



The Social Composition of Top Comprehensive Schools

*Rates of Eligibility for Free School Meals at the 200
Highest Performing Comprehensive Schools*

January 2006

Summary

- In October 2005 the Sutton Trust released a survey looking at the proportion of pupils eligible for free school meals (FSM) at the top 200 state schools compared to both national averages and the postcode sectors in which the schools are sited. This found that the overall rate of FSM eligibility at these schools was 3%, compared to 12.3% in their local areas and 14.3% nationally. The top 200 included almost all the remaining grammar schools (161) and only 39 comprehensives, so it was decided to look separately at the top 200 comprehensives (6% of schools).
- Social selection is evident in top comprehensive schools: the overall proportion of pupils eligible for free school meals at the 200 highest performing comprehensives is 5.6%, compared to 11.5% of children in the postcode sectors of the schools, and 14.3% in secondary schools nationally.
- Comprehensive schools which act as their own admissions authorities are more likely to feature in the top 200 than those which do not, accounting for 31% of state secondary schools, but 70% of the top 200. These schools are unrepresentative of their local areas, with 5.8% of pupils eligible for FSM, compared to 13.7% in their postcode sectors – which is close to the national average of 14.3%.
- The 61 local authority controlled schools in the top 200 are generally found in affluent areas, with FSM rates of 5.9%, which is well below the national average. These schools are representative of their neighbourhoods, with a proportion of pupils on FSM of 5.0% - only one percentage point lower than the areas in which they are located.
- Faith schools account for 18% of all secondary schools, but 42% of the top 200 comprehensives, including 59% of the schools which act as their own admissions authorities. At 6% they have approximately the same proportion of pupils on FSM as non-faith schools within the sample, but the gap between school and area rates is much higher for faith schools – 9 percentage points, compared to 3 percentage points for non-faith schools.

Methodology

In October 2005 the Sutton Trust released a survey¹ looking at the proportion of pupils eligible for free school meals (FSM)² at the top 200 state schools compared to both national averages and the postcode sectors in which the schools are sited. This found that on both counts pupils from poorer homes were significantly underrepresented: the overall rate of FSM eligibility at these schools was 3%, compared to 12.3% in their local areas and 14.3% nationally.

This study builds on that work by focussing solely on the top comprehensive schools (of which there were only 39 in the original study), and aims to discover the extent to which pupils eligible for FSM do – or do not – attend high performing state schools when academic selection is not a factor.

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

In reviewing the results it is important to recognise that a school's postcode sector is not necessarily the same as its catchment area – which may be larger – and a school may not be situated in the middle of its postcode sector. It is also worth noting that in the absence of a more accurate measure, FSM rates can be interpreted as being indicative of a school's *overall* social mix: in schools with high numbers of FSM pupils, for instance, there are also likely to be substantial numbers of pupils from families with low or modest incomes and few – if any – from affluent homes.

¹ *Rates of Eligibility for Free School Meals at the Top 200 Schools* at www.suttontrust.com

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

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

⁴ A postcode sector is defined as being the first half of a postcode, plus the initial digit of the second half, e.g. SW15 2xx. These are areas which are similar in size to an electoral ward and typically contain 6510 people in 2702 households.

Overall Free School Meal Rates at the Top 200 Comprehensive Schools

Table 1: Free school meal (FSM) rates at the top 200 comprehensive

	Top 200 Comps	Secondary school average ⁵
Average school FSM rate	5.6%	14.3%
Average postcode FSM rate	11.5%	
Average percentage point gap (school minus area FSM rates)	5.9	

Young people from poorer homes are underrepresented at the top 200 comprehensives compared to both national and local averages. Eleven and a half percent of children in the postcode sectors of the leading comprehensives are eligible for free school meals, but fewer than half this proportion (5.6%) attend these schools.

Table 2: Spread of top 200 comprehensive schools by FSM eligibility rate

FSM eligibility rate	Number of top 200 comprehensives
0-2%	50 (25%)
3-5%	81 (40.5%)
6-8%	29 (14.5%)
9-11%	15 (7.5%)
12-14%	7 (3.5%)
15% plus	18 (9%)

Looking at the spread of the top schools by FSM band, only 9% of the top 200 comprehensives have a proportion of pupils on free school meals that is above the national average, and 65% have FSM rates which are less than 5%, including 25% with less than 2%.

⁵ For consistency we have continued to use the average for 2003/4. The 2004/5 national average for England, as cited in the DfES's *Statistics of Education 2005*, is 14.0%.

