



**Sutton Trust note for the House of Commons
Education Select Committee session on the
Government's new school admissions code**

October 2011

Summary

1. The Sutton Trust's concern given the reforms to allow greater freedom and autonomy for schools is that there needs to be a clear and robust admissions code to ensure that an already social segregated system is not made even more polarised. We believe the code is an essential part of the series of checks, balances and incentives in the school system needed to ensure that the current reforms benefit all pupils, not just those from privileged homes. Greater social segregation between schools is likely to be bad for overall social mobility levels, and the attainment of the poorest children in our schools.
2. A clear and robust admissions code will play a critical role in ensuring fair and equitable admissions to schools. We believe that ballots should be used as widely as possible as a tiebreaker when schools are oversubscribed after using other selection criteria. We also think that poorer children should be prioritised in schools admissions. We think it would be a retrograde step to allow priority in admissions for the children of teachers – as teachers would naturally want to teach and have their children go to the best performing schools. It would also be beneficial if faith schools employed a binary yes / no criteria in determining whether a pupil meets the faith criterion.

Sutton Trust research

3. The latest international comparisons of social mobility commissioned by the Trust show that a distinctive characteristic of England is a widening attainment gap from the ages of 11-14, which is likely to be related to social polarisation at the start of secondary schooling. We believe that particular stark attainment gaps in the UK are one of the factors behind low social mobility in the country.
4. A series of statistical analyses by the Trust have found that the intakes of high performing state schools are markedly different to the social mix of the local communities. One study found that the proportion of pupils eligible for free school meals (FSM) at the top 200 secondary state schools was on average 3% compared with 12.3% in the postcode sectors in which the schools were sited, and 14.3% nationally. These differences were found to be particularly stark for schools that are their own admissions authorities.
5. These findings were confirmed by a report investigating the social exclusivity in secondary schools using a more sophisticated postcode analysis of children's income levels, based on IDACI (Income Deprivation Affecting Children Index). The country's top 164 comprehensive schools took only 9.2% of children from income deprived homes although they drew pupils from areas where about 20% were income deprived.
6. A socially segregated school system leads to worse outcomes for bright pupils from less privileged backgrounds. For example, Sutton Trust research found that highly able pupils (the top 10%) in the most deprived state schools on average achieve half a grade less per GCSE than highly able pupils in the most advantaged schools. These differences are due to a number of factors associated with advantaged schools, including a 'peer effect' by which

pupils benefit from being educated with other pupils with high levels of attainment, and low levels of deprivation.

Admissions code – key issues for the Sutton Trust

Ballots

7. We believe ballots are the fairest way to allocate places at oversubscribed schools once pupils applying have met other selection criteria (such as proximity to the school).
8. So we disagree with the Code's proposal to ban local authorities from using ballots or 'random allocation' to decide which children should go to oversubscribed schools. No reasoning is given for this proposal.
9. Our rationale for that is fairly simple – ballots are fairer than any of the alternatives. If oversubscription is determined simply on proximity, then those who can afford to live a few feet closer to the school gates benefit. If you use religion, then you have admissions authorities making subjective judgements about which pupils are more religious than others. Often, of course, it is the better off parents who are more able to make that case.
10. A public survey of parents commissioned previously by the Trust showed that when properly explained random allocation methods are viewed as at least as fair as the other methods.
11. When given the specific scenario of an over-subscribed faith school, more people (36%) thought that a ballot was the fairer way of deciding which pupils get a place than those who think the decision should rest on judgements showing which families are most committed to the Christian faith (20%).
12. When given the specific scenario of an over-subscribed comprehensive school, almost the same number of people (32%) thought that a ballot was the fairer way of deciding which pupils get a place as those who think it is fairer to decide on how near families live to the school (35%).

Priority for poorer children

13. The Trust has already proposed that children from poor backgrounds should have priority in school admissions. So we support the proposal in the new Code that academies and free schools be allowed to prioritise children on Free School Meals in their admissions. We see no reason however why this should not be extended to all schools.
14. Allowing schools to give preference to children from disadvantaged backgrounds is crucial if pupil premium funding is to operate truly as an incentive for schools to actively recruit children from poorer homes.
15. While the Trust supports good schools expanding, we are concerned that schools would tend to recruit more affluent students. A solution would be to make expansion conditional on giving first preference to all children eligible for free school meals before allowing other children to take up the extra places. This would ensure that successful schools which had the appetite to grow would recruit the pupils who would most benefit.

Prioritising the children of teachers and other school staff

16. The Trust believes it would be wrong to allow schools, as suggested, to give preferential places to children of their own teachers and other staff because this will provide a further disincentive to teachers with children, or planning to have children, to work in the most disadvantaged schools.
17. Our fear is that it will become even harder to attract the best teachers to the most challenging schools – one of the key challenges if we are to narrow attainment gaps between poorer children and their more privileged peers. The biggest single factor within schools impacting on attainment is the quality of teachers in the classrooms.
18. It will also go against the need for a more robust performance management system needed for the teaching profession, creating a strong disincentive for teachers to leave schools on their own accord or because of consistently poor performance.

Other admission criteria

19. The Trust believes that religious schools should consider straightforward 'binary' criteria to decide which pupils should be admitted – perhaps signature from a religious leader to demonstrate commitment to a particular faith. An alternative would be simply for faith schools to be open to any family who wants their child to be educated in line with the tenets of that particular religion.
20. The Trust also supports fair banding – whereby schools are required to admit equal proportions of pupils from each band of ability. However, because of the opportunity for 'playing the system' and the need to conduct tests, the Trust's preference is for ballots.