

# SELECTIVE COMPREHENSIVES: SCOTLAND

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Access to top performing schools for disadvantaged pupils in Scotland.

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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 summary

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- 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.

## Recommendations

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- 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.

## 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>1</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>2</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>3</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>1</sup> Sutton Trust (2017) [Selective comprehensives 2017](#). London: Sutton Trust.

<sup>2</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>3</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.

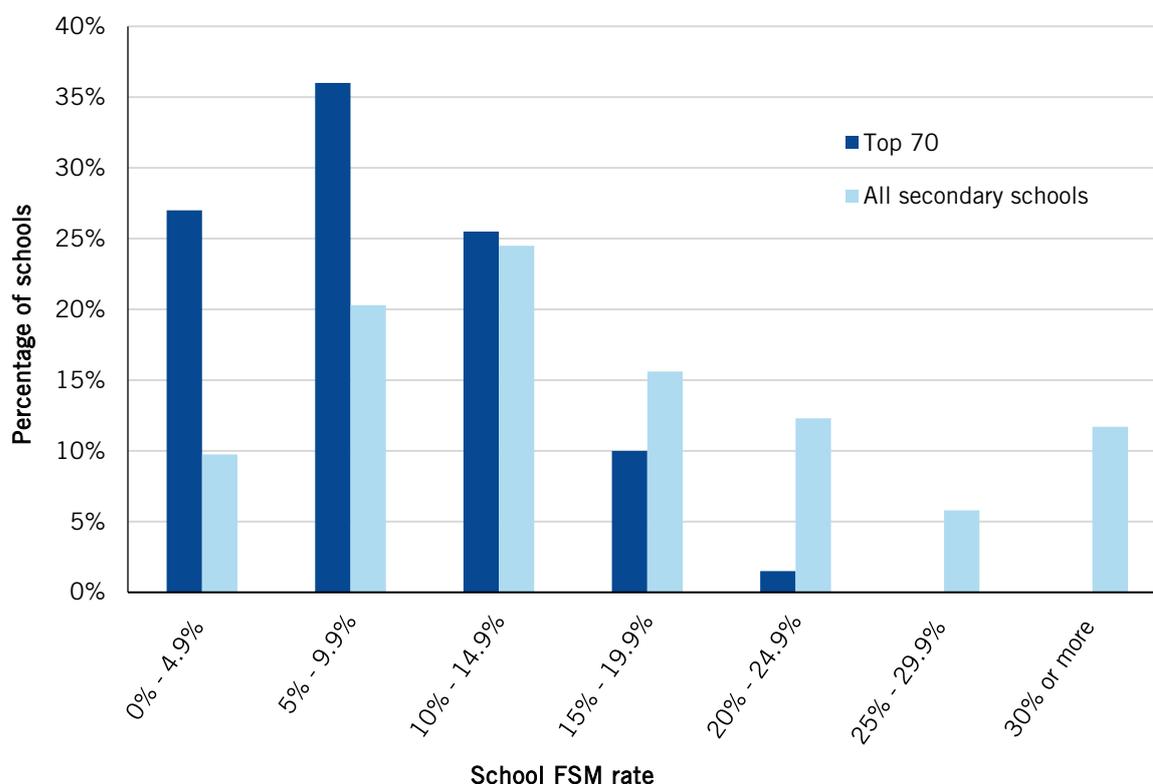
**Table 1: FSM rate of the top 70 schools**

	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.

