



Ballots in school admissions

May 2007

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Key findings

Key findings from the Ipsos MORI survey:

- When given the specific scenario of an oversubscribed faith school, more people (36%) think that a ballot is the fairer way of deciding which pupils get a place than those who think the decision should rest on judgements showing which families are most committed to the Christian faith (20%).
- When given the specific scenario of an oversubscribed comprehensive school, nearly as many people (32%) think that a ballot is the fairer way of deciding which pupils get a place as those who think it is fairer to decide on how near families live to the school (35%).
- Among parents from the higher social classes, 45 per cent of respondents think that a ballot is the fairer way of deciding which pupils get a place at an oversubscribed comprehensive school.
- However, when asked simply to describe any one of eight listed methods of allocating school places as either fair or unfair, the majority of respondents felt unable to make this judgement in all but one of the cases. This uncertainty was particularly prevalent among those from less prosperous backgrounds: nearly one in five people from the lowest social classes could not say whether any of the eight admissions criteria listed were fair or unfair.
- Respondents who did make a judgement believed that the fairest way of allocating school places was by giving priority to children who live closest to the school (52% viewing this as fair, compared with 9% unfair).
- Selecting children on the basis of a certain religion or faith emerged as the way of allocating school places most frequently identified as unfair, with 40% of respondents saying it was unfair compared with 8% who said it was fair.
- The next method most frequently identified as unfair was selecting places by ballot, with 28% of respondents believing it to be unfair and 9% believing it to be fair -- although a significant 63% were unable to make up their minds.

Key findings from the international review:

- Ballots have been deployed extensively across the world, in both school and university admissions. These include schools across the US, Sweden and New Zealand, and universities in Sweden and Holland.
- Ballots are not used in isolation. They are only deployed in conjunction with other criteria or constraints when determining which pupils or students secure places.
- Ballots are part of wider school reforms to introduce more choice for prospective pupils when applying for places at school, dealing with the problem of oversubscribed schools.
- Outside the UK at least, public concern has focused on which types of pupils enter the ballots—not whether they are fair or unfair.

Commentary

How could our children's futures be determined by a random lottery? So thundered the various newspaper headlines when earlier this year Brighton and Hove Council announced its decision to allocate secondary school places by a ballot when schools are oversubscribed. The decision, prompted by new Government admissions rules, provoked a media frenzy and divided local parents in the Brighton area. In Parliament, the schools minister was asked to explain the apparent contradiction between the Government's attempts to widen school choice for parents and the introduction of ballots to decide places for oversubscribed schools.

In the heat of debate, the reasons behind the council's decision – and the finer details of the overall scheme being introduced - were often lost. In fact what was proving most controversial for many parents in Brighton was the creation of new catchment areas by the Council, defining who could apply to particular schools. Tellingly, although most of the press coverage came out against the use of ballots, no consensus emerged as to what are the fairest ways to allocate places at over-subscribed state schools.

This report summarises the findings of two pieces of research commissioned by the Trust aimed to create a clearer understanding of how ballots work in school admissions, and what the UK public really thinks of ballots as a way of deciding which children secure the limited number of places available in popular schools. The hope is that the evidence presented here will lead to more informed discussion on this critical and sensitive issue.

The Trust commissioned RAND Europe to review the widespread use of ballots overseas in school and university admissions. In this report we summarise some of the common characteristics of the many schemes deployed abroad. In parallel, the Trust commissioned Ipsos MORI to gauge public views in the UK on what are the fairest ways of allocating places at oversubscribed schools. In late March interviews were undertaken with a representative cross-section of 1,928 adults.

Lack of understanding

Perhaps predictably some mixed responses emerge from the public opinion poll. Indeed one of the core messages of this research is that school admissions are so complex that many do not feel they understand the issues sufficiently to make a judgement on the use of different criteria. When asked to describe any one of the listed methods of allocating school places as either fair or unfair, more often than not the majority of respondents felt unable to make this judgement. This trend remains when the figures are collated just for parents taking part in the survey.

A concern is that this apparent ambivalence towards school admissions policies is particularly pronounced among those from lower social class groups – the very people intended to benefit from reforms such as those introduced in Brighton. Nearly one in five people from the lowest social classes for example could not say whether any one of the eight admissions criteria listed were fair or unfair.

