

# SELECTIVE COMPREHENSIVES: GREAT BRITAIN

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Access to top performing schools for disadvantaged pupils in Scotland, Wales and England

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Jens Van den Brande, Jude Hillary and Carl Cullinane  
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## About the Sutton Trust

The Sutton Trust is a foundation which improves social mobility in the UK through evidence-based programmes, research and policy advocacy.

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## Foreword

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There is nothing more important for promoting social mobility in schools than access to the best teaching. Great teachers in great schools have the most positive impact on the disadvantaged pupils who need it most. But too often, those from less well-off homes don't have access to the best schools and the best teachers. Who gets into highly successful schools matters, because these students are more likely to go to a top university and get into jobs in the most sought-after professions.

Since 2005, the Sutton Trust has conducted ground-breaking work looking at the social composition of top comprehensive schools in England. It has shown consistently that the highest performing state schools have intakes hugely different to the typical comprehensive. It has also demonstrated that many of these schools are unrepresentative of the neighbourhoods around them, taking in fewer disadvantaged pupils than live in the catchment areas they draw from.

The Trust's *Parent Power* research has illustrated how the differing financial and cultural resources of parents influence a child's path through education, from choosing the best school to attend, navigating admissions and appeals processes, to buying homes in the catchment areas of prestigious schools. There are huge inequalities in the power of parents to promote the educational success of their offspring.

Today's report for the first time extends our analysis of state school admissions to Wales and Scotland. Both countries' school systems share commonalities with England, but all three nations have their own unique features and challenges. England has a selective grammar system alongside its comprehensive schools, along with extensive decentralised powers for schools. Wales has a school system with two official languages. While Scotland has a more traditional setup where councils allocate school places and most pupils attend their local school.

All three systems have great strengths, but all three share Britain's great problem of low social mobility, and substantial educational inequality. This report serves to demonstrate how thorny this problem really is. Despite their differences in geography, culture and education policy, the three nations have strikingly similar patterns of social inequalities across their school systems. The best schools in all three countries admit just half of the proportion of disadvantaged pupils in each nation as a whole.

In England and Wales the problem is two-fold, with the best schools also failing to represent the communities around them. While these schools are, by and large, not using forms of overt selection, they are, in effect, exercising covert selection. Often complex admissions criteria, appeals processes and transport issues all provide barriers to families in less well-off circumstances.

There is also a tension between fair admissions and setting catchment areas entirely defined by proximity to a school. This favours those who can afford houses near the best schools. A divided state school system, where the top schools are located in affluent areas, serving pupils from advantaged backgrounds, is a disaster for social mobility. This is why we want to see more use of priority for disadvantaged pupils, and ballots - where a proportion of places is allocated randomly, to achieve a genuinely balanced intake.

The state school system is the bedrock of education across Great Britain. But there is work still to do to make sure the benefits of comprehensive schooling are available to children regardless of their background.

I would like to thank the authors Jens Van den Brande and Jude Hillary for their work on this vital issue.

**Sir Peter Lampl**

**Founder of the Sutton Trust and Chairman of the Education Endowment Foundation**

## Executive summaries

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### Overview

- Building on *Selective Comprehensives 2017*, which looked at high performing secondary schools in England and how socially representative they are, the Trust has conducted further studies looking at schools in Scotland and Wales. These looked at the proportion of pupils eligible for Free School Meals at the top fifth performing schools (top sixth in England), comparing this with both the national average and with their local catchment area.
- In all three nations, the proportion of disadvantaged pupils at the best schools was around half of the average, showing that their intakes are substantially different from the norm. In all three nations the average deprivation rank of all schools is near the 50<sup>th</sup> percentile (the middle), however the groups of top performing schools on average drew students from among the most advantaged areas in each country: in England the 72<sup>nd</sup> percentile, in Wales the 82<sup>nd</sup>, with Scotland the highest at 87<sup>th</sup>.
- The reasons for these differences varied between nations. In England and Wales, about half of the disadvantage gap can be explained by the location of the best schools in more affluent areas. In England, the FSM rates in the catchment areas of top schools was 12.8%, 4.7 percentage points below the national average. In Wales it was 13.6%, 5.2 below the national average. In Scotland however, where most children attend their nearest school, the FSM catchment rate for a top school was even lower at 9.1%, 7.2 percentage points beneath the national average.
- In England and Wales therefore, the underrepresentation of disadvantaged pupils is also as a result of schools admitting lower rates of disadvantaged pupils than live in their catchment areas. There are gaps of 3 to 4 percentage points between catchment FSM rates and the intakes of top schools in England and Wales.

**Table 1: FSM rates in top performing comprehensives and their catchments compared to the national averages**

	Overall rate of disadvantage	Average rate in catchment area of top school	Rate of disadvantage attending top school
England	17.5%	12.8%	9.4%
Wales	18.8%	13.6%	9.6%
Scotland	16.3%	9.1%	8.2%

- However, the equivalent gap in Scotland is less than one percentage point. While the best Scottish schools are equally as unrepresentative as those in England and Wales, this is almost entirely as a result of their concentration in more affluent areas, and not due to social selectivity within their catchment areas.
- The landscape of school admissions is different in the three countries, with distinctive factors influencing the admissions processes in schools. In England, as a result of the academisation process over the past two decades, 89% of top secondary schools can act as their own admissions authority. In Wales just 17% of top schools control their own admissions - at

voluntary aided (faith) schools and foundation schools. Whereas in Scotland, all school admissions are controlled by local authorities.

- In England and Wales, FSM gaps are over twice as large in schools which control their own admissions, compared to those with local authority controlled admissions.
- Across all three nations, faith schools under-represent the rates of disadvantage in their catchment areas. Faith schools, particularly in Wales and England, have been traditionally associated with strong academic performance, and are over-represented among the group of top schools. In England there is a 6 percentage point gap between the FSM rate in the catchment areas of faith schools and their actual intake, and a 10 percentage point gap in Wales. Secondary denominational schools in Scotland are different in nature however, as they are restricted to just Roman Catholic schools, which have historically provided for more deprived populations. The gap at such schools is less than 2 percentage points.
- The situation in Wales is also characterised by the distinctive issue of language. Welsh medium schools play a dual role of catering to the Welsh language communities, but have also been traditionally viewed as high quality schools. They are also key to Welsh government targets of 1 million Welsh speakers by 2050. However, Welsh language schools have FSM gaps almost twice as large as English language schools (6 percentage points, compared to 3.5 percentage points).

## *Scotland*

- The 70 top performing state schools in Scotland were calculated, based on the proportion of pupils achieving at least 4 A to C grades in their SCQF level 5 qualifications. These top schools have an average of just 8.2% of pupils who are registered for free school meals (FSM), about half of the average rate for all schools nationally (16.3%). Almost two thirds (63%) of top performing schools have FSM rates below 10%, compared to 30% of all schools.
- Due to a different admissions system compared to England and Wales, the vast majority of pupils attend their local school in Scotland. As a consequence, the average proportion of disadvantaged pupils attending these 70 top performing schools is very similar to the average levels of disadvantage in their catchment areas. While 57% of top performing schools take slightly fewer disadvantaged pupils than their catchment area, 39% take slightly more. The average gap is less than one percentage point. High performing Scottish schools are thus quite reflective of their local area.
- The average FSM rate in the catchment area of a top performing school is 9.1%. This suggests their lower FSM rate is almost entirely due to these schools being located in more affluent areas, with a gap of over 7 percentage points to the national average. Nearly four out of five top performing schools are ranked in the 40% most affluent areas of the country, based on the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation measure.
- Secondary denominational state schools in Scotland are all Roman Catholic. They have a higher proportion of disadvantage than average, but admit slightly lower rates of disadvantaged pupils than in their locality. Denominational schools have wider catchment areas than other schools, so this gap may reflect transport issues and willingness to travel, along with the demographics of their local faith community.

- In contrast to England and Wales, the vast majority of pupils in Scotland attend their closest school. While this reduces the level of *de facto* social selection in admissions, this still results in a highly socially segregated school system. While the average deprivation for those attending all schools in Scotland is in the 52<sup>nd</sup> percentile (about the middle), those attending the top performing schools come from areas in the 87<sup>th</sup> percentile of deprivation (among the most advantaged in the country). Furthermore, levels of disadvantage at top performing schools are about half of the national average, comparable with England and Wales.

## *Wales*

- There are large differences in the socio-economic make-up of the top performing comprehensive schools when compared to other secondary schools in Wales. The top 40 performing schools were calculated, based on the proportion of pupils achieving at least 5 A\* to C grades in their Key Stage 4 level qualifications. These schools have on average just 9.6% of pupils who are eligible for free school meals. This is just over half of the average FSM rate for all schools in Wales (18.4%).
- The average FSM rate in the catchment areas of top performing comprehensives is 13.6%, which is nearly five percentage points lower than the average FSM rate for all schools in Wales. As in Scotland, four out of five top schools are located in the 40% most affluent areas (according to the Welsh Index of Multiple Deprivation). About half of the overall FSM gap is due to the location of these schools in more affluent areas.
- After accounting for the impact of the schools' location, there remains a four-percentage point difference between the average FSM rates of top performing schools and their catchment areas. Three quarters of top schools have intakes with lower proportions of FSM than their catchment areas, with 45% having a gap of five percentage points or more.
- Top performing voluntary aided (faith) schools have a slightly higher average proportion of FSM pupils compared to other school types in the top performing group. However, the social composition of such schools is lower than in their catchment areas. For top performing faith schools, the difference is nearly 10 percentage points.
- Language is a key issue in the Welsh education system. Welsh medium schools have on average a lower proportion of disadvantaged pupils (10.3%), when compared to bilingual (13.7%) and English medium (21.2%) schools. This is also reflected among the highest performing Welsh medium schools. Such schools also have a lower average proportion of FSM pupils compared to their catchment areas, with an FSM gap of 6 percentage points, compared to 3.5 for English schools, and less than 1 for bilingual schools.
- The impact of language also has a regional element. Central South Wales and West Wales have a large proportion of the best schools (73%), and the biggest FSM gaps. Much of this is due to a group of high performing Welsh language schools, catering to middle class parents living in those areas. This reflects the fact that linguistic demographics are substantially different in places like Cardiff compared to North Wales.

## Recommendations

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### *Scotland*

- 1. The Scottish Government should work with local councils and school leaders of the top performing schools to increase the socio-economic diversity of their intake.** While the top 70 performing schools are reflective of their local areas, they have very different intakes to the average school. In order to increase access to the best schools for disadvantaged pupils, councils and the Scottish Government must look at how the admissions processes could be changed. This could include:
  - Setting admissions targets for schools, particularly those in urban areas, for pupils registered for free school meals, to reflect the numbers in their catchment area.
  - When deciding catchment areas, particularly in urban areas, councils should look at drawing boundaries which consider the socio-economic diversity of the school intake.
- 2. Deprived families should receive greater support in terms of transport.** Given the geographical and social segregation of Scotland's best schools, pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds should be entitled to the costs of transport to attend a school outside of their immediate area. Parents in deprived areas should be kept informed about their right to transportation.
- 3. There should be a focus on improving standards at schools in deprived areas, so that pupils of all backgrounds have access to good schools.** Given the level of social segregation across the school system and the emphasis on attending local schools, in order to facilitate social mobility, schools in deprived areas must be targeted for improvements. The introduction of the 'Pupil Equity Fund' (after the timescale examined in this report), similar to England's pupil premium policy, is a positive move.
- 4. In the longer term, the Scottish government should review how to broaden access to high performing schools. For example, consideration should be given to a system with fewer incentives for middle class parents to purchase homes in the catchment areas of attractive schools. Use of random allocation (ballots) could form a central part of this.** While proximity to school is important for local communities, it risks reinforcing social segregation by incentivising well-off parents to buy into the catchment areas of the best schools. Creating 'inner' catchment areas, with places allocated based on proximity, alongside a larger 'outer' catchment area, with random ballots, could help to allow more equal access to the best schools.

## *Wales*

1. **The Welsh Government should work with the Regional Consortia, local authorities and school leaders of the top performing schools to increase the socio-economic diversity of their intake.** Most of the best performing schools have levels of disadvantage both lower than their local area and the national average. To improve social mobility, there must be increased access to the best schools for those from disadvantaged backgrounds.
2. **Local authorities, particularly in urban areas, should consider implementing random allocation ballots for admission,** to ensure a wider mix of pupils have access to the best schools. Reducing the emphasis on geographical proximity will allow fairer access to the best schools and limit socially divisive incentives for house buying and gaming the system. Ballots should be introduced alongside large catchment areas in order to maximise the potential socio-economic diversity of the catchment.
3. **Schools should give students entitled to free school meals priority in school applications when places are oversubscribed.** The Welsh Schools Admissions Code should allow for and encourage the use of pupil premium or free school meals eligibility as an oversubscription criterion. More schools, particularly high performing schools, should move to implement this in order to create a more socially balanced intake and better reflect their local communities.
4. **Faith schools need to look at their recruitment of disadvantaged pupils.** Faith schools are among the most socially selective of schools both in England and Wales. The admissions process for faith schools should be opened up so that their admissions are fairer, and reflect their local population, while maintaining their ethos.
5. **The Welsh Government, Regional Consortia, and Welsh language schools should work together to explore why pupils from low income families are less likely to attend Welsh language schools.** Welsh language schools admit substantially fewer disadvantaged pupils than their local area, particularly in South Central and West Wales. Barriers to entry should be explored, and solutions found, including:
  - Priority for disadvantaged pupils as an oversubscription criterion.
  - Better outreach to families and primary schools in more deprived areas of the locality.
  - Better information provided to parents in deprived areas on the right to transport, and the benefits of such schools.

As it is difficult to transition from an English medium primary to a Welsh medium secondary, the focus here should be on primary schools also.

6. **The Welsh Government's Welsh Language Strategy states that disadvantage should not be a barrier to the Welsh language. It should seek to ensure that Welsh language education is available on an equitable basis to those from all socio-economic backgrounds.**

## *England*

1. **More schools, particularly in urban areas, should take the opportunity where they are responsible for their own admissions to introduce random allocation ballots** to ensure that a wider mix of pupils has access to the most academically successful comprehensives. Reducing the emphasis on geographical proximity will allow fairer access to the best schools and limit socially divisive incentives for house buying and gaming the system. Ballots should be introduced alongside large catchment areas in order to maximise the potential socioeconomic diversity of the catchment.
2. **Schools should give pupil premium students priority in school applications when places are oversubscribed.** The Schools Admissions Code currently allows for the use of pupil premium status as an oversubscription criterion, so more schools, particularly high performing schools, should move to implement this in order to create a more socially balanced intake and better reflect their local communities.
3. **The Government should improve the range and quality of information available to working class parents.** The Government should find ways, working with community groups, consumer agencies and businesses that are successful in working class communities - to make it easier for all parents to access as rich a range of information to facilitate informed choice-making over their children's education, including through digital innovation.
4. **It is particularly important that parents are aware not just of the school choices available, but of their rights to free transport** to a choice of three schools within six miles of their home (or up to 15 miles for faith schools) if their child is eligible for Free School Meals.

## Introduction

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Comprehensive schools offer a platform to foster educational equity by educating and improving the skills of pupils across the whole socio-economic spectrum. However, consistency and equal access to high quality education is key for a comprehensive system to provide a platform for upward social mobility. However, in a system with substantial variation in school quality, it becomes essential that access to the best schools is equitably and fairly distributed. Measuring school quality is a complex issue, but for the purpose of this report we look at schools with the highest levels of attainment. Examining who is admitted to top performing schools matters, because they are the ones who are most likely to attend the best universities and most likely to succeed in the top professions.