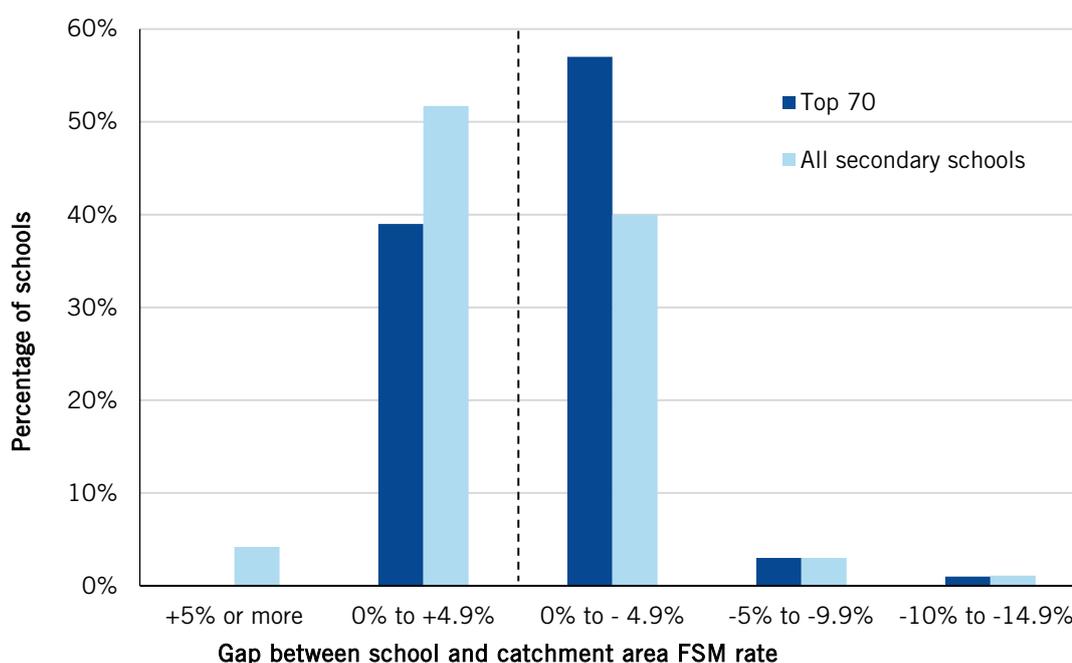
By comparison, the average school catchment FSM rate for all secondary schools is 16.3%, which is the same level as the average school FSM rate for all secondary schools. This is also consistent with the fact that the vast majority of pupils in Scotland attend their local school.

**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%

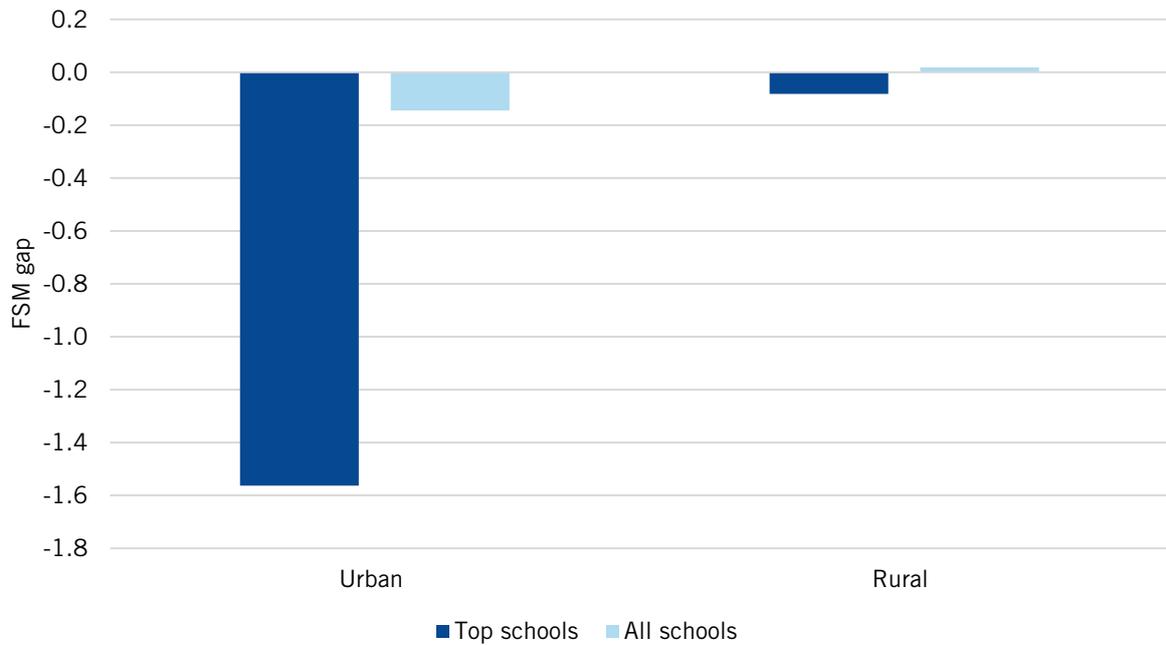
As these averages may be masking underlying variation in the FSM gap, we also looked at the distribution of the differences between the school and catchment area FSM rates (Figure 2). This revealed that roughly 60% of the schools in the top 70 schools have slightly lower proportions of FSM pupils than 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>4</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>5</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>4</sup><http://www.sath.org.uk/edscot/www.educationscotland.gov.uk/higherscottishhistory/migrationandempire/experienceofimmigrants/irish.html>

