



**The London School of Economics and Political Science
CENTRE FOR EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH**

RESEARCH BRIEF

SECONDARY SCHOOL ADMISSIONS IN LONDON

Executive Summary

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In March 2005, the Greater London Authority provided a grant to the London School of Economics and Political Science to carry out a research project on secondary school admissions in London. The project had two objectives:

- to provide an up-to-date report on secondary schools' admissions criteria and practices in London for admissions in 2005/06, with a particular focus on disadvantaged pupils (and to compare these with the criteria used in 2001/02); and
- to examine, from the perspective of local authorities, how effectively the Pan London Co-ordinated Admissions Scheme functioned during its first year, including difficulties encountered by local authorities.

The research methods, key findings and implications for policy are summarised below.

Secondary school admissions criteria and practices in London

Parents obtain information about secondary schools and the criteria used to decide who should be offered a place at the school from local authority brochures and, in some cases, from individual schools. For this study, secondary school brochures for pupils due to start secondary school in September 2005 were obtained from the 32 London local authorities with maintained secondary schools. The research reported here relates to the admissions criteria and practices of 374 secondary schools in London that are nominally 'comprehensive'. Schools with responsibility for their own admissions (voluntary aided and foundation) may require supplementary application forms to be completed, so they were contacted and asked for the information they provided to parents together with any supplementary forms.

- When there were more applicants than places available, the vast majority of secondary schools (96%) reported that priority in admissions was given to siblings of children already attending the school and to the distance from a child's home to the school. Over eight out of ten (85%) schools reported giving priority to children in care, whilst other commonly reported criteria were the medical/social needs of a child (70%) and a child's special educational needs (47%).
- A range of criteria were identified that could be described as promoting social justice by, in particular, giving priority to children in public care, criteria related to medical/social need and

special educational needs. In each case, more community/voluntary controlled than voluntary aided or foundation schools reported the use of these criteria (in each case, the difference was statistically significant).

- For faith schools, the School Admissions Code of Practice (Department for Education and Skills (DfES), 2003) states that a contribution can be made to community cohesion by having admissions arrangements that are inclusive of other faiths. Around half of voluntary aided schools (46%) made specific mention of 'other faiths', or another world faith, in their admissions criteria.
- Secondary schools are permitted under legislation to select pupils in order to obtain a 'balanced' intake based on pupils' abilities; this is usually referred to as 'banding'. Just over one in ten schools (16%) used some form of banding; more of these were voluntary aided or community/voluntary controlled schools than foundation schools (24% and 13% compared with 9%). The only form of banding that can now be introduced is called 'fair banding'; this involves children whose parents/carers have applied for a place at a school being tested and then placed in ability bands based on their results. The bands are required to be representative of all levels of ability with no level of ability 'substantially' over-represented. Examples of banding were identified, used by schools responsible for their own admissions, that would result in an intake skewed towards higher ability pupils.¹
- Banding carried out for community schools and some voluntary aided schools in specific parts of London is different. It is carried out centrally by the local authority and involves all pupils transferring to secondary schools in the area rather than applicants to individual schools. It relates to the allocation of places to secondary schools rather than involving particular pupils. No new systems of this type can now be introduced, as they do not constitute 'fair banding' under current legislation. However, these systems have advantages over school-based systems: in particular, the banding is not carried out on the basis of applicants to a school, so will reflect the ability profile of the area rather than applicants to a school. As the local authority does not have a vested interest in the outcome, there can be more confidence that the system used is clear, fair and transparent.
- There are some admissions criteria that could be considered unfair on the grounds that they give priority to pupils who possess certain abilities/aptitudes. Although legislation has ruled out any new selection on the basis of academic ability, arrangements existing at the beginning of the 1997/98 academic year have been allowed to continue and new selection on the basis of aptitude in a subject is allowed in limited circumstances where the school has a specialism. There is a debate about whether aptitude can be distinguished from ability. Seven per cent of secondary schools in London used criteria based on ability/aptitude in a subject, more were voluntary aided and foundation schools than community/voluntary controlled (this difference was statistically significant).
- A small percentage of schools (6%) gave priority to the children of employees/governors and to children of former pupils (2%); these could contravene anti-discriminatory legislation such as the Race Relations (Amendment) Act 2000. Other criteria and practices could enable schools to 'select in' certain pupils and 'select out' others. These include the holding of interviews/meetings and seeking references from a child's primary school. Other criteria are imprecise or unclear.

¹ This banding was in place at the beginning of the 1997/98 academic year and so may continue; legislation prevents further banding of this type being introduced.

- Overall, around a quarter of secondary schools used at least one ‘potentially selective’ admissions criterion (e.g., aptitude/ability in a subject/general ability, child of an employee, child of a former pupil, pastoral factors, compassionate factors, interview/meeting). More of these were voluntary aided or foundation than community/voluntary controlled (46% and 35% versus 10%). This difference was statistically significant.