Over the last 15 years, and most recently in 2017,<sup>1</sup> the Sutton Trust has analysed the extent to which top performing comprehensives in England reflect their local catchment areas. These reports have consistently shown that England's top comprehensive schools are, in practice, often highly socially selective, admitting much lower proportions of pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds than the national average, and even than their immediate locality.

The English school system is also characterised by localised academic selection in the form of its remaining 163 grammar schools. This report focuses on comprehensive admissions only, but it should be noted that England's grammar schools, many of which are among the highest performing schools in the state sector, are extremely socially exclusive,<sup>2</sup> to a much greater degree than the top comprehensives in this report.

There remains however a question about the extent to which the unequal access to high performing comprehensives is unique to England, or whether it is replicated in other parts of Great Britain. To answer this, the Sutton Trust has commissioned two further reports, which consider the extent to which the top performing schools in Scotland and Wales reflect their catchment areas. While secondary schools in Scotland are not generally referred to as 'comprehensives', this report uses this terminology for consistency across the three nations. This summary provides an overview of the three reports and highlights areas of commonality and differences across the three nations.

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<sup>1</sup> Selective Comprehensives 2017, Sutton Trust

<sup>2</sup> Gaps in Grammar, Sutton Trust

## Methodology

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The data used for the reports has been sourced from public Department for Education (DfE), Scottish Government and Welsh Government figures, in combination with pupil level data sourced from the respective government departments, which was gathered and analysed for the Sutton Trust by the National Foundation for Educational Research.

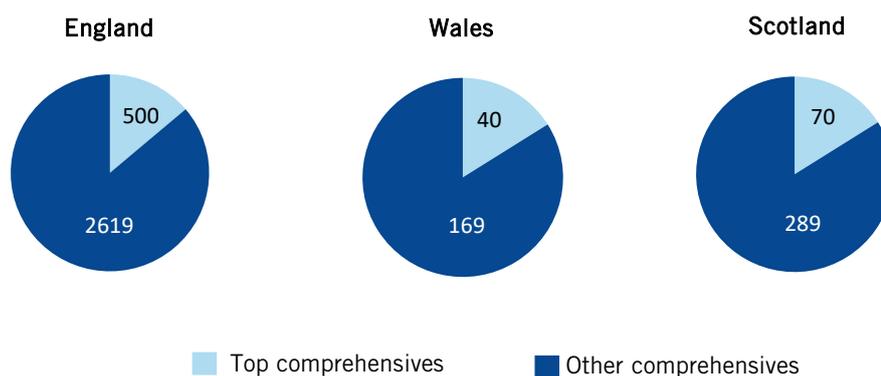
In order to assess the social composition of comprehensive schools, the number of pupils eligible for Free School Meals (FSM) was used. We should note that the FSM measure used across the three nations was not consistent; in England the measure used was whether a pupils has been eligible for FSM at any point in the last six years (described as 'FSM ever', and consistent with pupil premium eligibility). In Scotland, the measure describes whether a pupil was registered for FSM when the data was collected, and in Wales the measure describes whether a pupil was eligible for FSM at the point the data was collected. Therefore, a direct comparison between FSM levels in England to those in Scotland and Wales should not be made. However, comparing the relative differences between the FSM rates in the top performing schools in each nation to its respective national average is an accurate comparison to draw.

To assess robustly the extent to which schools are not catering for disadvantaged pupils, one needs to compare the profile of the pupils admitted to the school with those who could have been admitted. To do this, school catchment areas were created based on detailed data across three years of admissions, looking at where schools have recruited from. This ensured a flexible and realistic picture was created of where schools actually draw their pupils from, rather than using administrative boundaries or distance-based methods. More information on this process is included in the methodologies of each report.

To measure the social selectivity of a school, the proportion of FSM eligible pupils admitted in year 7 (or in Scotland S1, the equivalent of year 8) over three years was calculated. For England and Scotland, the three intake years used were the academic years 2014 to 2016, while for Wales it was 2015 to 2017. The school's average FSM rate in those years was then compared with the proportion of FSM eligible pupils in its catchment area.

To identify the top performing schools, we ranked all of the secondary schools in each nation based on their pupils' academic outcomes. In England, the measure used was the percentage of pupils with five GCSEs or equivalent at grades A\*-C including English and Maths in their Key Stage 4 level qualifications. In Wales, it was based on the proportion of pupils achieving at least five A\*-C grades in their Key Stage 4 level qualifications, while Scotland's was based on the proportion of pupils achieving at least four A-C grades in their SCQF level 5 qualifications. About one-sixth of the schools in England comprise the top performing group, compared to one-fifth for Wales and Scotland (Figure 1).

**Figure 1: Number of secondary schools and top performing schools by country**



## The social composition of top comprehensive schools

### Composition of the catchment areas

While schools can and do recruit from outside the catchment areas we have constructed, the vast majority of pupils starting school across the three intake years live within the school's catchment (Figure 2), over 80% in England and close to 90% in Wales and Scotland. The proportions increase when major urban areas are excluded. For example, in England, almost 85% of pupils live within catchment when London is excluded, which is more fluid due to its population density.

**Figure 2: Percentage of pupils who live in their school's catchment area by country**

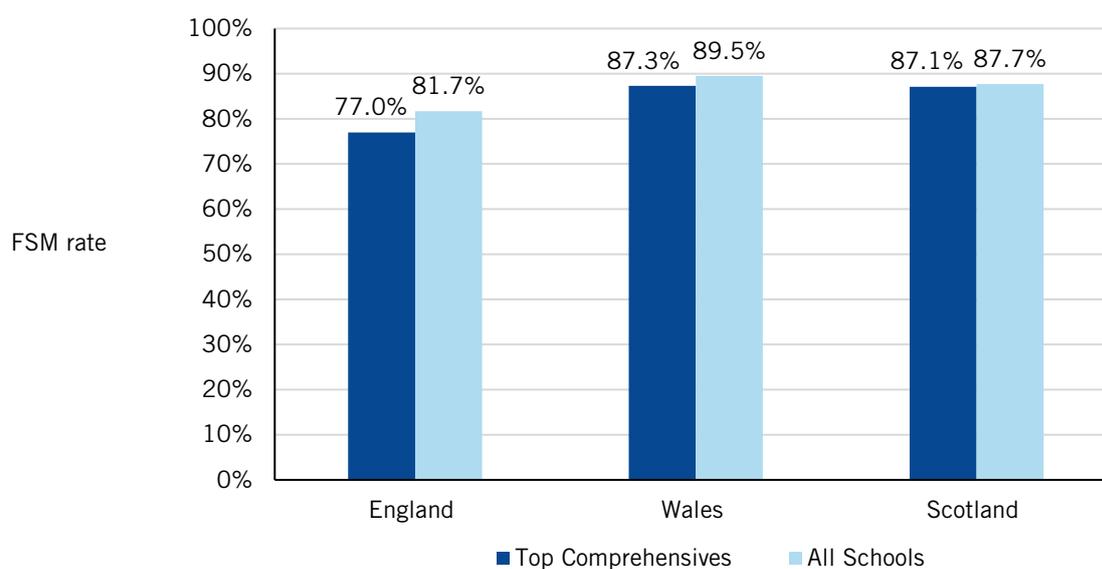


Figure 2 also shows that the top comprehensives in England and Wales have slightly more pupils who come from outside their school's catchment area compared to their respective national averages. There is little difference in Scotland as the majority of pupils go to their local school.

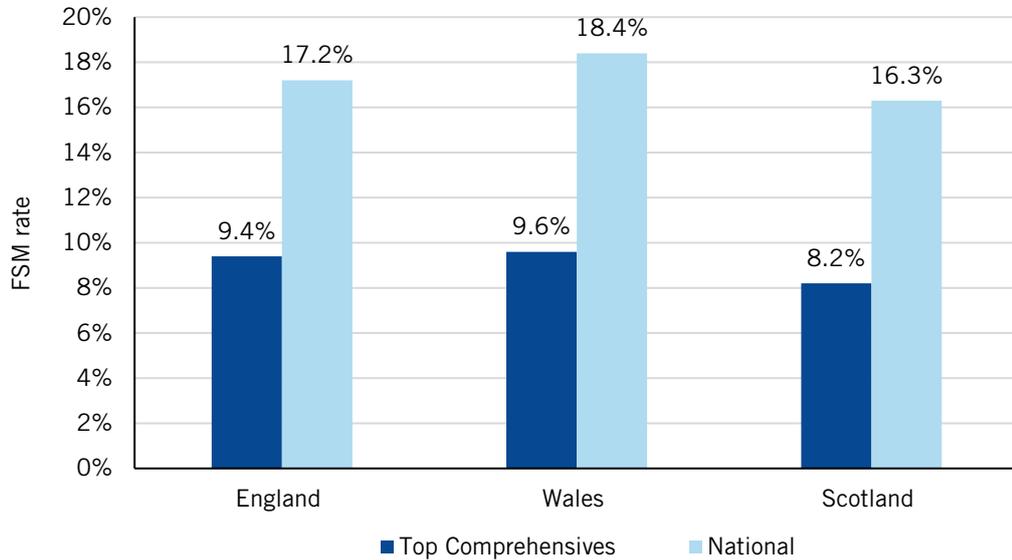
In England and Wales there were substantially more geographical units<sup>3</sup> contained in multiple catchment areas. An 'overlapping index' was created to measure the ratio of unique geographical units to areas shared among multiple schools. In England, the level of overlapping catchments were three times higher than Scotland (1.4 compared to 0.4). In Wales the figure was 1.2.

### Socio-economic disadvantage and pupil intake

The proportion of disadvantaged pupils is not directly comparable across nations due to differences with the FSM measure used in each country. However, it is possible to compare the relative differences between countries. There are wide variations in the average levels of disadvantage in top performing schools and in all schools in England, Wales and Scotland (Figure 3).

<sup>3</sup> Lower super output areas in England and Wales, data zones in Scotland

**Figure 3: FSM rate of the top performing comprehensives in each nation compared to the average**

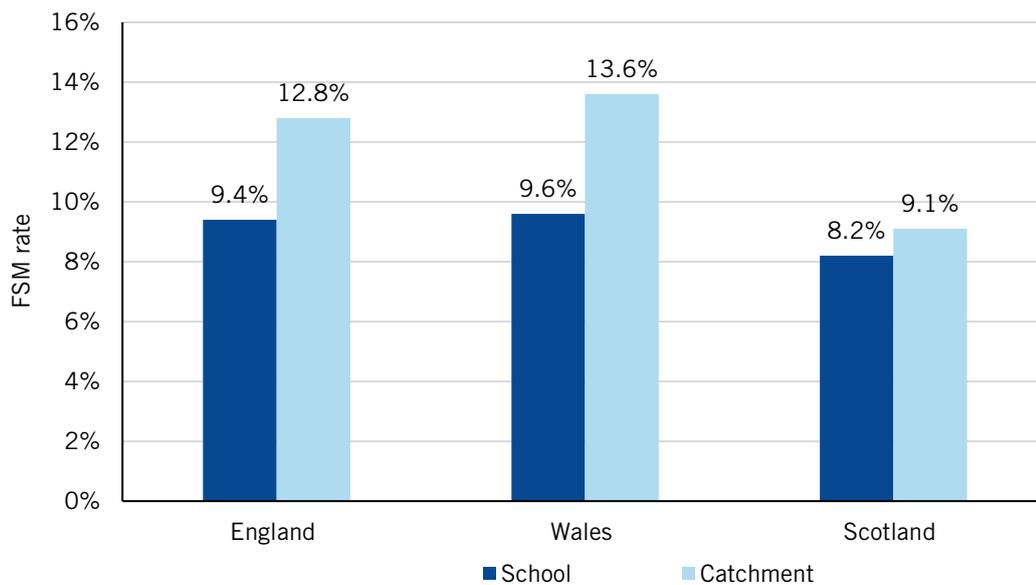


Note: England (FSM Ever), Wales and Scotland (FSM)

***Socio-economic disadvantage and school catchment areas***

To determine the reasons behind this large difference, we examined whether the pupils who attended these top comprehensive schools are representative of the catchment area that the school can draw from.

**Figure 4: Average FSM rates in top performing comprehensives compared to their catchment areas**



This analysis reveals that one of the main reasons these schools have much lower FSM levels compared to the national average is because they are generally located in more affluent areas. This is particularly the case in Scotland, where pupils tend to go to their local school, hence top comprehensives largely reflect their local areas.

England and Wales both have an average difference of three to four percentage points between the school and catchment FSM rates for top comprehensives after accounting for school location, suggesting that there are other issues at play.

The top performing schools are primarily concentrated at the bottom end of the distribution of FSM intake in each nation, with around 60% having less than 10% of disadvantaged pupils in their school in Wales and Scotland, rising to nearly 70% in England (Table 1). In contrast, just less than a third of all schools across the nations have an FSM rate of less than 10%.

Table 1 also shows that very few of the top comprehensives in England and Scotland have an FSM rate of 20% or more, while in Wales, none of the top 40 comprehensives have. This compares to around a third of all schools overall in each nation that have an FSM rate in excess of 20%.

This suggests that there is much less variation in the FSM rate amongst the top performing comprehensives compared to all schools nationally in each country. The levels of disadvantage in top comprehensives in all three of the countries tend to be clustered in the bottom half of the distribution, whereas all schools are more uniformly spread.

**Table 1: The spread of secondary schools by FSM rate**

	Less than 10% FSM rate		20% FSM rate or more	
	Top comprehensives	All schools	Top comprehensives	All schools
England	69%	31%	8%	33%
Wales	58%	21%	0%	37%
Scotland	63%	30%	2%	30%

## Characteristics of the top comprehensive schools

### *Type of admissions authorities*

As noted previously, there remains an average difference of more than three percentage points between the school and catchment FSM rate for the top comprehensives in England and Wales, after allowing for school location. One factor that could be impacting this is school type and in particular, who controls the school's admissions.

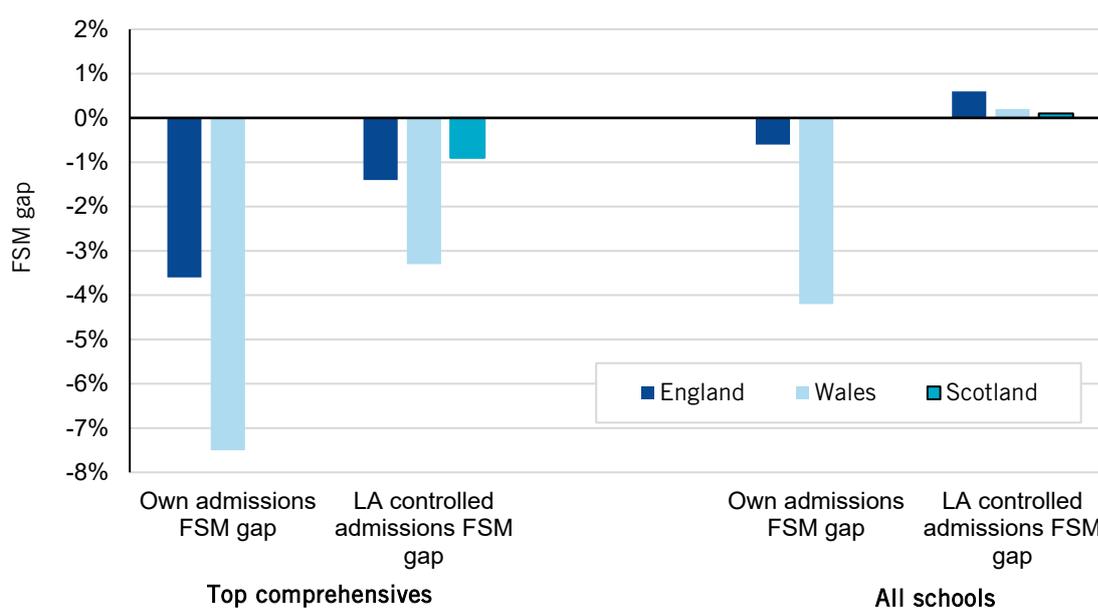
In England, there has been a large shift in the way schools are managed since 2010, with large numbers converting to academy status or becoming a sponsored academy. By 2017, 80% of secondary schools were responsible for their own admissions (Table 2). The proportion of the top 500 performing schools in England who are responsible for their own admissions is even greater, at 89%. This compares to Wales where one-sixth of the schools are their own admissions authorities, and Scotland where all school admissions are controlled by local authorities.