Table 3: Spread of top 200 comprehensives by difference between school and area FSM rates

FSM gap (school FSM rate minus area rate)	Number of top 200	%
No gap or 'positive gap'	61	30.5%
1-4% points	61	30.5%
5-9%	39	19.5%
10-14%	22	11%
15-19%	5	2.5%
20-24%	1	0.5%
25-29%	2	0.5%
30% points +	9	4.5%

If the postcode sectors in which the schools are found are also taken into account, we find that 70% of the top 200 comprehensives are taking fewer pupils on free school meals than exist in their immediate areas, including over one third (34.5%) which are significantly unrepresentative of their postcode sector with gaps of 5 or more percentage points. Forty-four of the top 200 comprehensives have a 'positive gap', meaning they are taking a greater share of FSM pupils than live in their local area, but they are almost all located in affluent neighbourhoods.

Characteristics of the Top Comprehensives

In order to establish the factors that may be working to exclude poorer pupils from high-performing comprehensives, we have split the sample by the school's governance structure, whether it is single sex or mixed, and whether it is of a religious or non-religious character.⁶

Table 4: Top 200 comprehensive schools split by school structure

School Type	% of sample	% of secondary schools ⁷	School FSM	Area FSM	% point gap
<u>Own admissions authorities</u>					
Voluntary Aided Schools (n=88)	44%	16.1%	5.6%	14.6%	9.0
Foundation Schools (n=40)	20%	15.0%	4.2%	8.7%	4.5
City Technology Colleges (n=11)	5.5%	0.4%	14.0%	25.6%	11.6
TOTAL (n=139)	69.5%	31.5%	5.8%	13.7%	7.9%
<u>LEA controlled admissions</u>					
Community Schools (n=57)	28.5%	64.5%	5.0%	5.9%	0.9
Voluntary Controlled School (n=4)	2%	3.6%	3.9%	5.9%	2.0
TOTAL (n=61)	30.5%	68.5%	5.0%	5.9%	0.9

As can be seen from the above table, CTCs, Foundation and Voluntary Aided schools - which act as their own admissions authorities - are overrepresented in the top 200 (70% of the sample compared to 32% nationally), but are also least reflective of their local areas in terms of FSM rates. For example, the gap between the average FSM rate for a Voluntary Aided school and its postcode sector is 9 percentage points, ten times greater than for a Community school. Although most of the schools in the sample which act as their own admissions authorities are Voluntary Aided religious schools, a significant number are also non-religious Foundation schools.

Schools with admissions controlled by the local education authority (Community and Voluntary Controlled schools) are underrepresented amongst the top 200 comprehensives, accounting for 30% of the sample, but 70% of schools nationally. The areas in which these schools are sited are notably more affluent than those of Voluntary Aided or Foundation schools, and – most likely because their selection processes are based principally on geography – their intakes reflect more closely their immediate areas, with FSM rates of 5.0% compared to 5.9% in their neighbourhoods, well below the national average of 14.3%.

⁶ Please see Appendix 1 for a more detailed breakdown of the makeup of the top 200, and Appendix 2 for an explanation of the various types of school.

⁷ *The Statistics of Education, 2004 Edition*, DfES (includes Academies and CTCs)

Mixed or single sex

School Characteristic	% of sample	% of secondary schools	School FSM	Area FSM	Gap
Single Sex School (n=48)	24%	11.9%	7.3%	15.4%	8.1%
Mixed School (n=152)	76%	88.1%	5.1%	10.2%	5.1%

The majority of the top 200 comprehensives are mixed schools, but there is twice the proportion of single sex schools in the sample (24%) compared to the national average (12%). The leading single sex institutions tend to have more affluent intakes than their mixed counterparts, both in absolute terms and in comparison to their local areas which have, on average, higher rates of FSM eligibility. Seventy-seven percent of single sex schools within the top 200 comprehensives are girls' schools, compared to 55% of the single sex secondary schools in England.

Religion

School Characteristic	% of sample	% of secondary schools	School FSM	Area FSM	Gap
Non Faith School (n=116)	58%	82.1%	5.3%	8.6%	3.3%
Faith School (n=84)	42%	17.9%	5.9%	15.2%	9.3%

Again, there is a much higher proportion of faith schools in the top 200 (42%) than nationwide (17.9% at secondary level), and these tend to be found in areas with FSM rates close to the national average - in contrast to non-faith schools - and yet they are less reflective of their neighbourhoods. Eighty of the 84 faith schools have Voluntary Aided status.