From those who did respond to this part of the survey, however, there are some clear patterns. Across all social groups, respondents believed that the fairest way of allocating school places was by giving priority to children who live closest to the school (52% viewing this as fair, compared with 9% unfair).

Selecting children on the basis of a certain religion or faith was most often described as an unfair way of allocating school places, with 40% of respondents saying it was unfair compared with 8% who said it was fair.

The next method most often described as unfair was the use of ballots, with 28% of respondents believing it to be unfair and 9% believing it to be fair – although 63% of respondents were unable to make up their minds on this issue. Again, this pattern was consistent across the social classes.

Support for ballots

However, when asked to judge the use of admissions criteria in the real context and specific example of an oversubscribed school, respondents were much more likely to think random allocation is a fair way of deciding which pupils get places.

Given the choice, more people, for example, think that a ballot is the fairer way of deciding which pupils get a place at an oversubscribed faith school than judgements to show which families are most committed to the Christian faith (36% against 20%).

Nearly as many people meanwhile (32%) think that a ballot is the fairer way of deciding which pupils get a place at an oversubscribed community comprehensive school as those who think it is fairer to decide on how near families live to the school (35%).

In the second scenario, backing for ballots is most pronounced among parents from the highest social groups. The survey shows that 45% of these particular respondents think that a ballot is the fairer way of deciding which pupils get a place at an oversubscribed comprehensive school.

No pure lotteries

These two scenarios above highlight one of the common features of ballots across the world in school and university admissions: there are no pure lotteries in academic selection. Ballots are only deployed in conjunction with other criteria or constraints when determining which pupils or students secure places.

In North Carolina and Chicago in the US, for example, pupils are guaranteed a place at their local school while given the opportunity to apply to other schools, where there is the possibility of being entered into a ballot if they are oversubscribed.

In Milwaukee in the US, ballots only apply to a certain proportion of school places set aside for students from low income backgrounds.

In Chicago, a series of ballots are organized for students of different gender, race and year group, while in New Zealand ballots apply to pupils grouped according to different priority criteria, including, for example, eligibility for free school meals.

Dutch university medical schools meanwhile undertake a series of ballots for different groups of students according to their exam or test scores. This is organised in a way that those students with the highest grades are still more likely to gain degree places. In some medical schools, moreover, lotteries only apply to a fixed proportion of places.

Widespread use

The reason that ballots have been deployed so extensively around the world – we list here just some of the examples -- is that they are a tool for dealing with one of the inevitable consequences of greater school choice: oversubscribed schools. The UK is far from alone in witnessing reforms to introduce more choice for prospective pupils and parents when deciding which school to apply to.

These reforms include the introduction of new schools to provide more choice, the use of vouchers to enable parents to use state funds to apply to different schools, and the relaxing of admissions rules so that pupils can apply to more than just their local schools.

Outside the UK at least, the assumption appears to be that ballots represent the fairest and most transparent way of dealing with the problem of deciding who gets a place when there are more applications than places at a school.

The issue of whether ballots are fair or not has not been investigated by researchers overseas because it is seen as a non-issue. US academics said that as far as they are aware the US public believes that random allocation is a fair and transparent way of deciding who wins school places when schools are oversubscribed.

Implications for the UK

These examples from overseas offer some instructive messages for local education authorities in the UK considering following in the steps of Brighton and Hove Council and using ballots as part of school admissions policies.

We must not forget the backdrop to these developments: that the alternatives to ballots - allocation by proximity to the school or by faith, for example - have been found to be highly socially selective.

Poorer families, for instance, have been priced out of the catchment areas of high-performing schools by rocketing house prices, and there is evidence that selecting pupils on religious grounds tends to favour the better off. The Trust's 2006 analysis of the 200 highest-performing comprehensive schools found that just 4% of their intake was eligible for free school meals, compared with over 14% of pupils nationally.

The Government's new Admissions Code, which came in to force in February 2007, states that "random allocation can widen access to schools for those unable to buy houses near to favoured schools and create greater social equality".

A role for ballots?

While this research would not support an argument for using ballots as the sole process in determining school admissions, it does suggest that there is a role for ballots in conjunction with other admissions criteria – and that, communicated clearly, this may be broadly acceptable to the public. When there are a number of children that are all meeting particular admissions criteria – whether it is proximity to school, commitment to a faith, or academic achievement – then logically the fairest 'tiebreaker' is to hold a random allocation of places.