**Table 2: Admissions authorities by country**

	Top comprehensives		All schools	
	LA controlled admissions	Own admissions	LA controlled admissions	Own admissions
England	11%	89%	20%	80%
Wales	83%	17%	87%	13%
Scotland	100%	0%	100%	0%

Some interesting patterns start to emerge when looking at the social compositions of the top comprehensives compared to those in their catchment areas, by type of admissions authority (Figure 5).

**Figure 5: Average gap in FSM rates between intakes and catchment areas in each country by admissions authority**



Although the average school FSM rate is fairly similar for own admission authority and local authority controlled schools, the former have much lower FSM levels than their catchment areas - a larger FSM gap. This FSM gap is also not replicated for all schools that control their own admissions, which raises questions about why the highest attaining own admissions schools have such a large gap. There are particularly large differences by admissions type in Wales, which are discussed in the next section.

### *School type*

There is variation in the school landscape of the three countries. Within England, there are a number of different ways that a school can be structured and managed. Wales also operates a mixed economy of school types, while schools in Scotland are more standardised.

#### *England school types*

There is a lot of variation in the types of schools comprising the top performing comprehensives compared to the national picture (Table 3). Converter academies and voluntary aided (faith) schools are over-represented, while sponsor-led academies, foundation and community schools are under-represented.

**Table 3: Top performing schools in England by school type**

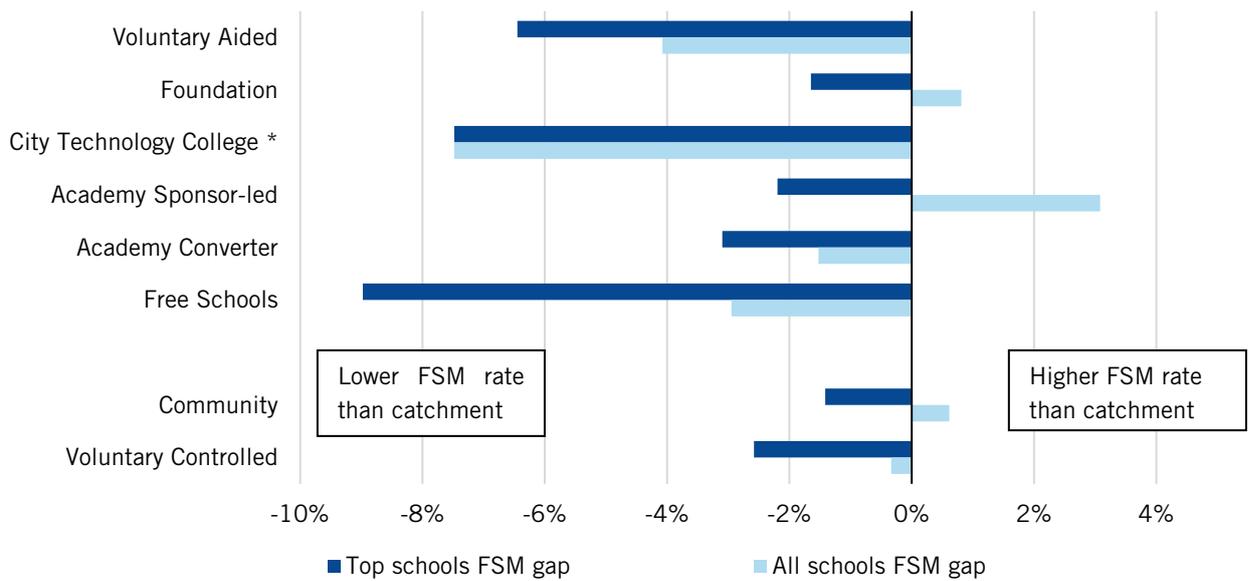
	% of top comprehensives	% of all secondary schools
<b>Own Admissions Authorities</b>		
Voluntary aided schools	15%	9%
Foundation schools	3%	9%
City Technology Colleges	0.4%	0.1%
Sponsor-led academies	7%	19%
Converter academies	63%	40%
Free schools	1%	4%
<b>Total</b>	<b>89%</b>	<b>89%</b>
<b>LEA Controlled Admissions</b>		
Community schools	10%	18%
Voluntary controlled schools	0.2%	1%
<b>Total</b>	<b>11%</b>	<b>11%</b>

There are also differences in the social selectivity of different school types (Figure 6).

All top performing school types have lower FSM rates, on average, compared to their catchments. Free schools are the most socially selective, though at the time this work was carried out, there were just a handful in the top schools. Community schools and Foundation schools are the least socially selective.

Figure 6 also compares the FSM gaps for the top performing group to all other schools of the same type. This reveals some rather large differences, particularly for free schools and sponsor-led academies. Disadvantaged pupils are particularly unrepresented in both the top performing and all voluntary aided (faith) schools.

**Figure 6: FSM gaps of top performing and all schools in England**



\* Based on 2 or less schools

### *Wales school types*

There are several different types of school in Wales. The vast majority, 180 of the 209 state secondary schools, are community schools. The next largest type are voluntary aided schools, with 19 secondary schools. There are also a small number of foundation and voluntary controlled schools.

Looking at the top 40 performing schools in Wales, community schools, which make up five-sixths of this group, have the lowest proportion of FSM pupils at 9.3%. The proportion of FSM pupils in the catchment areas of these schools, at 12.6%, is much lower than the national average (18.4%). This suggests that a great deal of the difference compared to the national average is due to these schools being located in more affluent areas.

Voluntary aided schools are the next largest school type in the top performing institutions. They have a higher average FSM rate at 11.4% compared to community schools in the top 40, but also have an average FSM gap of almost 10 percentage points. While they make up only an eighth of the top performing schools group in Wales, they account for a quarter of the four percentage point FSM gap observed for the top 40 schools (that was not due to school location). As in England, it is also the case this issue extends beyond top schools, with all Welsh voluntary aided schools averaging fewer disadvantaged pupils compared to their catchment areas, 5.5 percentage points lower.

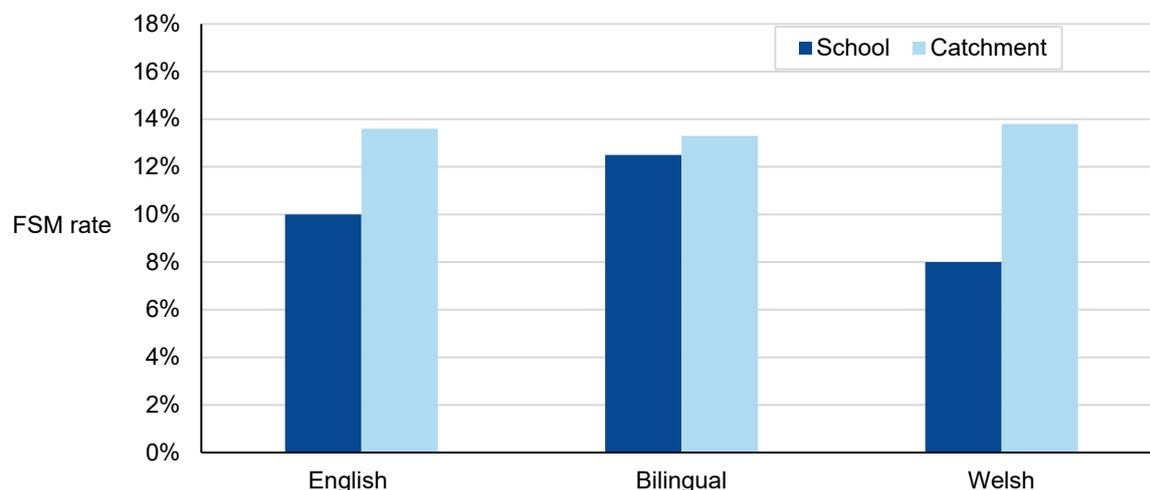
### *Language status in Welsh schools*

There is an array of different school types in terms of working language in the Welsh education system. For our reports, schools were classified into three categories – Welsh, Bilingual and English – based on the proportion of subjects taught in Welsh. See methodology section of our Wales report for more details of how these schools were classified.

Looking at the average FSM rates for these school groups, Welsh medium schools have the lowest proportion of pupils from deprived backgrounds compared to the other two school groups. This is true

for both the top comprehensives and for all secondary schools. Welsh medium schools in top performing schools also have the largest FSM gaps when compared to their catchment areas (5.8 percentage points, Figure 7). This pattern remains consistent for all Welsh medium schools, where the FSM gap is 4.9 percentage points.

**Figure 7: FSM gaps of top performing comprehensives in Wales by working language**



As both top performing and all Welsh medium schools have large FSM gaps, and because local authorities are responsible for admissions, the FSM gap may be a feature of the types of families that these schools tend to attract. For example, disadvantaged families might be dissuaded from sending their child to a school further away if public transport is not available and they do not have their own transport. Another possibility is that parents of higher socio-economic class may have a preference for such schools and will go extra lengths to get their children in.

### *Faith / denominational schools*

A fifth of state secondary schools in England are faith schools, which is higher than the levels in both Wales and Scotland (Table 4). Faith schools in England are also over-represented within the top comprehensives, with one in three schools in this group having a faith ethos. They are slightly over-represented in the top performing comprehensives in Wales, but there is no difference in Scotland.

**Table 4: Proportion of faith schools among top performing and all schools, by country**

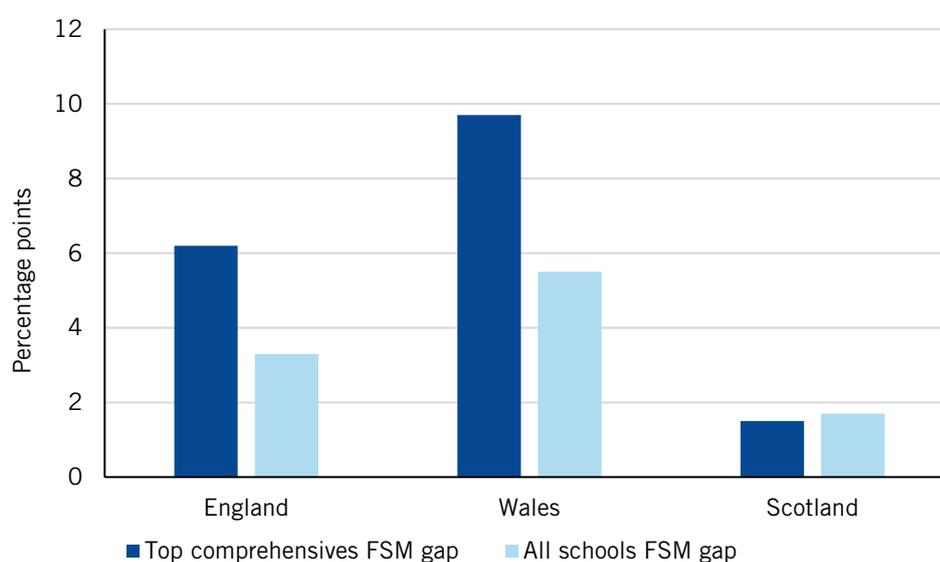
	% of top comprehensives which are faith schools	% of all schools which are faith schools
England	33%	20%
Wales	13%	9%
Scotland	15%	15%

### England faith schools

When looking at the levels of disadvantage between faith schools and their catchments, an interesting picture emerges. Top performing faith schools in England have only marginally lower average FSM intakes than those with no religious affiliation. However, the gap between these schools and their catchment areas are more than three times that of top performing non-faith schools, with an average 6 percentage point FSM gap, compared to 2.

The disparity between faith school FSM rates and their catchment areas is not just restricted to top performing faith schools, but to all faith schools nationally (Figure 8), although the FSM gap for the former is about twice as large.

**Figure 8: FSM gaps of top performing faith and all faith schools by country**



### Wales faith schools

Top performing faith schools in Wales have a very large average FSM gap when compared to their catchments, at nearly 10 percentage points. As shown in Figure 8, an FSM gap also exists for all faith schools, which despite the average proportion of FSM pupils in these schools being slightly above the national average at 18.8%, have a FSM rate that is 5.5 percentage points lower on average than their corresponding catchment areas.

It is not possible to tell conclusively from this analysis why this FSM gap exists for Welsh faith schools. The school governing boards are responsible for admissions in these schools, so therefore can control which pupils are admitted. However, it may be due to other factors outside of the schools' control. For example, given they are relatively few in number, they may be more difficult to access without private transport, which may be a barrier to low income families. Another potential reason might be that not all of the disadvantaged families living in a faith school's catchment area will follow the faith of the school, so therefore may not wish to attend a faith school. Another possibility is that parents of higher socio-economic backgrounds are more motivated to navigate the sometimes complex rules for admission.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Parent Power (2018) Sutton Trust

### *Scotland faith schools*

In Scotland, faith schools are referred to as denominational schools. For top performing denominational schools, there is a small difference of 1.5 percentage points between the average school and catchment FSM rates. A similar difference is present for all denominational schools: 1.7 percentage points.

It is not possible to tell from the data what is causing this difference, but Scotland's school admissions guidance for parents states that denominational schools can have larger catchment areas which overlap those of other non-denominational schools. Therefore, one possible explanation for this difference could be that pupils who wish to attend a denominational school may have to travel further, which may put off some low income families, who may not be able to afford the transport costs or may be unaware that they are entitled to free transport. Likewise with Welsh faith schools, disadvantaged families living in a denominational school's catchment area may not follow the faith of the school, or middle-class parents may be more motivated to apply.

### *Index of deprivation*

To date, we have used FSM eligibility as a measure of the social make-up of a school. However, this does not capture the full range of the socio-economic spectrum. The level of deprivation in top performing schools was therefore also examined using another measure, namely the Income Deprivation Affecting Children Index (England), the Welsh Index of Multiple Deprivation (WIMD) and the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD). These are the official measures of relative deprivation in each nation. This index ranks every lower super output area (LSOA) or data zone (Scotland) based on a set of socio-economic criteria, including income, employment and housing among others.

In order to create an average index of multiple deprivation (IMD) ranking for each school, we aggregated the relevant nation's IMD scores in England or ranks in Wales and Scotland for each pupil used in each study. The IMD score / rank used is that relating to the LSOA / data zone where a pupil lives. We then ranked all of the schools from highest to lowest, and divided these average rankings into equal groups known as quintiles. Schools with an average deprivation ranking in the top 20% of the distribution are in quintile 1 as they are the least deprived, while quintile 5 contains schools with the lowest deprivation ranking.