<sup>5</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>6</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**

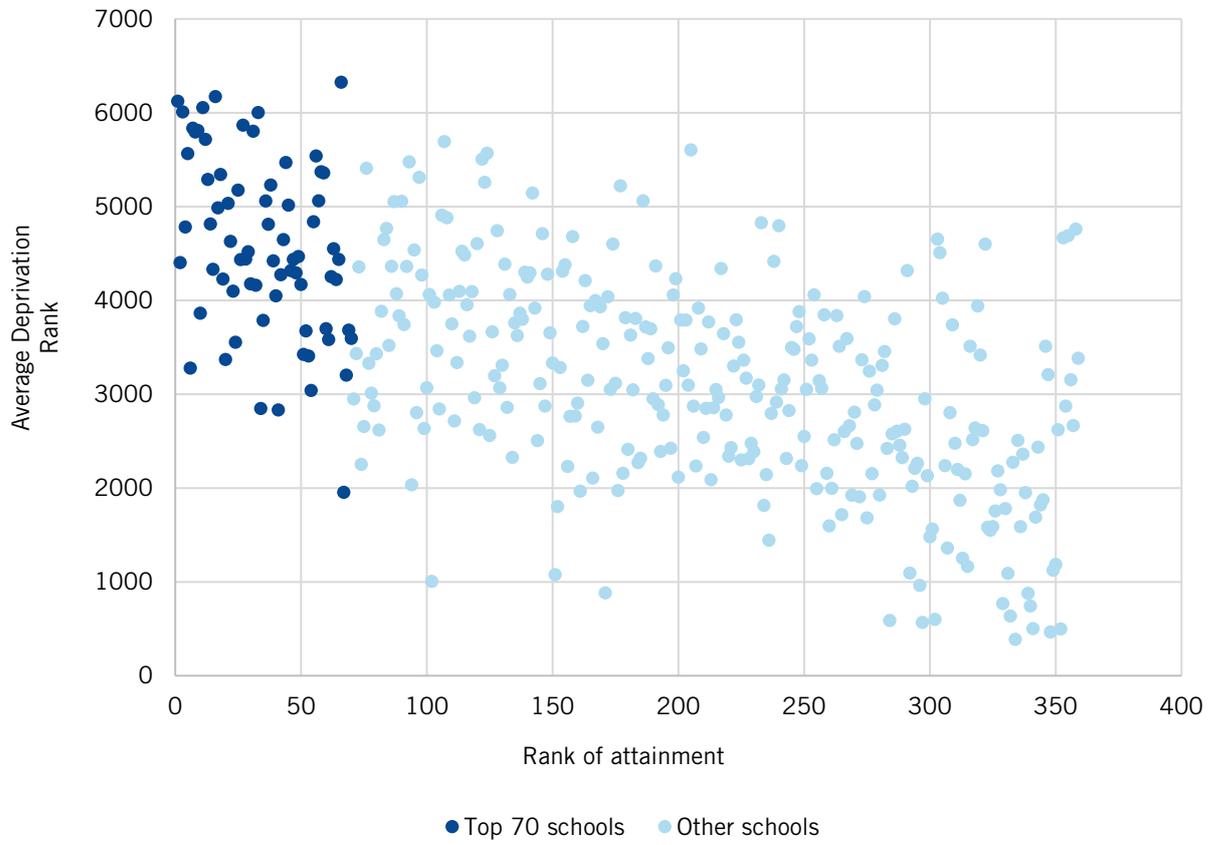
Quintiles of area deprivation	Proportion of top 70	Average school FSM rate top 70	Average catchment FSM rate top 70	Proportion of all secondary schools	Average school FSM rate all secondary schools	Average catchment FSM rate all secondary schools
Quintile 1 (least deprived)	54%	5.4%	6.4%	20%	5.9%	6.8%
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>6</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>7</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>8</sup> This is a particular issue in urban areas like Glasgow and Edinburgh.<sup>9</sup> This dynamic, which the Trust has

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<sup>7</sup> <https://www.holyrood.com/articles/news/increase-scottish-university-students-deprived-areas>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-scotland-45400765>

<sup>9</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.

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