The use of ballots in the UK – for example, in academies such as Haberdashers' Aske's Hatcham college, in single sex schools in Hertfordshire and now in schools in Brighton -- currently follow this approach. The real debate in many senses should concern how fair the other criteria (such as catchment areas or ability banding) are to begin with – not the lottery process itself.

The Ipsos MORI survey suggests that the public are intuitively against the idea of allocating school places on a random basis, which corroborates anecdotal evidence that such a system is against our natural sense of justice. Yet equally, when the details of any scheme are explained and the context laid out, the use of ballots becomes a more acceptable proposition.

These arguments apply to all types of schools (indeed we have found that some independent primary schools also use lotteries to decide on places when other criteria are met).

Interestingly, lotteries are not viewed by the public as being as unfair as allocating places on the grounds of religion, even though there are many more schools which use faith as a selection criterion and these schools tend to be very popular.

There are signs however that ballots may be embraced within this part of the schools sector. The heavily over-subscribed (faith based) Lady Margaret School in Parsons Green – previously criticised by the local government ombudsman as having ‘very serious faults’ in its admissions process - has recently decided to allocate 40 of its 90 places each year by lottery.

Should the country’s remaining grammar schools – still socially as well as academically selective – also consider the use of ballots for appropriately qualified pupils? Currently the majority of grammars rank prospective pupils according to their marks in verbal reasoning and other tests, and then offer places according to this ranking. An alternative approach could be to consider pupils who score over a certain threshold in the tests and then undertake a ballot to decide on places – possibly weighted so that those with the highest marks have a better chance of winning a place.

Finally, should the country’s oversubscribed universities follow the example of other higher education sectors overseas and use ballots to decide which of the hundreds of equally well qualified applicants are successful in getting a university place? Four years ago the medical school at Queen Mary College, University of London, became the first medical school in the UK to use random allocation to select candidates (alongside other criteria). This approach has been proposed by several other university departments but has so far been resisted by vice-chancellors, for fear of adverse publicity.

Complexity of school admissions

The findings from the research also underline the complexity of school admissions. Many respondents did not feel able to make judgements as to what are and are not fair ways of allocating pupils to oversubscribed schools. This appears to be particularly true of those from poorer backgrounds, and may reflect a general lack of knowledge of the school admissions process and the consequences of using various admissions criteria.

This is concerning as – by implication – these parents are less likely to be able to successfully negotiate the admissions process and to make the best school choices for their children. It is no coincidence, perhaps, that those schools with the most complicated methods of allocating places – which tend to be foundation and voluntary aided schools – are generally more socially exclusive than their local authority-run counterparts.

The Government’s decision to introduce Choice Advisers in every area to help parents make sense of the system is therefore a welcome – if under-funded – step forward. But we should not underestimate the challenge in communicating the increasing complex admissions system that now operates for schools.