This analysis indicates that around 80% of the top performing schools in Wales and Scotland are ranked in the top two quintiles of deprivation (the most advantaged), compared to nearly 70% in England (Table 5). If there was no association between attainment and deprivation, we would have expected about 40% of top performing schools to fall in these top quintiles. This confirms the majority of these schools are concentrated at the top of the socio-economic spectrum. In Scotland, the position is more pronounced, with 54% of top performing schools in the least deprived quintile, compared to 45% in England and Wales.

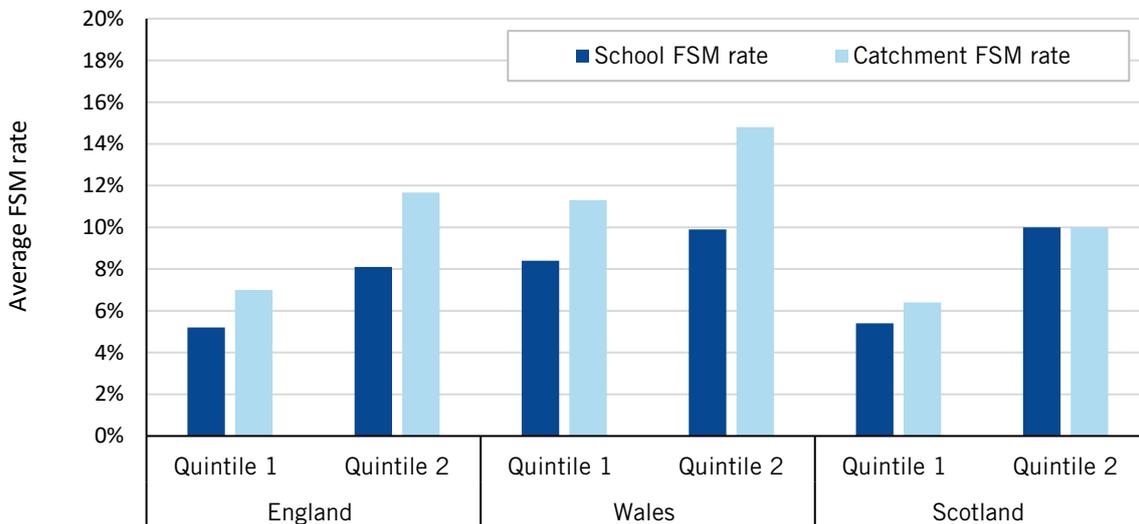
**Table 5: Percentage of top performing comprehensives by quintile of deprivation**

	England	Scotland	Wales
Quintile 1 (least deprived)	45%	54%	45%
Quintile 2	23%	24%	35%
Quintile 3	15%	16%	13%
Quintile 4	10%	4%	7%
Quintile 5 (most deprived)	6%	2%*	-

\*based on a small number of schools

The average FSM gap between top performing comprehensives and their catchment areas differs by country for these schools in the top two quintiles, as shown in Figure 9.

**Figure 9: Average FSM rate of top performing schools in the two least deprived quintiles, by country**

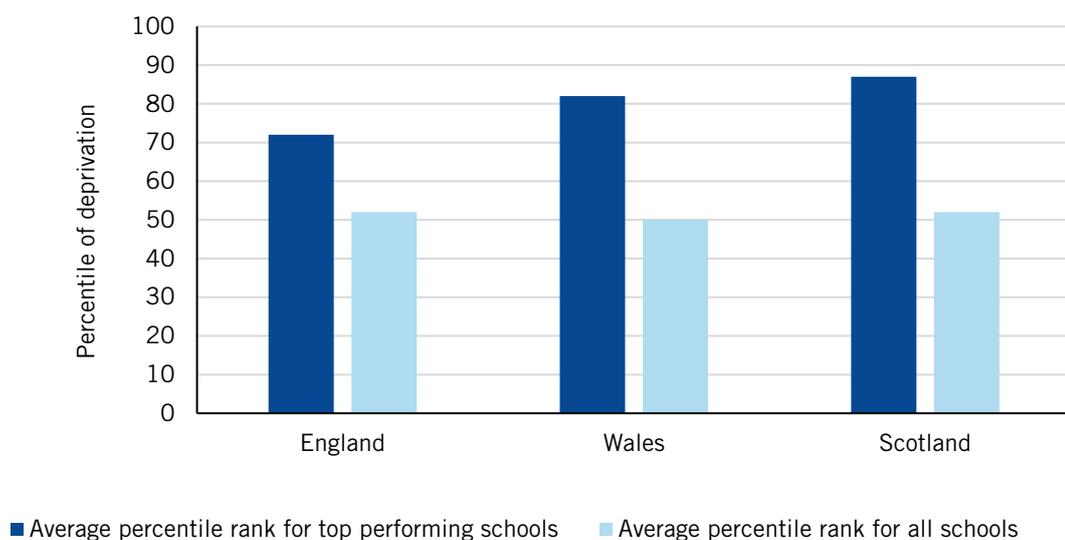


Quintiles of lowest deprivation by country

This showed that top performing schools in the most affluent areas in England and Wales have large differences in FSM rates, on average, when compared to their catchment areas. In Scotland, these FSM gaps are much smaller. The majority of pupils in Scotland go to their local secondary school, so therefore these schools are largely reflective of their local areas. However, this is not to say that large differences in the levels of disadvantage in schools do not exist. It just reflects the fact that these schools tend to be located in more affluent areas in Scotland.

This is illustrated by Figure 10, where we looked at the position of the average top performing school and the average school within the distribution of deprivation in each country.

**Figure 10: Average percentile rank of top performing schools by country**



This showed that the average deprivation rank of all schools in each nation is near the 50<sup>th</sup> percentile of the distribution, as might be expected. However, the average rank for top performing schools is much higher, confirming they are in the most advantaged areas in each country (in England the 72<sup>nd</sup> percentile, and in Wales the 82<sup>nd</sup>). This is particularly true in Scotland, where the average deprivation rank for top performing schools is equivalent to the 87<sup>th</sup> percentile of the deprivation distribution.

### *Attainment analysis*

To get a sense of relative difference between the attainment outcomes of top performing comprehensives and all schools, we examined how far ahead the average attainment figure at top performing schools is compared to all schools, measured by standard deviations, so this is comparable across nations. For England, the average proportion of pupils achieving 5 A\* to C grades including English and Maths is 56.0%, while the corresponding for top comprehensives is 76.4%. The size of the gap in England, when measured in standard deviations, is 1.44. The comparable figures are 1.27 standard deviations for Scotland and 1.23 standard deviations for Wales. Although this suggests that there is a greater difference between the top comprehensives in England and the rest of the school population, this may in part be due to its top comprehensives group comprising about a sixth of all secondary schools, whereas in Scotland and Wales, the top performing group comprises about a fifth of all schools.

**Table 6: Attainment outcomes for top schools and all schools by nation**

	England (5 A*-CEM)	Scotland (4 A-C)	Wales (5 A*-C)
Proportion achieving threshold measure, top comprehensives	76.4%	81%	85%
Proportion achieving threshold measure, all schools	56%	61.5%	68.4%
Gap (in standard deviations)	1.44	1.27	1.23

## Discussion

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This overview report, alongside the two further reports that the Sutton Trust has commissioned for Scotland and Wales, highlights that there are a number of areas of both commonality and difference across the three nations.

One important area of commonality identified is that the proportion of disadvantaged pupils at the top performing schools in each country is much lower than the average levels seen in all schools nationally. This shows that the intakes of such schools are substantially different from the norm.

However, there are differences between nations in the reasons for these gaps. In England and Wales, about half of the FSM gap observed can be explained by the location of the best schools in more affluent areas. In Scotland however, most children attend their local school, so the observed FSM gap is almost entirely due to the top performing schools being located in more affluent areas.

While the top performing comprehensives in each country are still reflective of their local areas to a degree, they have very different intakes to the average school. These schools offer a pathway to their pupils to attend the best universities and potentially achieve the top labour market outcomes. Each government must look at how their admissions processes could be changed in order to increase access to the best schools for disadvantaged pupils. For example, when deciding catchment areas, governments should work with local councils to draw boundaries which consider the socio-economic diversity of the school intake. Consideration should also be given to the use of random ballots in school admissions, whereby 'inner' catchment areas are created for local families and 'outer' catchment areas are based on random allocation, which could achieve a balance between proximity and fairness.

After accounting for location, there still remain gaps of three to four percentage points between catchment FSM rates and the intakes of top schools in England and Wales, suggesting there are other factors at play. The landscape of school admissions is one area that varies substantially between the three countries. In England, as a result of the academisation process over the past two decades, nearly nine out of ten top secondary schools can act as their own admissions authority. In Wales just about one in six top schools control their own admissions. In contrast, all school admissions are controlled by local authorities in Scotland.

In England and Wales, FSM gaps are over twice as large in schools which control their own admissions when compared to those with local authority controlled admissions. Once again, there are differences between countries which might be contributing to this:

- In England, all top performing school types have lower FSM rates, on average, compared to their catchments. Free schools were the most socially selective, though at the time this work was carried out, there were just a handful in the top schools.
- In Wales, the difference is in part due to Welsh medium schools having a large FSM gap when compared to their catchment areas, both those in the top performing and wider school population. The FSM gap is likely to be a combination of the location (and relative scarcity) of these schools, along with the types of families that these schools tend to attract.

Another area of commonality is that faith schools under-represent the rates of disadvantage in their catchment areas in each country. These schools, particularly in Wales and England, have been traditionally associated with strong academic performance, and are over-represented among top

performing schools. While the governing bodies are the admissions authority for these schools, there may be other factors outside of these schools' control influencing who applies and gets in, such as the demographics of local faith communities. However, in the interests of fairness and social mobility, local authorities and schools themselves should look at their admissions policies to identify and address any socio-economic barriers.

# SELECTIVE COMPREHENSIVES: SCOTLAND

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Access to top performing schools for disadvantaged pupils in Scotland.

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Jens Van den Brande, Jude Hillary and Carl Cullinane  
– March 2019



## Introduction

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State schools offer a platform to foster educational equity by educating and improving the skills of pupils across the whole socio-economic spectrum. However, consistency and equal access to high quality education is key for a state school system to provide a platform for upward social mobility. In a system with substantial variation in school quality, it becomes essential that access to the best schools is equitably and fairly distributed. The Sutton Trust has been examining the issue of access to top performing schools in England since 2006. It has consistently found, including its most recent report<sup>5</sup> that top performing comprehensives have, on average, less disadvantaged intakes, compared to the national average, but also compared to their local areas. For the first time, this analysis can be extended to Scotland, and this report considers the extent to which top secondary schools in Scotland reflect the social composition of their local school catchment areas.

We explore this question by looking at the proportion of pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds in Scotland's top performing schools relative to the profile of children in their catchment areas. We define the highest performing institutions as the top 70 state schools based on the proportion of pupils who achieve 4 A to C grades at SCQF level 5 qualifications between their fourth and sixth year of secondary school (S4 to S6). While this measure will be influenced by the prior attainment and socio-economic background of these schools' intakes, and does not necessarily represent a measure of 'school quality' in itself, it nonetheless represents a group of schools where pupils are most likely to perform the highest in terms of outcomes.

To provide context, we always present the equivalent figures for all secondary schools. Moreover, the analysis is further broken down by a variety of school characteristics in an attempt to explain the reasons for the make-up and social composition of the top 70 schools.

In Scotland, local councils are responsible for allocating pupils a place at a secondary school.<sup>6</sup> In most cases, pupils in Scotland will attend their nearest local school, but parents can make a request for their child to attend a school which is not their local school, such as a denominational school. However, a local council may not provide free transport if a family chooses to put their child in a school outside of their local area.<sup>7</sup>

Denominational schools can have larger catchment areas, which overlap those of other non-denominational schools.

The school landscape in Scotland is substantially different to that of Wales and England. 'School choice' for parents is less of an influential paradigm. Priority instead is on the right to a place at the nearest school. Like Wales, and in contrast to England, official school performance 'league tables' are not published.

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<sup>5</sup> Sutton Trust (2017) *Selective comprehensives 2017*. London: Sutton Trust.

<sup>6</sup> Scottish Government (2016) Choosing a school: a guide for parents. Retrieved from <https://www.gov.scot/publications/choosing-school-guide-parents-nov-16/pages/2/> 7 February 2019

<sup>7</sup> Scottish Government (2018) Free School Transport. Retrieved from <https://www.mygov.scot/free-school-transport/> 7 February 2019

## Methodology

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The data in this report has been sourced from public Scottish statistics in combination with pupil level data sourced from the Scottish government. It has been gathered and analysed for the Sutton Trust by the National Foundation for Educational Research.

Pupil level data supplied by the Scottish government includes details of the school the pupil attended, which data zone the pupil lives in and whether or not they were registered for free school meals (FSM). We matched in school and area characteristics from the publicly available data, such as the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation and religious affiliation of the school.

In order to assess the social composition of state schools in Scotland, the proportion of pupils registered for FSM was used as a proxy for socio-economic disadvantage. To assess the extent to which schools are reflective of their local areas, we needed to compare the profile of the pupils admitted to the school with those who could have been admitted. To do this, we created school catchment areas, based on detailed data across three years of admissions, looking at where schools have admitted pupils from.

To construct the catchment areas, we identified all the data zones which had 5 or more pupils joining a secondary school in the first year (S1) over the 3 academic school years between 2014 and 2016. These data zones were combined to form the catchment area for that secondary school. For each school catchment area, we then calculated the aggregate number of pupils who would be starting secondary school in each of the three years, who could have potentially gone to the school. We also computed the proportion of these pupils in the school catchment area who were registered for FSM, which we refer to as the catchment FSM rate. Similarly, a school's FSM rate is the average FSM registration rate of all the pupils attending the school in the intake year over the 3 years used in this research. The difference between the school and catchment FSM rate is referred to as the FSM gap.

In order to identify top performing schools, we ranked all state secondary schools according to their attainment outcomes. However, as Scotland does not have a headline accountability measure like other nations, in order to evaluate the relative performance of secondary schools in Scotland, we looked at the percentage of pupils who achieved varying numbers of SCQF level 5 qualifications within different grade ranges. The proportion who achieved at least 4 A to C grades in their SCQF level 5 qualifications between academic years S4 to S6 was chosen, in part as the average proportion of pupils who achieved these attainment outcomes was broadly similar to the average attainment measures in the other two nations. The top 70 schools, which is about a fifth of all secondary schools, were then selected based on this ranking.

We also re-ran our analysis ranking schools based on the proportion of pupils achieving at least 5 A to C grades in their SCQF level 5 qualifications to test the sensitivity of the results, but there was little difference.

While these exam scores will be influenced by the prior attainment of the school intakes, and a progress-based measure such as Progress 8 in England would be preferable, there is no equivalent in Scotland at this point. While the attainment-based ranking is a highly imperfect way of measuring the best schools, it nonetheless captures the schools with the highest results, which are important for university attendance and future employment prospects.

## The social composition of top state schools in Scotland

As shown in Table 1, the average FSM registration rate for the top 70 schools, based on the proportion of pupils achieving at least 4 A to C grades in their SCQF level 5 qualifications, is 8.2%. This is half that for all secondary schools in Scotland.