Information provided for parents/carers by local authorities and schools

- The quality of information provided to parents/carers by local authorities was variable. In a few cases the secondary school brochures did not contain details of the admissions criteria of all schools in the area; in others, the information was incomplete or unclear. A minority of local authorities included the supplementary admissions forms, required by some schools, with the local authority brochure, so easing the secondary transfer process for parents/carers.
- In terms of the information provided by voluntary aided and foundation schools to parents/carers who had expressed an interest in applying for a place at the school, there were cases where the information differed in material respects from that given in the local authority brochures (e.g., the school held interviews, but these were not mentioned in the brochure or admissions criteria were included that were not mentioned in the brochure).
- A number of issues arose concerning the use and content of supplementary admissions forms; there were examples where parents were asked to provide information that did not seem to be related to the school’s admissions criteria (e.g., whether parents were living in bed and breakfast accommodation or parents’ occupation); there were also concerns about the length of some forms and the requirement, in some cases, that parents and children write extensively about, for example, their reasons for wanting a place at the school. The use of these forms could deter parents/carers from applying to particular schools.

Functioning of the Pan London School Admissions Scheme

- For admission to secondary schools in year 7 (age 11), from September 2005, local authorities have been required to co-ordinate secondary school applications for their residents. All parents/carers apply to their local authority, on behalf of their child, for secondary schools; and local authorities exchange information with each other where residents apply to schools beyond their boundaries. In London, co-ordination for admissions in September 2005, involved all 32 London boroughs and the City of London (together with some local authorities on the periphery of London). The Pan London Co-ordinated Admissions Scheme was established. A questionnaire survey was conducted of admissions officers in the 40 local authorities (33 in London and seven in the surrounding area) participating in the Scheme in 2004/05. Completed questionnaires were received from 95% of the local authorities that were part of the Scheme. The response rate from London local authorities was 100%.
- Nearly eight out of ten London respondents were satisfied with the operation of the Scheme in its first year in terms of the allocation of places to pupils resident in their local authority: they tended to feel that the Scheme had eliminated – or partially eliminated – multiple offers and reduced the numbers of children without places. Over eight out of ten were satisfied with the Scheme more generally.
- Around nine out of ten London respondents considered that there were advantages of the Scheme compared with the method used the previous year. High percentages expressed satisfaction with the number of preferences allowed, liaison with local authorities, liaison with

individual schools and the timetable adopted. However, half were not satisfied with the computer software and a third were not satisfied with the supplementary application forms used by schools.

- Two-thirds of London respondents considered that individual admission authorities had complied with the School Admissions Code of Practice compared with one-third who felt that they had not.
- Amongst suggestions for improvement, were the need for better and more reliable software; consistent and sustained co-ordination beyond the offer date of 1 March when the statutory scheme ended; and the need to resolve the incompatibility between the different systems used in relation to the consideration of preferences used by the Pan London Scheme and a number of schools that were their own admission authority.

Discussion

- The majority of London secondary schools reported using criteria that can be considered to be fair in that they did not appear to be designed to select any particular categories of pupils at the expense of others. This was most notable in the case of community/voluntary controlled schools. A minority of schools, mainly those that were their own admission authority (voluntary aided and foundation), reported criteria that appeared to be designed to select certain groups of pupils but exclude others. Proportionately more voluntary aided and foundation schools reported the use of criteria that could be seen as being potentially selective. They were also less inclusive than community/voluntary controlled schools in that they did not prioritise certain groups of disadvantaged children (e.g., children in public care or those with special educational needs) to the same extent.
- Covert selection is almost certainly more extensive than suggested by the admissions criteria published in local authority brochures for a number of reasons: not all the admissions criteria and practices are mentioned in the local authority brochures; the supplementary forms used by some schools provide opportunities for schools to select more 'desirable' pupils; and the survey of admissions officers revealed some disquiet amongst a minority with the admissions arrangements of some schools.
- Analysis undertaken by the Greater London Authority, found that, in 2003, pupils resident in London, attending schools responsible for their own admissions (voluntary aided/foundation/city technology colleges/academies) were less likely to be eligible for free school meals and less likely to have special educational needs than those attending community or voluntary controlled schools. In addition, pupils in these schools had higher levels of achievement at the end of key stage 2 (age 11 years) prior to admission to secondary school.
- Research carried out at the London School of Economics and Political Science has also found similar differences when examining the composition of schools of different types: in 2004, the attainment band of pupils in community/voluntary controlled secondary schools in London who had entered the school in 2001, was lower (prior to admission to secondary school) than that of those in voluntary aided/foundation schools. Moreover, the percentage of pupils known to be eligible for free school meals and the percentage of pupils with special educational needs, both with and without statements, was found to be higher in community/voluntary controlled schools than in voluntary aided/foundation schools.
- The research findings were compared with an earlier survey conducted in 2001 (West et al., 2003). It was found that there had been an increase in the use of criteria that could be said to

enhance social justice and inclusion. The most dramatic change was in the percentage of schools that prioritised children in public care; this increased from 4% in 2001 to 85% in 2005. In the case of religious schools, the inclusion of pupils from 'other faiths' was more frequently reported in admissions criteria in 2005 (35% in 2001 compared with 46% in 2005).