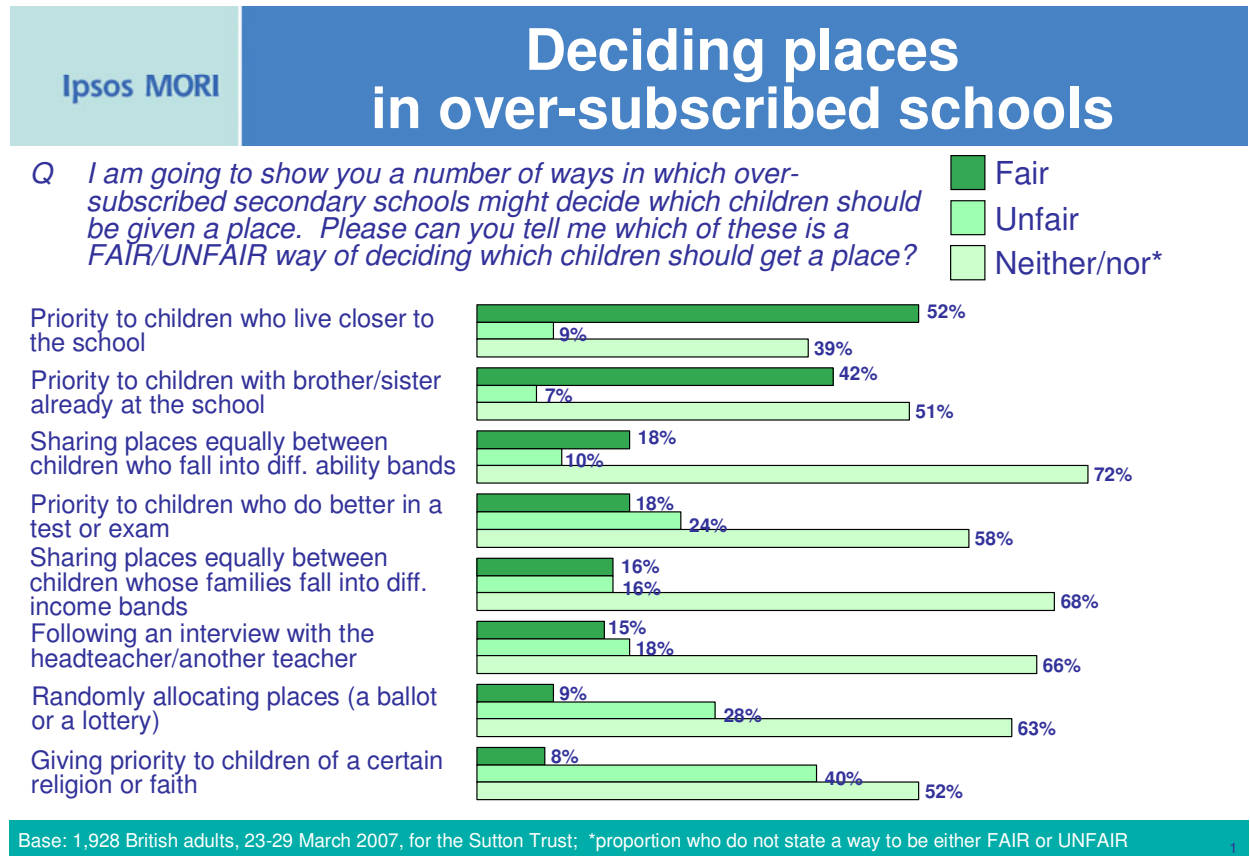
The survey’s findings also suggest that a ‘one size fits all’ approach to admissions is not workable. Rather than being black or white, for the majority of respondents there are several shades of grey - what is appropriate in determining the intake of an inner city area served by many schools, for example, may not be suitable to a rural area with one comprehensive. Equally, any admissions process – whether based on proximity, lottery or religion - will have its winners and losers; there is no definitive solution.

While this suggests that a uniform school admissions policy is not realistic, a strong framework which ensures equity in a diverse system is certainly needed if our schools are not to become even more socially segregated. The strengthened school admissions code, which came in to effect in February 2007, goes some way to providing this, and the Trust will be monitoring its impact on the social makeup of our schools following these changes.

Result of Ipsos MORI poll

The following is a summary of findings from a survey undertaken by Ipsos MORI between the 23 and 29 March 2007, comprising interviews with a representative cross-section of 1,928 adults.

Summary of findings: question 1



- A high proportion of respondents were unable to describe any of the methods of allocating school places as either fair or unfair, indicating both that the issue of school admissions is complex – one criterion may be fair in one context, but not in another – and that many may feel they do not understand the issues sufficiently to make a judgement.
- Significantly, those from the higher social classes are more likely to express a definitive opinion than those from lower social groups. For instance, 13% of those from the C1C2 social class group – and 18% of DEs – could not say whether any of the admissions criteria listed were fair, compared to just 8% of respondents from the AB class.
- Across the social groups, respondents believed that the fairest way of allocating school places was by giving priority to children who live closest to the school (52% viewing this as fair, compared to 9% unfair).

- Selecting children on the basis of a certain religion or faith emerged as the way most frequently identified as unfair in allocating school places, with 40% of respondents saying it was unfair compared to 8% who said it was fair. The second least fair method was found to be by ballot, with 28% of respondents believing it to be unfair, although a significant 63% were unable to make up their minds. Again, this pattern was consistent across the social classes.