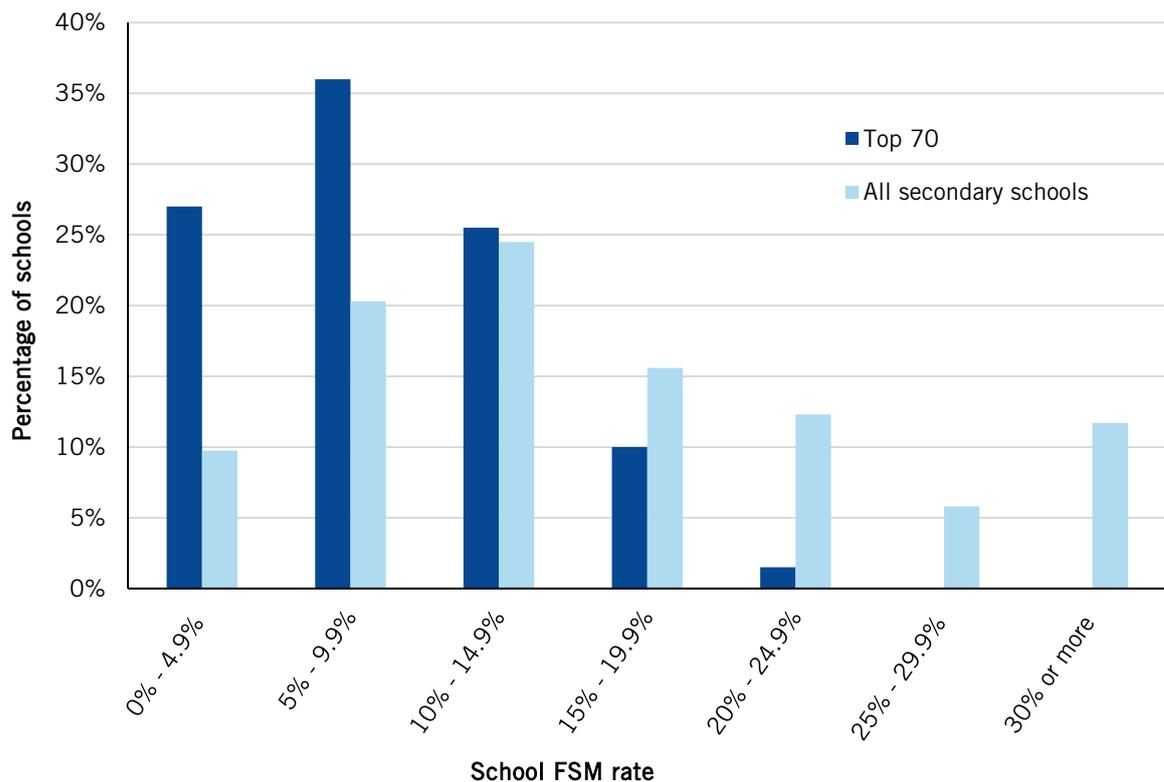
**Table 1: FSM rate of the top 70 schools**

	Top 70 schools	All secondary schools
Average FSM rate	8.2%	16.3%

The top performing schools are also primarily concentrated at the bottom end of the distribution of FSM registration, with over 60% of the top schools having less than 10% of disadvantaged pupils in their school (Figure 1).

This analysis shows that there is also less variation in the FSM rate between these top performing schools than there is nationally. Almost all the top schools have less than 20% of pupils registered for FSM, whereas the whole school population is much more spread out in terms of its intake of disadvantaged pupils.

**Figure 1: Spread of secondary schools by the proportion of FSM pupils in a school**



## Socio-economic disadvantage and school catchment areas

We have seen that top performing schools look very different from secondary schools as a whole, but to investigate whether they are representative of their local areas, we compare the proportion of disadvantaged pupils in each school to its catchment area. As shown in Table 2, the average catchment FSM rate for the top performing schools is 9.1%, which is just 0.9 percentage points higher than the corresponding average school FSM rate. This suggests that the top performing schools broadly reflect the level of disadvantage in their catchment areas. Therefore, the reason these schools have much lower FSM levels compared to the national average is because they are generally located in more affluent areas.

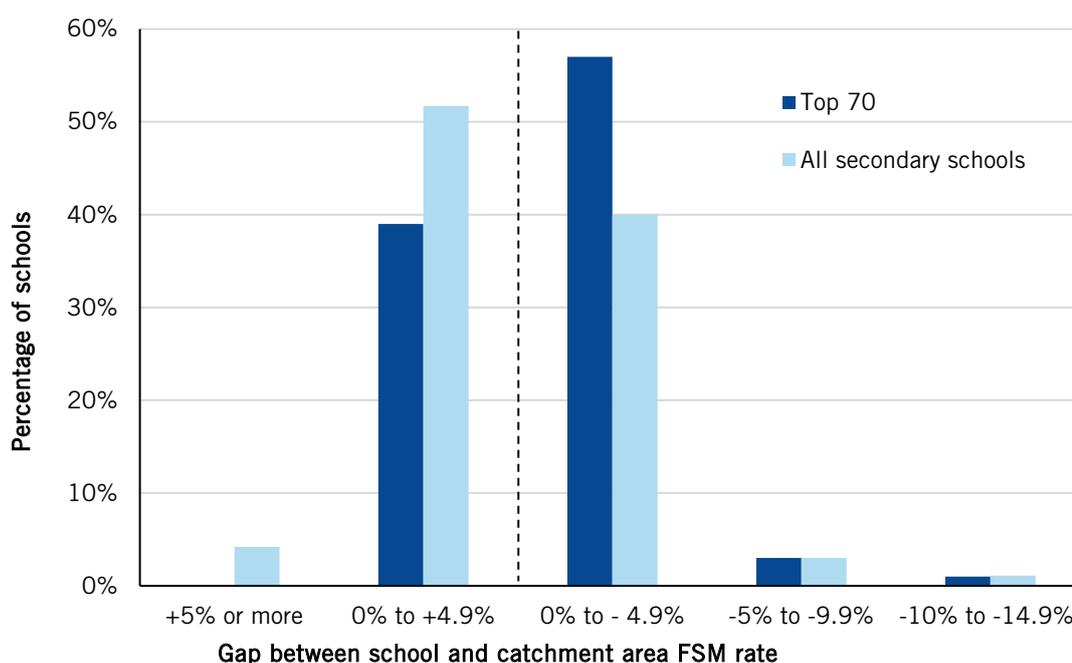
By comparison, the average school catchment FSM rate for all secondary schools is 16.3%, which is the same level as the average school FSM rate for all secondary schools. This is also consistent with the fact that the vast majority of pupils in Scotland attend their local school.

**Table 2: FSM rates in the school catchment areas**

	Top 70 schools	All secondary schools
Average FSM rate in school catchment	9.1%	16.3%

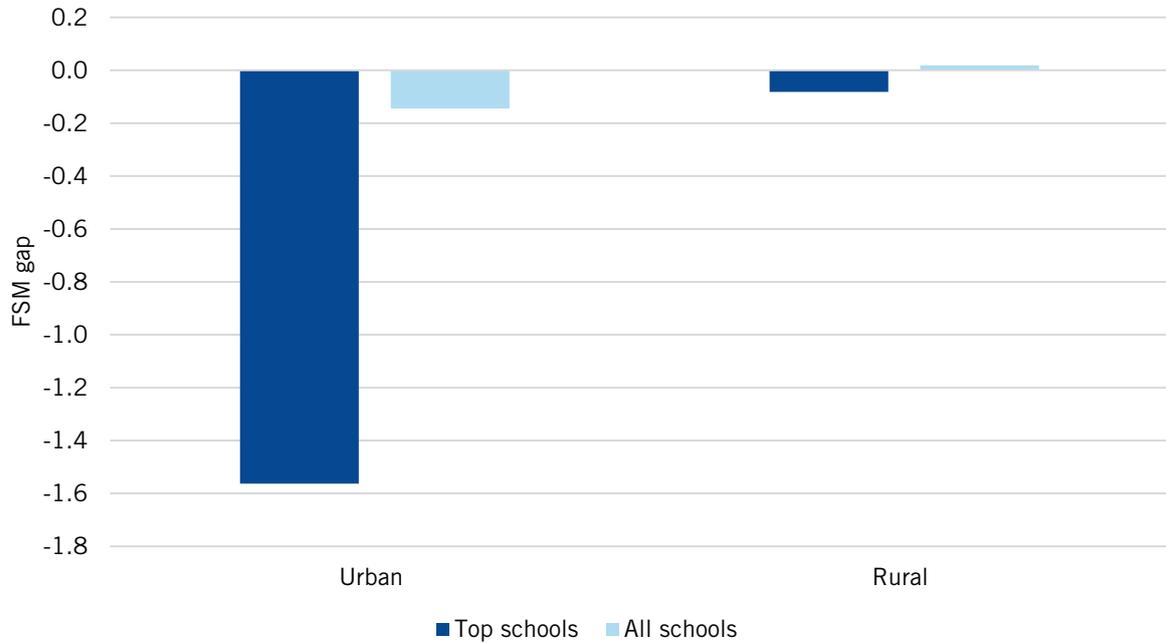
As these averages may be masking underlying variation in the FSM gap, we also looked at the distribution of the differences between the school and catchment area FSM rates (Figure 2). This revealed that roughly 60% of the schools in the top 70 schools have slightly lower proportions of FSM pupils than their catchment areas, while 39% had slightly more. However, in contrast to similar analysis in Wales and England, less than 5% of top schools have an FSM gap which begins to look unrepresentative (five percentage points or more). Hence, we can conclude that the majority of the top schools in Scotland have FSM gaps which are negligible.

**Figure 2: Spread of the FSM gap in Scotland**



While Scottish schools in general had very low FSM gaps, there were differences by the location of the school. Schools in rural areas had no FSM gaps whatsoever, regardless of whether they were among the top performing group. However, there was a 1.6 percentage point gap in urban locations, particularly cities (Figure 3). This is consistent with areas of high population density having slightly more fluid school populations, leading to small imbalances in socio-economic make up.

**Figure 3: A comparison of FSM gaps in urban and rural areas**



## Characteristics of top state schools

### *Religious faith*

**Table 3: FSM rate of top 70 schools and all schools by religious status**

School type	Proportion of top 70	Average school FSM rate top 70	Average catchment FSM rate top 70	Proportion of all secondary schools	Average school FSM rate all secondary schools	Average catchment FSM rate all secondary schools
Denominational	15%	11.3%	12.8%	15%	22.0%	23.7%
Non-denominational	85%	7.7%	8.5%	85%	15.2%	15.0%
<b>All Schools</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>8.2%</b>	<b>9.1%</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>16.3%</b>	<b>16.3%</b>

Secondary denominational schools in the state sector in Scotland are all Roman Catholic. They have a much higher average proportion of disadvantaged pupils compared to non-denominational schools. This is the case for both the denominational schools in the top 70, where the average FSM rate is 11.3% compared to 7.7% for non-denominational top performing schools, and for all denominational schools, where the FSM rate for all denominational schools is 22% compared to 15.2% for all non-denominational schools (Table 3). This is likely to be because of the historical context in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, when there was a lot of migration from Ireland to Scotland, and these Roman Catholic schools were set up in these areas to cater for this increase in the pupil population.<sup>8</sup>

Table 3 also shows that 15% of schools in the top 70 schools are denominational, which is the same proportion for all secondary schools in Scotland. Denominational schools are therefore no more or less likely to be represented in the top performing group than non-denominational schools. However, the intakes of those in the top group are very different to other denominational schools.

The average level of disadvantage at top performing denominational schools (11.3%) is nearly half the level for all denominational schools in Scotland (22.0%). However, the average FSM rate in top performing schools' catchment areas is 12.8%. As with top performing schools more generally, this suggests that most of the FSM gap between top performing denominational schools and the national average is due to these schools being located in more affluent areas.

There remains a small difference of 1.5 percentage points between the average school and catchment FSM rates of the top performing denominational schools which is not attributable to location. A similar difference is present for all denominational schools (1.7 percentage points). We cannot tell from the data what is causing this difference, but we know from Scottish Government's Guidance for Parents<sup>9</sup> that denominational schools can have larger catchment areas which overlap those of other non-denominational schools. Therefore, one possible explanation for this difference could be that pupils who wish to attend a denominational school may have to travel further, which may put off some low income families, who may not be able to afford the transport costs or may not know that they may be entitled to free transport. Another potential reason may be the demographic make-up of the local community. Not

<sup>8</sup><http://www.sath.org.uk/edscot/www.educationscotland.gov.uk/higherscottishhistory/migrationandempire/experienceofimmigrants/irish.html>

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.gov.scot/publications/choosing-school-guide-parents-nov-16/>

all of the low income families living in a denominational school's catchment area will follow the faith of the school, or parents from higher socio-economic classes may be more motivated to apply.

## Index of multiple deprivation

So far we have used free school meal registration as a measure of the social make-up of a school, but this does not capture the full range of the socio-economic spectrum. In this section, we look at another measure, namely the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD), which is the official measure of relative multiple deprivation in Scotland.<sup>10</sup> This index ranks every data zone based on a set of socio-economic criteria, including income, employment and housing among others.

To use this, we started by creating an average SIMD ranking for each school by calculating the average SIMD rank for all of the pupils in their intakes across the three academic years 2014 to 2016. The SIMD rank used is that relating to the data zone where each pupil lives. We ranked all of the schools from highest to lowest. We divided these average rankings into equal groups known as quintiles. Schools with an average deprivation ranking in the top 20% of the distribution are in quintile 1 as they are the least deprived and quintile 5 contains schools with the lowest deprivation ranking, thus are selecting pupils from the most deprived areas in Scotland.