- There was an increase in the percentage of schools that selected a proportion of their intake on the basis of aptitude/ability in a subject (5% in 2001 and 7% in 2005). However, there was a decrease in the use of other potentially selective/discriminatory admissions criteria. Interviewing dropped to 2% (from 14% reporting parent interviews and 8% reporting pupil interviews in 2001). The proportion of schools giving priority to children of employees/governors dropped from 13% to 6%. In short, the new Code of Practice, which came into force in September 2004, has had a positive effect.
- The survey of admissions officers involved in the Pan-London Co-ordinated Admissions Scheme indicated that the Scheme was largely successful in meeting its main aim of eliminating or greatly reducing multiple offers of places. There were high satisfaction rates for various aspects of the Scheme. The main areas of concern were in respect of the computer software used; there was also concern about the use of supplementary forms by schools that were responsible for their own admissions. There was a general view that the increased links between local authorities that had been engendered by the Scheme were beneficial.

Summary and policy implications

The research findings suggest that a number of changes to current policy are needed to ensure that schools with autonomy over admissions do not 'cream' the most desirable pupils. Given the recent Government White Paper, 'Higher Standards, Better Schools for All' (HM Government, 2005) this is even more important as included within it are proposals for all new schools to become responsible for their own admissions as foundation, voluntary aided, trust schools or academies. Moreover, existing schools would also be encouraged to become trust schools with similar powers over admissions. As these changes would increase the number of schools with responsibility for their own admissions, and hence the potential for more selective admissions criteria/practices, the following proposals should be considered by policy makers.

- At present, the School Admissions Code of Practice provides guidance, to which bodies responsible for school admissions should 'have regard'. If they have a good reason not to follow the guidance having first considered it, they may do so. As a result of this lack of regulation, schools may continue to use criteria that are not clear, fair or objective to decide who should be admitted to the school. To address this issue, the School Admissions Code of Practice should be strengthened and underpinned by regulation (as already happens in relation to the co-ordination of school admissions and is to happen in relation to children in public care).
- A 'menu' of acceptable types of criteria should be provided in regulations.
- The use of supplementary admissions forms by schools that are their own admission authority should be curtailed.
- Some of the most problematic admissions criteria and practices, identified in the research, pre-date the election of the Labour Government (e.g., partial selection by general ability and banding that results in an intake skewed towards higher achieving pupils). Regulations could be introduced to end their use.

- The use of selection by ability/aptitude privileges some pupils over others. Testing cannot clearly distinguish between current levels of achievement, ability and aptitude. Given the well-established links between achievement and socio-economic background, selection by aptitude/ability in a subject is likely to have a detrimental impact on disadvantaged children. The use of banding on an area-wide basis, on the other hand, could help reduce the current ability (and hence socio-economic) imbalance in the intake between schools (see also Gorard et al., 2003); legislation could be introduced to give powers to local authorities to introduce new area-wide banding systems.
- There is a good case for stating in admissions criteria that priority is given to children with a statement of special educational needs. Where it is not a criterion it may signal to parents/carers that such children do not have the same rights as those without such needs. Moreover, in the case of an individual school, it may give out the message to parents/carers that such a school does not welcome children with special educational needs to the same extent as other schools that do give such priority.
- Local authorities should be given a statutory role to oversee admission arrangements of all publicly funded schools in their area and ensure that admissions criteria are in accord with the ‘menu’ of acceptable criteria.
- There is a strong case for the allocation of school places to be carried out by a body other than a school. Where individual schools are responsible for their own admissions there will be continuing concern that pupils may be either consciously or unconsciously ‘selected in’ or ‘selected out’ in the admissions process in the interests of schools rather than pupils. The pressures caused by league tables and competition, undoubtedly present incentives for schools which are oversubscribed, to obtain pupils who are both highly motivated and able. We consider that an alternative body should be responsible. Local authorities are best placed to undertake admissions (as happens in Finland and Sweden) although separate arrangements could be made for faith schools, whereby appropriate bodies, such as Diocesan Boards in the case of Church of England schools, could undertake the role.
- Local authority brochures should contain admissions criteria on all publicly funded schools in their administrative area. Further, local authorities should have a statutory duty to ensure that the information included in brochures is complete and accurate.
- Given that differences have been identified in the characteristics of pupils who enter different types of schools (Ewens, 2005; West and Hind, 2006), the monitoring of applicants to different types of schools needs to be undertaken by local authorities or the Department for Education and Skills or an independent body such as the GLA.² The aim would be to determine which categories of pupils (e.g., children with special educational needs, children from different ethnic groups, children in public care, children known to be eligible for free school meals) are offered places and which are subsequently admitted to different types of schools.

Additional information

Copies of the full report are available from: <http://www.lse.ac.uk/collections/CER/research.htm>

The views expressed in this report are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of the Greater London Authority.

² With permitted access to DfES pupil level annual school census (PLASC) data.