Summary of findings: question 2

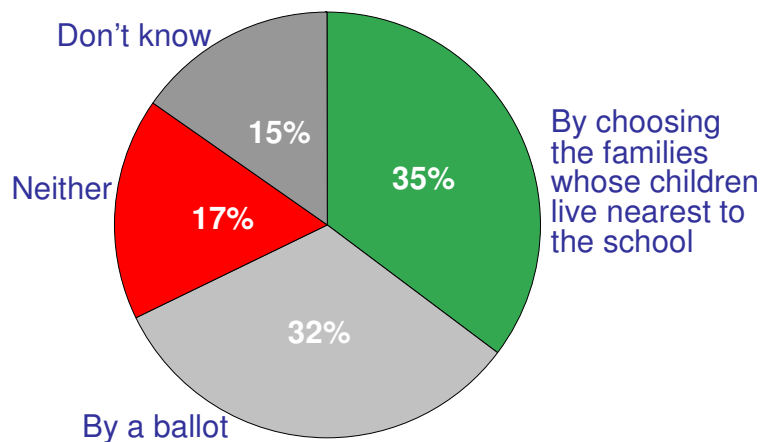
Scenario

A community comprehensive school has 100 places on offer, but 200 families have applied for these places. All of the families live within 2 miles of the school. The school first gives places to children with special educational needs and those with a brother or sister already at the school.

In your opinion, which is the fairer way of deciding which children get [the remaining places] at the school?



Q In your opinion, which is the fairer way of deciding which children get a place at the school?



Base: 1,928 British adults, 23-29 March 2007, for the Sutton Trust

- In this scenario almost as many respondents believed that a ballot is the fairest way of deciding which pupils get a place at the school (32%), as proximity (35%). This is particularly surprising in light of the responses to the first question, which revealed that allocating places by distance was more often identified as fair than by ballot.
- Again, a large percentage of respondents think that neither ballots nor proximity is a fairer way of making a decision (17%) or are unable to state which is preferable (15%).

Summary of findings: question 3

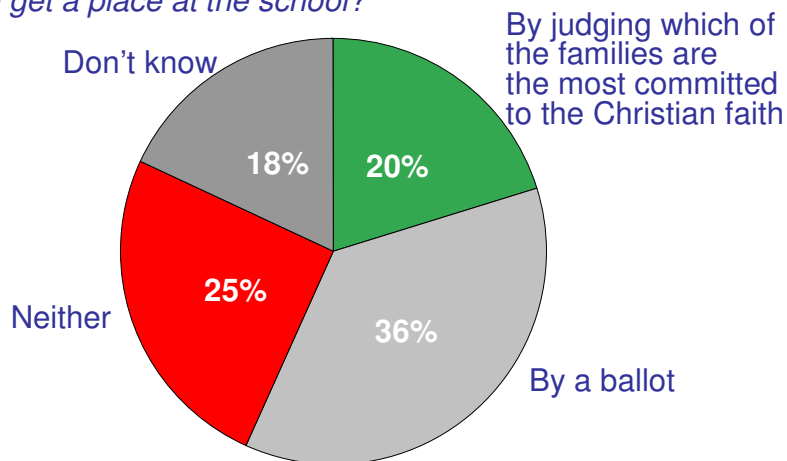
Scenario

A Christian faith secondary school has 100 places on offer, but 200 families have applied for these places. All of the families have been going to church regularly for at least two years. The school first gives places to children with special educational needs and those with a brother or sister already at the school.

In your opinion, which is the fairer way of deciding which children get [the remaining places] at the school?

Ipsos MORI Faith or ballot?

Q In your opinion, which is the fairer way of deciding which children get a place at the school?



Base: 1,928 British adults, 23-29 March 2007, for the Sutton Trust

- Of those who expressed an opinion, a greater proportion of respondents think that a ballot is the fairer way of deciding which pupils get a place at the school (36%) than using other measures of assessing commitment to the faith (20%).
- A significant 25% of respondents do not think either method is fairer, while 18% do not know.

International review of ballots

A review undertaken by RAND Europe for the Sutton Trust reveals that ballots have been deployed in many countries across the world, in both school and university admissions.

We list here some of the examples of the use of ballots. While they have been deployed in a number of different circumstances, some common features emerge.