**Table 4: FSM rate of top 70 and all schools by deprivation score of area**

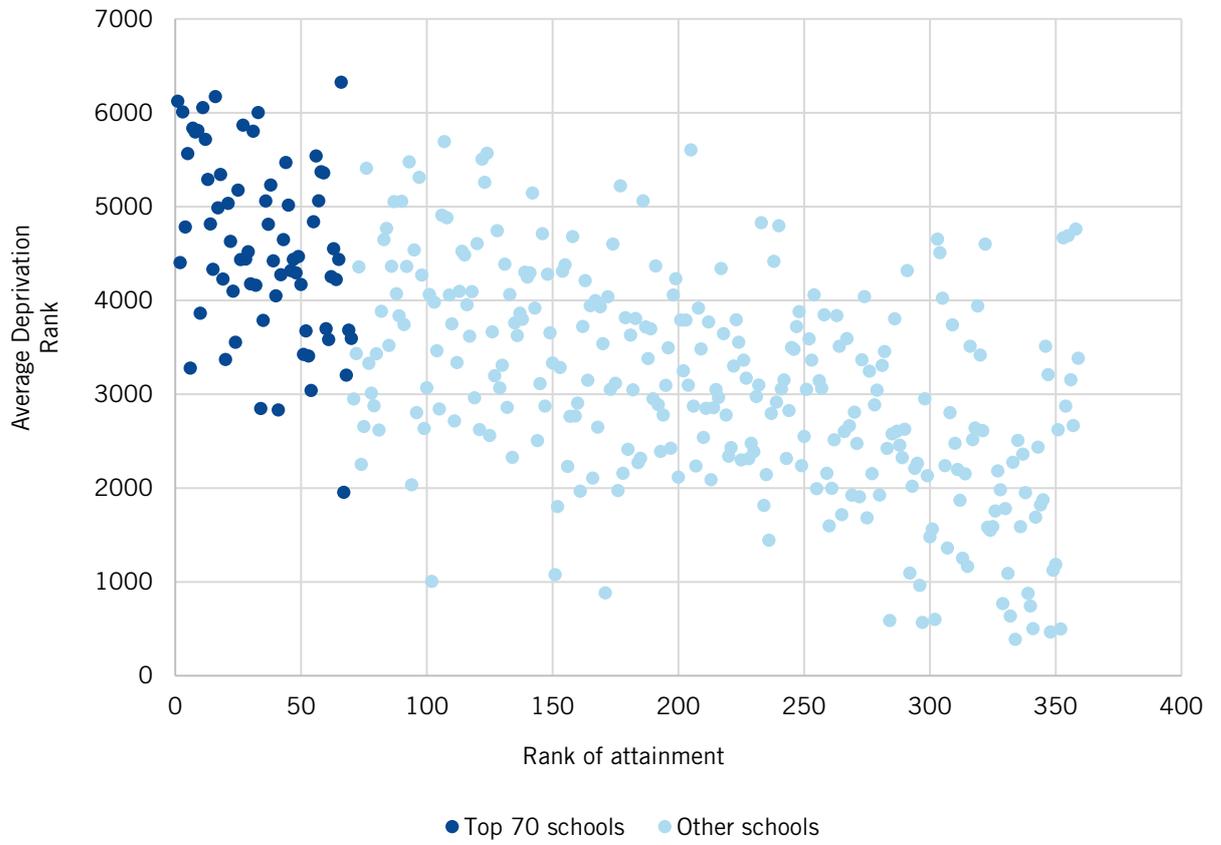
Quintiles of area deprivation	Proportion of top 70	Average school FSM rate top 70	Average catchment FSM rate top 70	Proportion of all secondary schools	Average school FSM rate all secondary schools	Average catchment FSM rate all secondary schools
Quintile 1 (least deprived)	54%	5.4%	6.4%	20%	5.9%	6.8%
Quintile 2	24%	10.0%	10.0%	20%	10.7%	10.9%
Quintile 3	16%	11.2%	12.8%	20%	13.2%	13.7%
Quintile 4	4%	17.4%	18.0%	20%	19.7%	19.9%
Quintile 5 (most deprived)	2%*	22.5%*	26.5%*	20%	31.7%	30.3%
All Schools	100%	8.2%	9.1%	100%	16.3%	16.3%

\*based on a small number of schools

This analysis indicates that over a half of the schools in the top 70 are in the least deprived quintile (Table 4). In fact, almost 80% of the top performing schools are ranked in the top two quintiles of deprivation highlighting that, even on a broader measure, the majority of these schools are concentrated at the very top of the socio-economic spectrum, as shown in Figure 4. The average deprivation rank of all schools is in the 52<sup>nd</sup> percentile of the distribution, as might be expected. However, for the top performing schools, the average rank is in the 87<sup>th</sup> percentile, among the most advantaged areas in Scotland.

<sup>10</sup> <https://www2.gov.scot/Topics/Statistics/SIMD>

**Figure 4: Average deprivation rank of top schools and other schools**



## Discussion

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The majority of pupils in Scotland go to their local secondary school, so therefore schools are largely reflective of their local areas, unlike Wales and England. However, this is not to say that there are not large differences in the levels of disadvantage in schools. In particular, this research has found that the top 70 performing schools have just half the level of FSM pupils compared to the national average. However, this is mostly because these schools tend to be located in more affluent areas.

Ultimately who gets admitted to these top performing schools matters, because pupils who achieve the best outcomes are the most likely to attend the best universities and most likely to succeed in the top professions. Therefore, in order to improve upward social mobility, more needs to be done to achieve more equal access to the highest performing schools. The Scottish Government should work with local councils and school leaders of the top performing schools to increase the diversity of their intake, including considering the level of socio-economic diversity when drawing up catchment areas.

To facilitate this, the Scottish Government and local councils may also need to look at the rules concerning the provision of free transport. Currently, families may not be able to receive free transport to school if they choose to send their child to a school outside of their area. The Scottish Government could work with local councils to ensure that low income families are able to receive free school transport. It is also crucial that this is well publicised so they know in advance if their child gets a place at a top performing secondary school outside of their area. This is particularly important in the context of denominational schools.

The Scottish system is notably different from that of England and Wales. The admissions system is entirely administered by councils, and the emphasis on the right to attend one's nearest school means that Scotland doesn't have the issues of local social selectivity seen elsewhere in Great Britain. Furthermore, recent higher education initiatives have meant that attending school in a deprived area is increasingly taken into account by universities.<sup>11</sup> School admissions in Scotland appear to be less 'high stakes' than elsewhere in Great Britain. However, this does not mean that there are no issues for educational equity.

While Scotland's greater emphasis on catchment areas means that schools are much more reflective of their locality than schools in England and Wales, the level of overall social segregation, with the best schools located in the most affluent areas, is similar. Much more work needs to be done to ensure the quality of schooling in the most deprived areas is higher, and to reduce the link between social background and school attainment. A situation where schools perceived as 'good' are concentrated in affluent areas can create a self-reinforcing cycle of inequality. As has been shown in England, such schools can appeal to better, more experienced teachers, and also attract well-off homebuyers. Given the level of social segregation, and the culture of most children going to their nearest school, it is even more vital that raising standards at schools in deprived areas are a priority.

The emphasis on catchment introduces incentives for parents with the financial resources to buy their way into the catchment areas of good schools, knowing that they will be guaranteed a place.<sup>12</sup> This is a particular issue in urban areas like Glasgow and Edinburgh.<sup>13</sup> This dynamic, which the Trust has

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<sup>11</sup> <https://www.holyrood.com/articles/news/increase-scottish-university-students-deprived-areas>

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-scotland-45400765>

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.heraldscotland.com/news/14804609.edinburgh-the-most-selective-education-system-in-the-uk/>

consistently highlighted in England, has a negative effect on equal access to high quality schooling, and thus social mobility.

The Trust has long advocated in England in favour of greater use of random ballots in school admissions, de-emphasising the importance of proximity. Creation of an 'inner' catchment area, where families are entitled to a place, with an outer catchment area based on random allocation, could achieve a balance between proximity and fairness. It is crucial, however, that catchment areas are large enough in order to achieve a degree of socio-economic diversity.

Given the current Scottish system of non-overlapping catchment areas, this would clearly be a radical step. Nonetheless, given the low levels of disadvantaged pupils attending the highest performing schools in Scotland, as in Wales and England, it should be considered as a policy option. However, as this report has shown, there are both radical and incremental steps that could also be taken to ensure more equal access to high quality schooling in Scotland.

# SELECTIVE COMPREHENSIVES: WALES

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Access to top performing schools for disadvantaged pupils in Wales.

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Jens Van den Brande, Jude Hillary and Carl Cullinane  
– March 2019



## Introduction

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Comprehensive schools offer a platform to foster educational equity by educating and improving the skills of pupils across the whole socio-economic spectrum. However, consistency and equal access to high quality education is key for a comprehensive system to provide a platform for upward social mobility. However, in a system with substantial variation in school quality, it becomes essential that access to the best schools is equitably and fairly distributed. The Sutton Trust has been examining the issue of access to top performing schools in England since 2006. It has consistently found, including its most recent report<sup>14</sup> that top performing comprehensives have, on average, less disadvantaged intakes, compared to the national average, but also compared to their local areas. For the first time, this analysis can be extended to Wales, and this report considers the extent to which top comprehensives in Wales reflect the social composition of their local school catchment areas.

We explore this question by looking at the proportion of pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds in Wales's top performing comprehensives relative to the profile of children in their catchment areas. We define the highest performing institutions as the top 40 comprehensive schools based on the proportion of pupils which achieve 5 A\* to C grades in their GCSEs. While this measure will be influenced by the prior attainment and socio-economic background of these schools' intakes, and does not necessarily represent a measure of 'school quality' in itself, it nonetheless represents a group of schools where pupils are most likely to perform the highest in terms of outcomes.

To provide context, we always present the equivalent figures for all secondary schools. Moreover, the analysis is further broken down by different school and sub-national characteristics in an attempt to explain the reasons for the make-up and social composition of the top 40 schools.

The majority of the secondary schools in Wales are maintained by local authorities, who are responsible for operating the admissions process for these schools within the rules set out in the School Admissions Code.<sup>15</sup> However, for foundation schools and voluntary aided schools, the governing body of the school is the admission authority.

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<sup>14</sup> Sutton Trust (2017) Selective comprehensives 2017.

<sup>15</sup> Welsh Government (2013) School Admissions Code. Retrieved from <https://beta.gov.wales/sites/default/files/publications/2018-03/school-admissions-code.pdf> 17 February 2019

## Methodology

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The data in this report has been sourced from public Welsh government figures, in combination with pupil level data sourced from the National Pupil Database, gathered and analysed for the Sutton Trust by the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER).

Pupil level data included which school a pupil attended, which lower super output area (LSOA) a pupil lived in and whether or not they were eligible for free school meals (FSM). We then matched in school and regional characteristics from the publicly available data, such as the Welsh Index of Multiple Deprivation (WIMD), school governance, religious affiliation, main working language and geographical region.

In order to assess the social composition of comprehensive schools, the number of pupils who are eligible for FSM was used as a proxy for socio-economic disadvantage. However, to robustly assess the extent to which schools are representative of their local areas, we needed to compare the profile of the pupils admitted to the school with those who could have been admitted. To do this, we created school catchment areas based on detailed data across three years of admissions, looking at where schools had admitted their pupils from.

To construct the catchment areas, we identified all the LSOAs that had five or more pupils joining a secondary school in the first year over the three academic school years between 2015 and 2017. These LSOAs were combined to form the catchment area for that school. For each school catchment area, we then calculated the aggregate number of pupils who would be starting secondary school in each of the three years, who could have potentially gone to the school. We also computed the proportion of these pupils in the school catchment area who were eligible for FSM, which we refer to as the catchment FSM rate. Similarly, a school's FSM rate is the average FSM eligibility rate of all the pupils attending the school in the intake year over the three years used in this research. The difference between the school and catchment FSM rate is known as the FSM gap.

Free school meal eligibility is a widely used proxy for deprivation, but it has some limitations. In particular, it is a process which requires parents to opt in. Moreover, it reflects only a certain type of disadvantage, namely income deprivation, and does not take account of forms of deprivation such as healthcare or housing. In Wales FSM entitlement is measured at a single time point in the year, and does not capture the longevity of entitlement, unlike the measure used in England.

In order to identify top performing schools, we ranked all the schools in Wales based on the proportion of pupils achieving at least 5 A\* to C grades in their Key Stage 4 level qualifications. The top 40 schools, which is about a fifth of all secondary schools, were then selected based on this ranking. While this ranking will vary from year to year, and if a different outcome measure had been used, we sought to use the most widely-used measure.

While exam scores in these schools will be influenced by the prior attainment of the school intakes, and a progress-based measure such as Progress 8 in England would be preferable, there is no equivalent in Wales at this point. Though this attainment-based ranking is a highly imperfect way of measuring the best schools, it nonetheless captures the schools with the highest results, which are important for university attendance and employment prospects.

Some of the analyses is based on the working language of a school. Schools were categorised as English medium schools where English is the language of the day to day business of the school. Welsh medium schools were defined as Welsh medium where Welsh is the language of the day to day business of the school or they were Bilingual (Type A), which are schools where at least 80% of subjects apart from English and Welsh are taught only through the medium of Welsh to all pupils. Bilingual schools included the remaining types of schools, which were the following: Bilingual (Type B), Bilingual (Type C) and English with significant Welsh.

## The social composition of top comprehensive schools in Wales

As shown in Table 1, the average FSM eligibility rate for the top 40 comprehensives, based on the proportion of pupils achieving at least 5 A\* to C grades in their Key Stage 4 level qualifications, is 9.6%. This is just over half that for all secondary comprehensives in Wales.

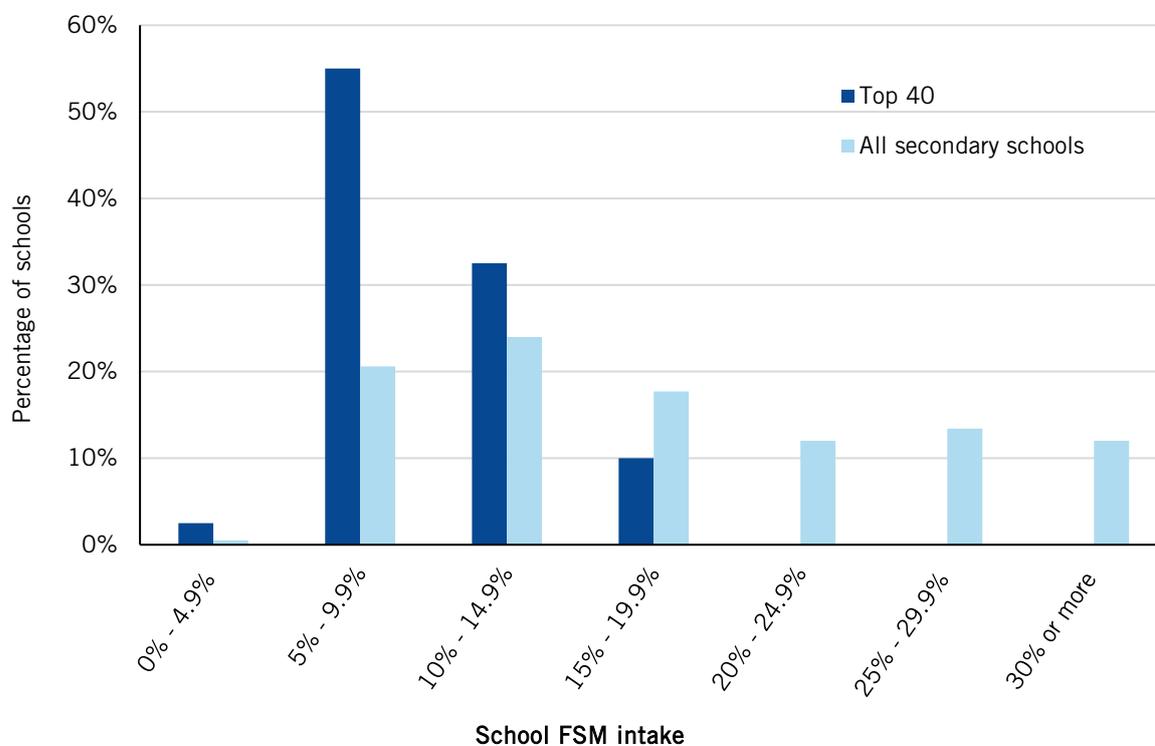
**Table 1: FSM rate of the top 40 schools**

	Top 40 comprehensives	All secondary schools
Average school FSM rate	9.6%	18.4%

The top performing schools are primarily concentrated at the bottom end of the distribution of FSM eligibility, with nearly 60% having less than 10% of disadvantaged pupils in their school (Figure 1). In contrast, just 21% of all schools nationally have an FSM rate of less than 10%.

