to choose the second level school. Schools that do not have places for all applicants operate various methods of selection. Until 1994, some secondary schools had entrance examinations.

Italy

Lower secondary schools cater for children from 11 to 14 years. They are fully comprehensive and provide free education to all children in the appropriate age range, regardless of their origin or social status. They must be set up in communes with at least 3,000 inhabitants, or wherever there is a need for such a school. No school may have more than 24 classes and no class may contain more than 25 pupils. Upper secondary schools consist of the following categories: classical and scientific, artistic, technical, vocational. In 1993, 31.6 per cent of age group entered classical and scientific education, 3.5 per cent artistic, 35.8 per cent technical and 19.5 per cent vocational.

To be granted access to upper secondary schools, pupils must hold the lower secondary education school leaving certificate. On the basis of guidance from lower secondary teachers, appended to the certificate, pupils and their families choose which upper secondary school they wish to attend. The only real limitation is the physical capacity of the school.

Netherlands

Secondary education is attended by 12 to 16/18 year olds. There are four main types of education:

- Pre-university education (Voorbereidend Wetenschappelijk Onderwijs - VWO) for 12 to 18 year olds
- Senior general secondary education (Hoger Algemeen Voorgezet Onderwijs - HAVO) for 12 to 17 year olds
- Junior general secondary education (Middelbaar Algemeen Voortgezet Onderwijs - MAVO) for 12 to 16 year olds
- Pre-vocational education (Voorbereidend Beroepsonderwijs - VBO) for 12 to 16 year olds.

In VBO schools lessons are given in general and vocational subjects. In the remaining three, education is primarily of a general nature.

VWO lasts six years and prepares pupils for university education. HAVO lasts five years and prepares pupils for higher professional education, but many pupils go on to a VWO or senior secondary vocational

school. MAVO lasts four years. On completion of a MAVO school, pupils may go on to senior secondary vocational education (MBO) or they may decide to attend HAVO courses or enter the apprenticeship system. VBO lasts for four years and leads to senior secondary vocational education (MBO) and the apprenticeship system.

Pupils are admitted to secondary education if they have completed primary education (at an average of 12 years of age). Entry is decided by an admissions committee on the basis of the report from the pupil's primary school. For admission to MAVO, HAVO and VWO, pupils must have been assessed to establish their suitability. Where a MAVO shares a common first year with a VBO school, there are no conditions for admission; there are no conditions for admission to VBO.

Norway

Compulsory education is completely comprehensive. The aim is to provide all children with an education which is adapted to their individual abilities. In relation to upper secondary education (from 16 to 19) there is basically one type of school administered by the regional authority. Pupils are recruited from lower secondary schools in their areas. As from 1994 everyone has a right to three years of upper secondary education. Entrance to the individual course is decided by factors such as the applicants' grades from lower secondary school.

Portugal

Basic education is compulsory for all children from the age of 6 and lasts nine years. The first cycle (6 to 10 years) is provided by mixed primary schools. The second cycle lasts for two years (10 to 12 years) is provided in state or private establishments and in centres for basic distance education (in areas that are sparsely populated). Pupils who have successfully completed the first cycle are admitted to the second cycle of basic education. They have to attend the educational establishment in the area in which they live. The same applies to the third cycle (from 12 to 15 years). Secondary education lasts from 15 to 18 years. Pupils who have successfully completed basic education or the equivalent have access to any secondary school course. Pupils normally enrol at a school in the area where they live.

Sweden

Compulsory education in Sweden takes the form of a nine-year comprehensive school (*grundskola*) for children aged 7 to 16. Almost all pupils (98%) attend schools run by the municipalities, usually in their local area. However, parents and pupils are able to make a choice concerning compulsory education. To the extent that it is possible, parents' wishes for their children to attend a particular public school within the municipality are considered. Parents and pupils are free to choose between public and private schools. As from 1993/94 a pupil can attend a school outside his/her home municipality. Most upper secondary studies take place in schools under municipal responsibility. Upper secondary schools are generally located in larger municipalities with pupils coming from several different municipalities. Most of the large upper secondary schools include a variety of study programmes and courses.

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