First, ballots are part of wider school reforms in different states and countries to introduce more choice for prospective pupils when applying for places at school. These reforms include the introduction of new schools to provide more choice, the use of vouchers to enable parents to use state funds to apply to different schools, and the relaxing of admissions rules so that pupils can apply to more than just their schools.

Second, random allocation is a tool used to deal with one of the inevitable consequences of greater school choice: oversubscribed schools. Outside the UK at least, it is assumed to be a fair way of dealing with the problem of deciding who gets a place when there are more applications than places at a school.

Third, ballots are only deployed in conjunction with other criteria or constraints. There are no pure lotteries. Pupils and parents are guaranteed a place at their local school while given the opportunity of extra school choices with the possibility of being entered into a ballot. In other school systems, ballots only apply to a certain proportion of school places set aside for particular students – for example those from low income backgrounds.

Elsewhere, a series of ballots are organized for students of different gender, race and year group, and (for universities) exam or test scores. Similarly, they are undertaken separately for pupils grouped according to different priority criteria, including for example eligibility for free school meals.

Fourth, public debate overseas has focused on concerns over which types of pupils enter the ballots – not whether the ballots themselves are unfair or not. In some systems, research suggests that wealthier students shun extra choice and the prospect of ballots – sticking with their local better performing schools. In others, however, it is the more privileged pupils that appear to be more likely to exercise their choice and potentially enter ballots for better schools.

The issue of whether ballots in themselves are fair or not has not been investigated by researchers overseas because it is seen as a non-issue. US academics when asked for example report that as far as they are aware the US public believe that random allocation is a fair and transparent way of deciding who wins school places when schools are oversubscribed.

One issue that has been debated is whether popular schools should be allowed to expand. Some academics have argued that ballots would then be a short term solution until the supply of places in those institutions is expanded.

Examples of ballot schemes across the world

Milwaukee Parental Choice Programme

1. Schools involved

Independent (primary and secondary) schools in Milwaukee. In 2007-08 151 schools will take part in the scheme.

2. Aims of overall choice programme

The choice programme aims to give pupils from low-income families the choice of attending private schools.

3. Which pupils are involved

Pupils from low income households (a total of 17,410 as of January 2007) whose school

4. General criteria used in allocating school places

Schools must accept all eligible applications and cannot select on the basis of race, ethnic background, religion, prior test scores, school grade (year), or 'membership of the church parish'.

5. Criteria used in conjunction with lottery

None. If applications exceed the number of places available in the independent school, a random lottery decides the selection of students.

6. What the research has said

Some research has suggested improvement in the achievement of students placed in independent schools compared with students denied a place. Other studies have shown an insignificant impact.

Charlotte-Mecklenburg school district, North Carolina

1. Schools involved

State schools in Charlotte-Mecklenburg

2. Aims of overall choice programme

In response to a court order which abolished race-based bussing to achieve desegregation, the Charlotte-Mecklenburg school district initiated a choice-based system in 2002.

3. Which pupils are involved

All students

4. General criteria used in allocating school places

Each pupil is guaranteed a place at a neighbourhood 'home school', usually the school closest to them. Pupils choosing 'non-home' schools are ranked in relation to three priority criteria -- previous school attendance, free lunch eligibility, and proximity ('school choice zone')

5. Criteria used in conjunction with lottery

Separate ballots for groups of students in these three priority groups decide school places remaining after home school students are accommodated. If a school is not filled by those listing it as a first choice, the process repeats with those listing the school as a second choice.

6. What the research has said

One study found that wealthier, white students (not eligible for the federally funded free-lunch programme) were more likely to list only their home school- because the average quality of their home schools is significantly higher than others in the system. Among all students not eligible for free lunch, non-white students were twice as likely as white students to list three choices.

Chicago Public Schools, Illinois

1. Schools involved

State schools in Chicago

2. Aims of overall choice programme

To widen school choice in the Chicago area.

3. Which pupils are involved

More than half of high school students in 2000 and 2001 applied to non neighbourhood schools, which use ballots to allocate places when oversubscribed.

4. General criteria used in allocating school places

Each student is guaranteed admission to their neighbourhood school, but can also apply to any other state school in Chicago.