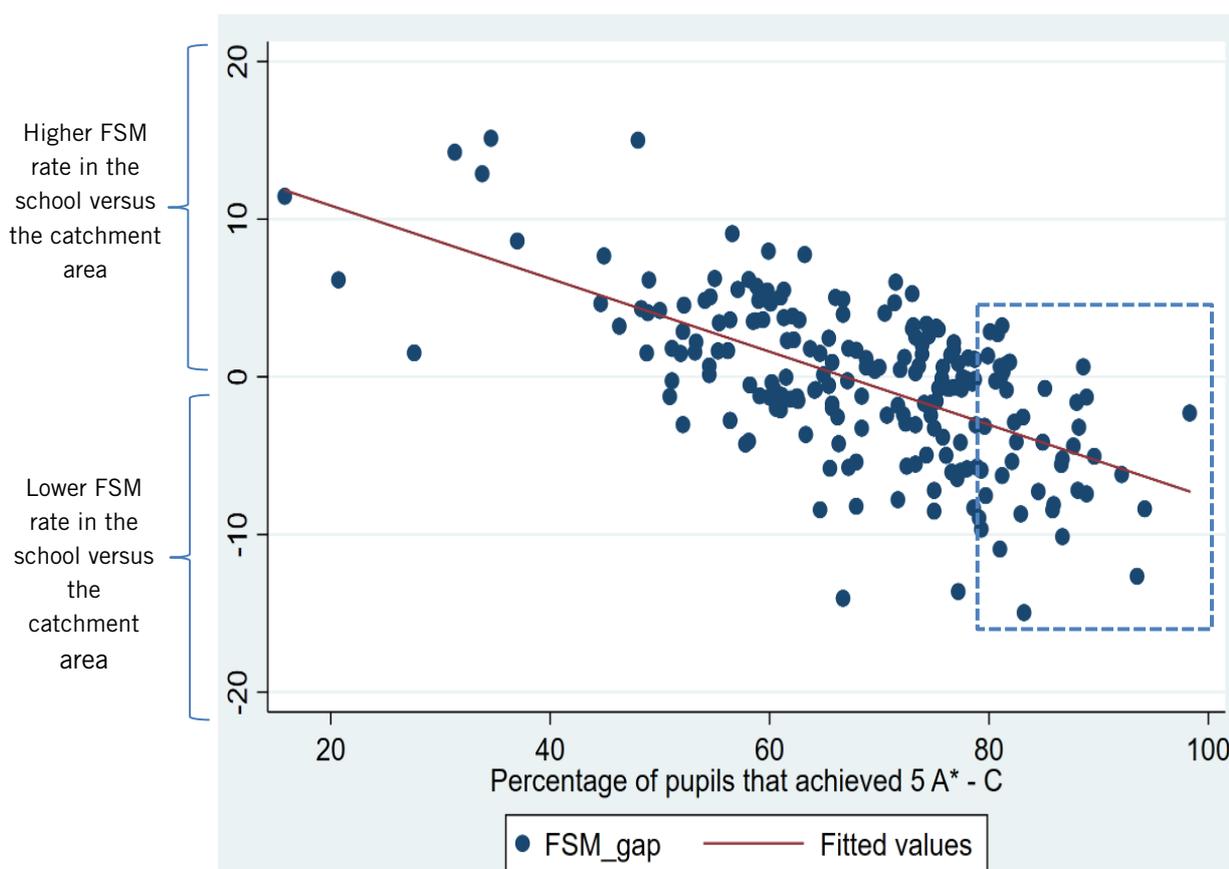
Figure 1 also shows there is also less variation in the FSM rate amongst the 40 top performing comprehensives. In these schools, the proportion of pupils who are eligible for FSM varies between 0% and 20%, whereas the distribution for all schools is much wider.

**Figure 1: Spread of secondary schools by the proportion of FSM pupils in a school**



It is important to note that the difference in the social composition of these schools could make a large difference in terms of their performance. This is because we know from research in England<sup>16</sup> that secondary pupils from low income backgrounds make less progress compared to their peers. We also know that a wide attainment gap exists between disadvantaged pupils and their peers at secondary level in Wales.<sup>17</sup> Hence the smaller proportions of FSM pupils in the top 40 schools may, to some extent, explain why they have higher proportions of pupils achieving 5 A\* to C grades (Figure 2).

**Figure 2: Comparison of schools' FSM gaps and their academic performance (top 40 schools in highlighted area)**



<sup>16</sup> Shaw B. et al (2017) Low income pupils' progress at secondary school. London: LKMCo

<sup>17</sup> National Assembly for Wales (2015) Inquiry into Educational Outcomes for Children from Low Income Households. Wales

## Socio-economic disadvantage and school catchment areas

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As shown previously, the top 40 comprehensives have a significantly lower average FSM rate than nationally and there is less variation in the FSM rate between these schools, but we do not know why this is the case. To explore the possible reasons for the difference in social composition between top Welsh schools and the national picture, we examine whether the pupils who attended these comprehensives are representative of the catchment area from which the school draws its pupils.

Table 2 shows the average FSM rates in school catchment areas for the top performing comprehensives and for all schools. This shows that the top 40 schools have an average catchment FSM rate of 13.6%, which is nearly five percentage points lower than the national average FSM rate in schools (18.4%). This suggests that just over half of the difference between top performing schools and the national average is due to these schools being located in more affluent areas.

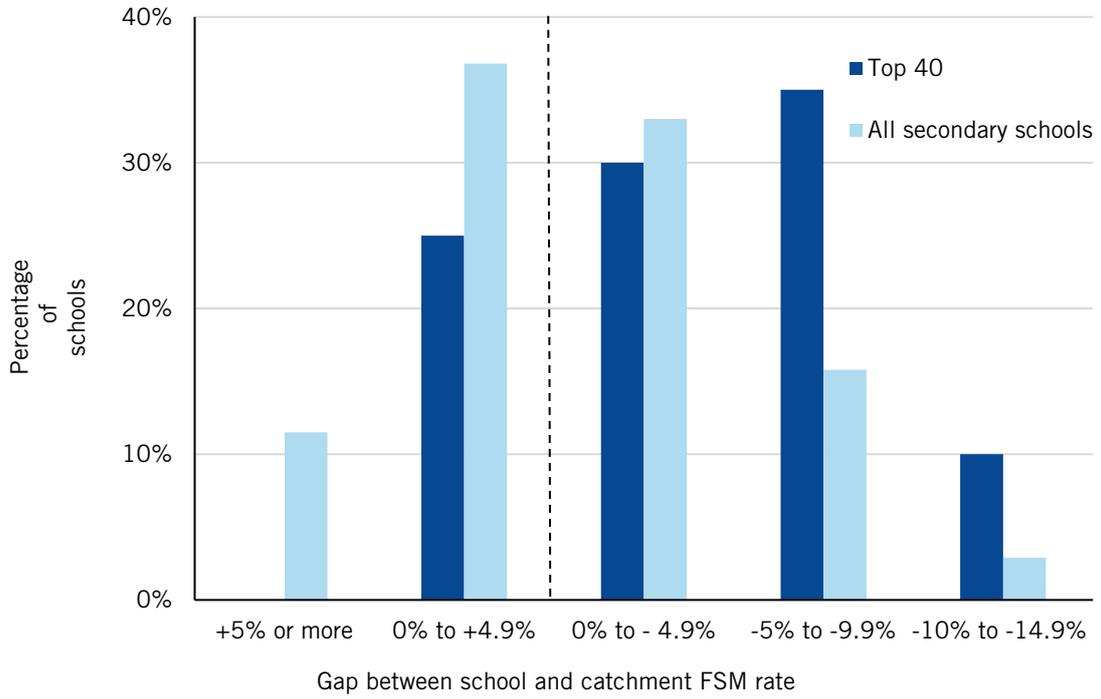
**Table 2: FSM rates in the school catchment areas**

	Top 40 comprehensives	All secondary schools
<b>Average FSM rate in catchment area</b>	13.6%	18.8%

While the location of the school appears to explain a lot of the FSM gap, there remains a four percentage point difference between the average FSM rate for top performing schools and their catchments. This suggests there may be other factors at play that are contributing to this FSM gap.

To explore this further, as averages can sometimes hide wide underlying variations in the data, we looked at the spread of the FSM gap. This revealed that 75% of the schools in the top 40 have lower proportions of pupils from low income families compared to their catchment areas (Figure 3). This is almost 25 percentage points higher than all secondary schools nationally. Moreover, 45% of the top comprehensives have a difference between their school and catchment area FSM rate that begins to look unrepresentative (i.e. five per cent or more).

**Figure 3: Spread of secondary schools by difference between school and catchment area FSM rate**



## Characteristics of top comprehensives

### School type

There are several different types of school in Wales. As Table 3 shows, the vast majority (180) of the 209 state secondary schools are community schools. The next largest type are voluntary aided schools with 19 secondary schools. There are also a small number of foundation and voluntary controlled schools.

The admission authority for a school varies according to the type of school. Local authorities are the admission authorities for community and voluntary controlled schools,<sup>18</sup> while school governing bodies are the admission authorities for foundation schools and voluntary aided schools. Table 3 shows that governing body admission authorities make up 13% of all comprehensives. By comparison, they make up slightly more (17%) of the top 40 performing schools, though we should not draw too many conclusions from this given the low number of schools involved.

**Table 3: Top 40 and all schools by school type and admissions authority**

	Proportion of top 40	Average school FSM rate top 40	Average catchment FSM rate top 40	Proportion of all secondary schools	Average school FSM rate all secondary schools	Average catchment FSM rate all secondary schools
<b>Governing body admissions authorities</b>						
Voluntary aided schools	12% (5)	11.4%	21.1%	9% (19)	18.8%	24.3%
Foundation schools	5% (2)	10.0%	12.1%	4% (8)	16.3%	17.7%
<b>Total</b>	<b>17% (7)</b>	<b>10.7%</b>	<b>18.5%</b>	<b>13% (27)</b>	<b>17.6%</b>	<b>22.3%</b>
<b>Local authority controlled admissions</b>						
Community schools	83% (33)	9.3%	12.6%	86% (180)	18.5%	18.3%
Voluntary controlled schools	-	-	-	1% (2)	13.2%	13.4%
<b>Total</b>	<b>83% (33)</b>	<b>9.3%</b>	<b>12.6%</b>	<b>87% (182)</b>	<b>15.9%</b>	<b>18.2%</b>
<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>9.6%</b>	<b>13.6%</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>18.4%</b>	<b>18.8%</b>

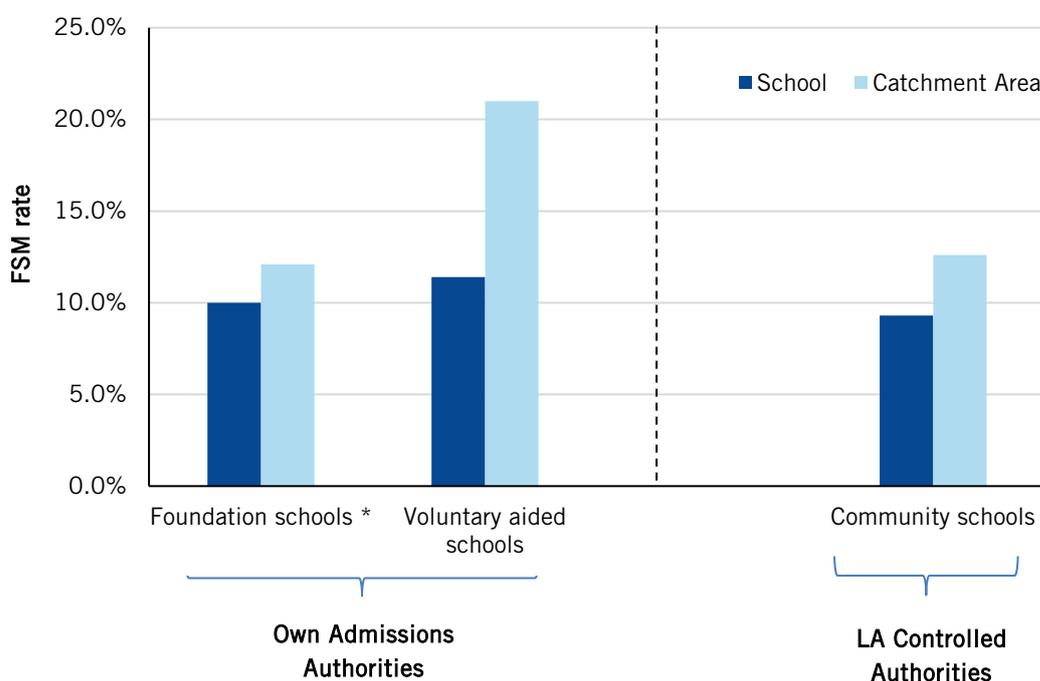
Note: Number of schools in parenthesis

<sup>18</sup> Unless, under section 88(1)(a)(ii) of the 1998 Act, the function has been delegated in full to the governing body

When comparing FSM rates for the different admission authorities, we find that schools where the governing body controls admissions, be they in the top 40 schools or all secondary schools, have slightly higher FSM rates (10.7% and 17.6% respectively) compared to schools where the local authority controls admissions (9.3% and 15.9%, respectively).

Looking at the different school types within the top 40 performing schools, community schools, which make up five-sixths of this group, also have the lowest proportion of FSM pupils at 9.3% (Figure 4). The proportion of FSM pupils in these schools' catchment areas, at 12.6%, is much lower than the national FSM rate (18.4%), which suggests that most of this difference is due to these schools being located in more affluent areas. This compares to voluntary aided schools, which have a higher average FSM rate at 11.4% but also have an average FSM gap of almost 10 percentage points. While the five voluntary aided schools only make up an eighth of the top performing schools group, they account for almost a whole percentage point of the four percentage point FSM gap (i.e. a quarter of the gap) that we have observed for the top 40 schools group that was not due to school location. This trend is also consistent when we look at the FSM gap for all voluntary aided schools, although it is smaller at 5.5 percentage points indicating that this unrepresentativeness is more acute for voluntary aided schools in the top 40 group.

**Figure 4: Difference between average school and catchment area FSM rate of top 40 schools by admission authorities**



Note: \* indicates two schools in the group

## Language status

There is an array of different school types in terms of working language in the Welsh education system. These range from schools with 80% of subjects taught in Welsh, to bilingual schools where varying proportions of either language are used, to English being the main language of teaching and learning in a school. We have classified all comprehensives into three categories – Welsh, Bilingual and English – based on the proportion of subjects taught in Welsh.

When we look at the average FSM rates for these school groupings based on their working language, an interesting pattern emerges. Welsh Medium schools have the lowest proportion of pupils from deprived backgrounds compared to other school groupings. (Table 4). This is true for both the top 40 comprehensives and for all secondary schools.

**Table 4: FSM rate of top 40 and all schools by working language**

	Proportion of top 40	Average school FSM rate top 40	Average catchment FSM rate top 40	Proportion of all secondary schools	Average school FSM rate all secondary schools	Average catchment FSM rate all secondary schools
<b>Welsh</b>	33% (13)	8.0%	13.8%	18% (38)	10.3%	15.3%
<b>Bilingual</b>	12% (5)	12.5%	13.3%	12% (24)	13.7%	13.4%
<b>English</b>	55% (22)	10.0%	13.6%	70% (147)	21.2%	20.5%

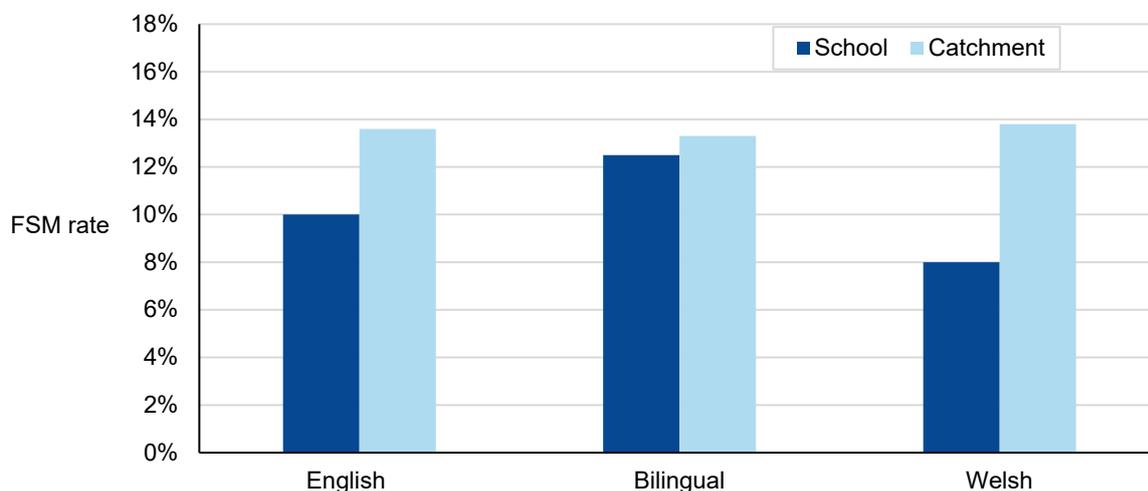
Note: Number of schools in parenthesis

When we explore this further, we find that Welsh medium schools in the top 40 performing schools group have the largest FSM gaps when compared to their catchment areas (Figure 5). This is 5.8 percentage points for top performing Welsh medium schools, which compares to 3.6 and 0.8 percentage points for English medium and bilingual top performing schools, respectively. This pattern remains consistent even when we look at all Welsh medium schools, where the FSM gap is 4.9 percentage points.