Conclusions

Because of the link which exists between academic attainment and social class, it is perhaps not surprising that the country's remaining grammar schools admit relatively few pupils eligible for free school meals. This study shows clearly, however, that even when academic selection is taken out of the equation, social selection, by overt or covert means, is evident in high-performing comprehensive schools, which take a little over a third as many pupils on free school meals as the national average.

The data indicate that this is not simply attributable to the location of these schools: one quarter are found in neighbourhoods with FSM rates above the national average, and two thirds fail to take a proportion of FSM pupils which reflects their postcode sectors. Notably, those schools which act as their own admissions authorities admit a smaller percentage of FSM pupils - both in absolute terms and in relation to their local areas - than those schools under local authority control. But although LEA controlled schools in the top 200 tend to be more reflective of their immediate environs, they also tend to be sited in more affluent neighbourhoods, so relatively few children from less well off homes are likely to have access to them.

The reasons underlying these patterns are complicated and the solutions far from straightforward. Not least it may be *because* of the social exclusivity of these schools that they are high performing in the first place; a more balanced social intake could cause their league table rankings to fall. But this is hardly a reason for complacency or inaction.

On a practical level, top schools should introduce programmes aimed at attracting poorer pupils from homes on their doorsteps, helping them to overcome the real and perceived obstacles which stand in their way. For a number of years the Sutton Trust has successfully run a curriculum enrichment project at the Pate's school in Cheltenham, which targets local primary schools serving the least affluent areas, and which aims to raise the attainment and aspirations of children and their parents. Other grammar schools are already using this model to broaden the social mix of their intakes, and similar outreach initiatives could be equally effective in high-achieving comprehensives.

We know from previous research that affluent parents have the confidence and know-how to negotiate complicated admissions arrangements, and their children are much more likely to travel longer distances to attend a good school⁸. The proposals for choice advisers and extended school transport to FSM pupils – both of which are in the Government's White Paper, *Higher Standards, Better Schools for All* – are therefore also important steps in the right direction. If properly implemented, and combined with the sort of school outreach programmes described above, these measures will increase the opportunities for disadvantaged families to access leading schools, particularly those which recruit from a wide region and are heavily oversubscribed.

More widely, we need to address the root causes of such an uneven state school system, in which some schools take very few local pupils on free school meals while economic disadvantage is concentrated in others, creating a spiral of underachievement. In part this is the product of an inconsistent admissions system, under which some schools act as their own admissions authority and others do not, which leads to a two tier system. We believe that all schools should be encouraged to handle their own admission arrangements, but – to guard against the social selectivity identified in this report – that their decisions should be underpinned by a fair and robust Code of Practice which is rigorously enforced by the local authority.

⁸ See *No More School Run – Proposals for a national yellow bus scheme in the UK* at www.suttontrust.com

The social exclusivity revealed in the top state schools must be seen alongside the even greater exclusivity of the private sector. The implications for social mobility are severe. Research undertaken by the Centre for Economic Performance at the London School of Economics, and released by the Trust last April⁹, found that the strengthening of the link between educational attainment and family income was a major reason why social mobility in the UK is low compared to other countries and has declined. A secondary school system, in which the top performing state and independent schools are open to all, would be a major spur to social mobility.

⁹ See *Intergenerational Mobility in Europe and North America* at www.suttontrust.com.

Appendix 1: Breakdown of top 200 by school type

		Voluntary Aided	Foundation	CTC	Community	Voluntary Controlled
TOTAL	200	88	40	11	57	4
Single Sex	48	26	10	0	11	1
Mixed	152	62	30	11	46	3
Religious	84	80	2	0	0	2
Non religious	116	8	38	11	57	2

Appendix 2: Explanation of school structures

Based on definition in *Statistics of Education, 2004*, DfES.

Voluntary Aided schools – The governing body employ the school’s staff and have primary responsibility for admissions arrangements. The school’s land and buildings are normally owned by a charitable foundation. The governing body contribute towards the capital costs of running the school.

Foundation schools - The governing body employ the school’s staff and have primary responsibility for admission arrangements. The school’s land and buildings are owned by the governing body or by a charitable foundation.

City Technology Colleges - These take the form of a charitable company limited by guarantee. The sponsors constitute an educational trust and will own or lease the college and appoint their representatives to the Board of Governors. The members of a CTC will consist of nominees of the sponsoring company and the Secretary of State.

Community schools - Community schools are very similar to former county schools. The LEA employs the school’s staff, owns the school’s land and buildings and has primary responsibility for deciding the arrangements for admitting pupils.

Voluntary Controlled schools - The LEA employ the school’s staff and have primary responsibility for admission arrangements. The school’s land and buildings are normally owned by a charitable foundation.