5. Criteria used in conjunction with lottery

When assessing applications from pupils outside their neighbourhood, schools use ballots to allocate places. Separate ballots are used for different groups of pupils organised according to gender, race and grade (year group). Schools also conduct separate lotteries for each 'magnet school' programme.

6. What the research has said

One study found that students entering lotteries are less likely to be black or male, have substantially lower test scores, and are less likely to be poor (as proxied by free lunch eligibility and census tracked poverty rates).

Universal voucher system in Sweden

1. Schools involved

Independent (primary and secondary) schools in Sweden. By the year 2002, there were over 800 such schools.

2. Aims of overall choice programme

Sweden introduced a universal voucher scheme in 1992 to widen choice in its school system. The reforms meant that local municipalities became responsible for schools and their financing. Independent schools became eligible to receive funding from municipalities. Pupils could use financial vouchers paid by municipalities to attend the independent schools instead of state schools.

3. Which pupils are involved

All students who are provided vouchers by the state to attend the schools. In 2002, these students accounted for about 5% of the overall school population.

4. General criteria used in allocating school places

Schools are prohibited from charging fees and are not allowed to select pupils by ability. Students are selected on the basis of the date of application with a preference for early applications.

5. Criteria used in conjunction with lottery

None

6. What the research has said

Although academic results vary by school, independent schools generally outperform state schools. Evidence also suggests that competition from independent schools has improved the performance of state schools in the country. The proportion of disabled and socio-economically disadvantaged pupils in independent schools tends to be higher than in state schools.

New Zealand Enrolment scheme

1. Schools involved

All (primary and secondary) schools in New Zealand.

2. Aims of overall choice programme

To manage choice among pupils and also prevent overcrowding at popular schools

3. Which pupils are involved

Students who have applied to schools in other school districts ('out of zone' students)

4. General criteria used in allocating school places

Pupils living in a defined locality of a school -- or 'home zone' -- are guaranteed places at the school

Certain numbers of pupils living outside the 'home zone' are allocated places in the following categories:

1. those in a special programme run by the school (for example programmes aimed at the intake of ethnic minorities or pupils with special needs);
2. siblings of current students;
3. siblings of former students;
4. children of board employees;
5. other pupils.

5. Criteria used in conjunction with lottery

Ballots are undertaken when the school receives more applications than available places set aside for the categories 2-5 above. In category 1 all students are accepted

6. What the research has said

One study has concluded that house prices have become inflated in 'home zone' areas for popular schools, restricting intakes for children from less privileged backgrounds.

Dutch university medical schools

1. University schools involved

Dutch university medical schools (nine in total)

2. Aims of overall choice programme

To choose students for over-subscribed medical schools

3. Which pupils are involved

Medical students

4. General criteria used in allocating school places

Universities can select up to 50% of their intake on the basis of personal statements, tests, and interviews. Some also specifically use selection procedure to allocate places to graduates, ethnic minorities, and mature students.

Remaining places are allocated using a 'grade point average weighted lottery'. Places in medical schools are allocated through ballot but candidates with higher grade point average (GPA) scores are given more chance of success. The average chance of getting a place is about 35% compared to 70% for candidates with the highest GPAs. There are no limitations on how many years a student can enter the lottery.

5. Criteria used in conjunction with lottery

See above

6. What the research has said

In recent evaluations at four of the universities using selection, three universities found that selected students did not achieve better outcomes (academic achievement) than students allocated places through the lottery systems. They have decided to stop selection on the basis of costs associated with the selection procedure. One university did find better achievement in selected students and will continue with selection.

Swedish universities

1. Universities involved

All Swedish universities and higher education institutions

2. Aims of overall choice programme

University admissions process in Sweden

3. Which pupils are involved

All student applicants

4. General criteria used in allocating school places

A central agency assesses university applicants for degree courses according to a range of tests and examinations. Gender may also be used as a selection criterion. Applicants are first grouped in various categories. Within each category they are then ranked on the basis of their qualifications, such as school-leaving grades. Applicants who have been ranked highest are admitted to the programme.

5. Criteria used in conjunction with lottery

Swedish universities use random allocation when the number of applicants exceeds the number of places and two or more applicants have the same 'merit' value from tests and the gender criterion can not be used. Each applicant gets a random queue number by the computer system for each alternative they have applied to.

6. What the research has said

N/A