We cannot tell conclusively from this analysis why Welsh medium schools have lower proportions of FSM pupils and larger FSM gaps than schools with other working languages. However, as this pattern is true for both top performing and all Welsh medium schools, and because local authorities are responsible for their admissions, it is likely to be a combination of the location (and relative scarcity) of these schools, along with the types of families that these schools tend to attract. For example, as Welsh medium schools are fewer in number, it is probable that some children would have to travel longer distances to get to them, which may be more challenging if public transport is not available and families do not have their own transport.<sup>19</sup> This is likely to be more the case for disadvantaged families, who therefore may choose a closer local school for their children.

<sup>19</sup> Pupils may not be eligible for free transport if a faith school or Welsh medium school is further away than the closest school to the pupil's home, though this is at the discretion of the council.

**Figure 5: Difference between school and catchment area  
FSM rate of top 40 schools by working language**



Another potential distorting factor is that some of the parents in a catchment area of a Welsh medium school may not speak fluent Welsh, so may not consider sending their children to a Welsh medium school. While we do not know from the available data whether children in disadvantaged families are more or less likely to fall in this category, other work in this area has spoken of a Welsh speaking middle class, particularly in the South East, who are focused on Welsh medium education.<sup>20</sup> However, Welsh medium schools have frequently been supposed to be 'better' than English-medium schools, and thus may attract parents with cultural capital and particular aspirations for their children,<sup>21</sup> regardless of their own linguistic background. It is also important to note here, that while the analysis in this report is focused on secondary schools, because of the difficulties in moving from an English medium primary school to a Welsh medium secondary, the focus of policy in this area should also fall on primary school admissions.

There is a lack of conclusive work on the reasons for social disparities at Welsh language schools, but other studies also suggest it is likely to include a combination of transport issues, perceptions of Welsh-medium and English-medium schools, and perceptions of the value of the Welsh language, all of which intersect with social class and parental cultural capital.<sup>22</sup>

Table 4 also shows a large difference in the proportion of FSM pupils in English medium schools in the top 40 (10%) compared to all English-speaking schools (21.2%). This difference is largely due to faith school admissions and will be explored further in the next section.

<sup>20</sup> <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/opendemocracyuk/home-truths-decline-of-welsh-language/>

<sup>21</sup> Four Errors ... and a Conspiracy? The effectiveness of schools in Wales. Gorard et al.

<sup>22</sup> What do we know and not know about choice of medium of education in south east wales. Llewelyn Jones.

## Religious faith

All secondary faith schools in Wales are voluntary aided schools and hence their governing boards control their admissions policy. Traditionally, faith schools have also been associated with stronger academic performance.<sup>23</sup> As shown in Table 5, comprehensives with a religious affiliation are slightly more prominent among the top 40 performing schools than the wider secondary school population. However, we should not draw too many conclusions from this breakdown, as the number of faith comprehensives in the top 40 schools is very small (five schools).

**Table 5: FSM rate of top 40 and all schools by religious status**

School type	Proportion of top 40	Average school FSM rate top 40	Average catchment FSM rate top 40	Proportion of all secondary schools	Average school FSM rate all secondary schools	Average catchment FSM rate all secondary schools
Faith school	12%	11.4%	21.1%	9%	18.8%	24.3%
Non-faith school	88%	9.4%	12.6%	91%	18.4%	18.2%
All schools	100%	9.6%	13.6%	100%	18.4%	18.8%

We saw in our breakdown by school type in Figure 4 that the voluntary aided (faith) schools in the top 40, while having a slightly higher average FSM rate than other top 40 school types, nonetheless have a very large average FSM gap, which is nearly 10 percentage points. An FSM gap also exists for all faith schools, which despite the average proportion of FSM pupils in these schools being slightly above the national average at 18.8%, have a FSM rate that is 5.5 percentage points lower on average than their corresponding catchment areas.

We cannot tell conclusively from our data analysis why this FSM gap exists for faith schools. The school governing boards are responsible for admissions in these schools, so therefore can control which pupils are admitted. However, it may be due to other factors outside of these schools' control – for example, given they are relatively few in number, they may be more difficult to access without private transport, which may be a barrier to low income families. Another potential reason may be the demographic make-up of the local community. Not all of the low-income families living in a denominational school's catchment area may follow the faith of the school, or parents from higher socio-economic classes may be more motivated to apply.

<sup>23</sup> Schagen S. et al (2002) The impact of specialist and faith schools on performance. Slough: NFER.

## Index of multiple deprivation

So far, we have used FSM eligibility as a measure of the social make-up of a school, but this does not capture the full range of the socio-economic spectrum. In this section, we look at another measure, the Welsh Index of Multiple Deprivation (WIMD), which is the official measure of relative deprivation in Wales. This index ranks every lower super output area (LSOA) based on a set of socio-economic criteria, including income, employment, housing, among others.

We started by creating an average WIMD ranking for each school by calculating the average WIMD rank for all of the pupils in their intakes across the three academic years 2015 to 2017. The WIMD rank used is that relating to the LSOA where each pupil lives. We then ranked all of the schools from highest to lowest. We divided these average rankings into equal groups known as quintiles. Schools with an average deprivation ranking in the top 20% of the distribution are in quintile 1 (the least deprived). Quintile 5 contains schools with the lowest deprivation ranking, thus are selecting pupils from the most deprived areas in Wales.

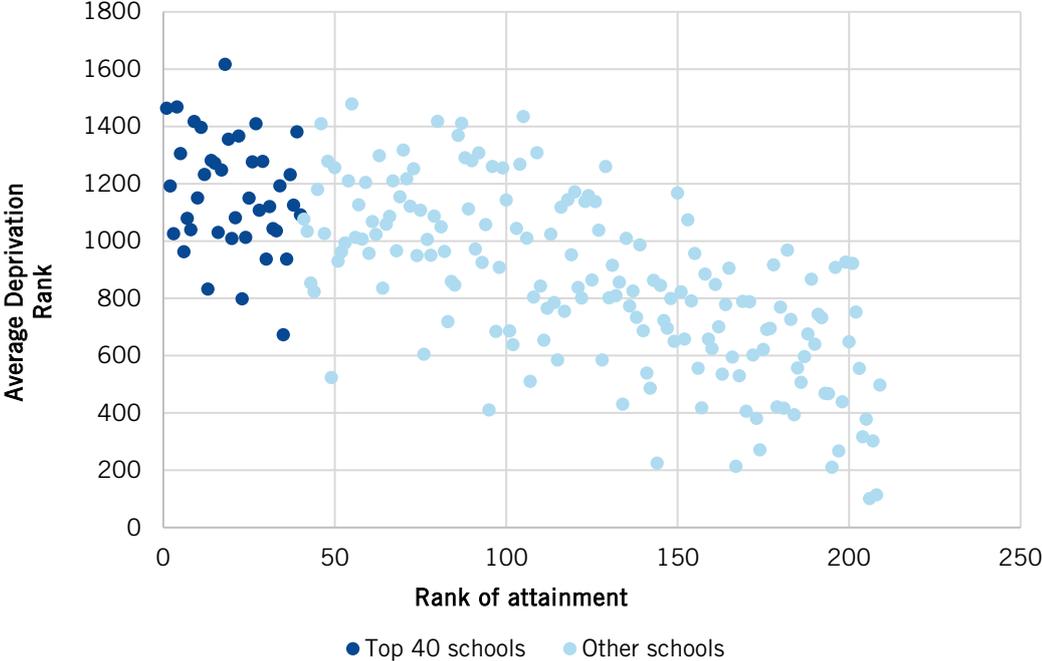
**Table 6: FSM rate of top 40 and all schools by deprivation score of area**

Quintiles of area deprivation	Proportion of top 40	Average school FSM rate top 40	Average catchment FSM rate top 40	Proportion of all secondary schools	Average school FSM rate all secondary schools	Average catchment FSM rate all secondary schools
Quintile 1 (least deprived)	45%	8.4%	11.3%	20%	9.9%	11.0%
Quintile 2	35%	9.9%	14.8%	20%	12.6%	14.4%
Quintile 3	13%	12.4%	14.3%	20%	16.6%	17.1%
Quintile 4	7%	11.2%*	21.1%*	20%	20.9%	22.1%
Quintile 5 (most deprived)	-	-	-	20%	31.7%	29.0%

\* based on 3 schools

As shown in Table 6, this analysis indicates that almost half of the schools in the top 40 are in the least deprived quintile, and none of these are in the most deprived areas of the country. In fact, 80% of the top 40 are ranked in the top two quintiles of deprivation highlighting that, even on a broader measure, the majority of these schools are concentrated at the very top of the socio-economic spectrum, as shown in Figure 6. The average deprivation rank of all schools is in the 50<sup>th</sup> percentile of the distribution, as might be expected. However, for the top schools, the average rank is in the 82<sup>nd</sup> percentile, among the most advantaged areas in Wales.

**Figure 6: Average deprivation rank of top comprehensives and other schools**



## Geographical region

We also examined the make-up of the top 40 performing schools by geographic region, as shown in Table 7. This shows that West Wales and Central South Wales are the best represented regions, representing over 70% of the top 40 schools. The top 40 schools in these regions also had lower FSM rates on average compared to those in the other regions.

**Table 7: FSM rate of the top 40 and all schools by region**

Region	Proportion of top 40	Average school FSM rate top 40	Average catchment FSM rate top 40	Proportion of all secondary schools	Average school FSM rate all secondary schools	Average catchment FSM rate all secondary schools
Central South Wales	33%	9.2%	15.1%	27%	21.4%	22.0%
North Wales	12%	10.4%	14.0%	26%	15.9%	16.6%
South East Wales	15%	10.4%	13.5%	17%	21.1%	20.8%
West Wales	40%	9.4%	12.4%	30%	16.3%	16.5%

Table 8 below shows a further regional breakdown by the working language of the school for top comprehensives. Despite North Wales having the highest concentration of Welsh medium schools, 11 of the 13 Welsh medium comprehensives in the top 40 are located in West Wales and Central South regions. Welsh medium schools in these regions also have the largest differences between their average school and catchment area FSM rate (5 percentage points and 9.2 percentage points respectively). There is evidence of high demand for Welsh medium schools in Cardiff in particular, with plans to build another Welsh school to deal with parental demand.<sup>24</sup>

**Table 8: Schools in the top 40 by region and by working language**

Region		Welsh	Bilingual	English	Total
Central South Wales	Schools in top 40	3	0	10	13
	Total schools	9	1	47	57
North Wales	Schools in top 40	2	2	1	5
	Total schools	17	9	29	55
South East Wales	Schools in top 40	0	0	6	6
	Total schools	2	0	33	35
West Wales	Schools in top 40	8	3	5	16
	Total schools	10	14	38	62

<sup>24</sup> <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-wales-47528827?>

## Discussion

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Wales' top performing schools tend to be located in more affluent areas than average, which explains just over half of the FSM gap that exists between these schools and the average FSM rate in all Welsh secondary schools. However, after accounting for this, there remains a gap between the average school and catchment area FSM rate, which suggests there are other factors influencing the composition of these schools.

Local authorities control admissions for most of the secondary schools in Wales, so it is unlikely that the entire remaining gap after accounting for school location is due to actions top performing schools are taking to influence which pupils are admitted to the school. It is more likely that there are other factors, such as family characteristics, distance to school and parental decisions, which are outside of a school's control, that explain the difference.

We have identified that Welsh medium schools have a large FSM gap when compared to their catchment areas, both those in the top performing category and the wider secondary school population. As local authorities control admissions for these schools, the FSM gap is likely to come about due to the type of parents attracted to these schools, rather than specific actions the schools are taking. We cannot identify conclusively from this data analysis what is causing these differences. However, as pupils who are admitted to top performing schools are most likely to achieve the best outcomes, attend the best universities and succeed in the top professions, it is important to ensure that there are not any barriers in the way that are preventing low income families from attending these schools. The Welsh Government should commission further work with the Regional Consortia and local authorities to investigate access to Welsh medium schools and take steps to address any issues identified. The government has set an ambitious target of one million Welsh speakers by 2050.<sup>25</sup> One of its goals is that disadvantage should not pose a barrier to Welsh speaking. Improving equal access to Welsh medium schools would play an important part in ensuring that increases in Welsh language participation cross the socio-economic spectrum.

We have also identified a large FSM gap for faith schools, which exists for both those in the top 40 group and the wider school population. As the governing bodies are the admissions authority for these schools, it is possible that they are controlling who gets in. However, it may be due to other factors outside of these schools' control. While we cannot identify conclusively from our data analysis what is causing these differences, this pattern is consistent with faith schools in England, and in the interests of fairness and social mobility, local authorities and schools themselves should look at their admissions to identify and address any socio-economic barriers.

To promote social mobility in Wales further, the Welsh Government, the Regional Consortia and local authorities should consider what actions they could take in order to improve the diversity of top performing schools' intakes, including prioritising pupils eligible for free school meals in situations of oversubscription. While priority for those entitled to the pupil premium is currently written into the Schools Admissions Code in England, this is not currently the case for equivalent pupils in Wales.

The location of top performing schools in the most affluent areas of Wales is also an issue for social equity. This segregation can be reinforced by parents with the financial resources buying houses in the catchment areas of good schools, and driving the prices up in such areas.<sup>26</sup> The Trust has long advocated

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<sup>25</sup> <https://gov.wales/topics/welshlanguage/welsh-language-strategy-and-policies/cymraeg-2050-welsh-language-strategy/?lang=en>

<sup>26</sup> Selective Comprehensives, 2017. Parent Power, 2018.

in England for the greater use of random ballots in school admissions, de-emphasising the importance of proximity. Creation of an 'inner' catchment area, where families are entitled to a place, with an outer catchment area based on random allocation, could achieve a balance between proximity and fairness. It is crucial however that catchment areas are large enough in order to achieve a degree of socio-economic diversity. It is also vital that transport is available for poorer pupils and that families in more deprived areas are fully informed of their rights to transport.

It will take a holistic approach from the devolved government in Wales, the Regional Consortia, and schools themselves to improve equity of access to top performing schools, and to ensure the comprehensive system provides a platform for education success for those of all backgrounds.

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