

# SELECTIVE COMPREHENSIVES: WALES

---

Access to top performing schools for disadvantaged pupils in Wales.

---

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





## 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.

Copyright © 2019 Sutton Trust. All rights reserved. Please cite the Sutton Trust when using material from this research.

## About the authors

**Jens Van den Brande** is an Economist within the Centre for Policy and Practice Research at NFER. His research interests include social mobility and the teacher workforce.

**Jude Hillary** is Quantitative Research Director at NFER, having previously worked as senior analyst and head of statistics at the Department for Education for five years. His research interests include school systems and structures, school accountability and educational outcomes data, along with teacher retention and turnover.

**Carl Cullinane** is Head of Research at the Sutton Trust.

The authors and the Sutton Trust would like to thank Joana Andrade (NFER) and Stephen McNamara (formerly NFER), along with the Welsh and Scottish Governments for their assistance with the data used in the report. We would also like to sincerely thank Dr Siôn Llewelyn Jones, Prof Doug Willms and others who offered comments and feedback.

## Contents

---

Foreword .....	4
Executive summary .....	5
Recommendations.....	6
Introduction.....	7
Methodology .....	8
The social composition of top comprehensive schools in Wales .....	10
Socio-economic disadvantage and school catchment areas .....	12
Characteristics of top comprehensives .....	14
Language status.....	16
Religious faith .....	18
Index of multiple deprivation .....	19
Geographical region.....	21
Discussion.....	22

## Foreword

---

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

---

- 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

---

- 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.**

## Introduction

---

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>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 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>2</sup> However, for foundation schools and voluntary aided schools, the governing body of the school is the admission authority.

---

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

<sup>2</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

---

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.

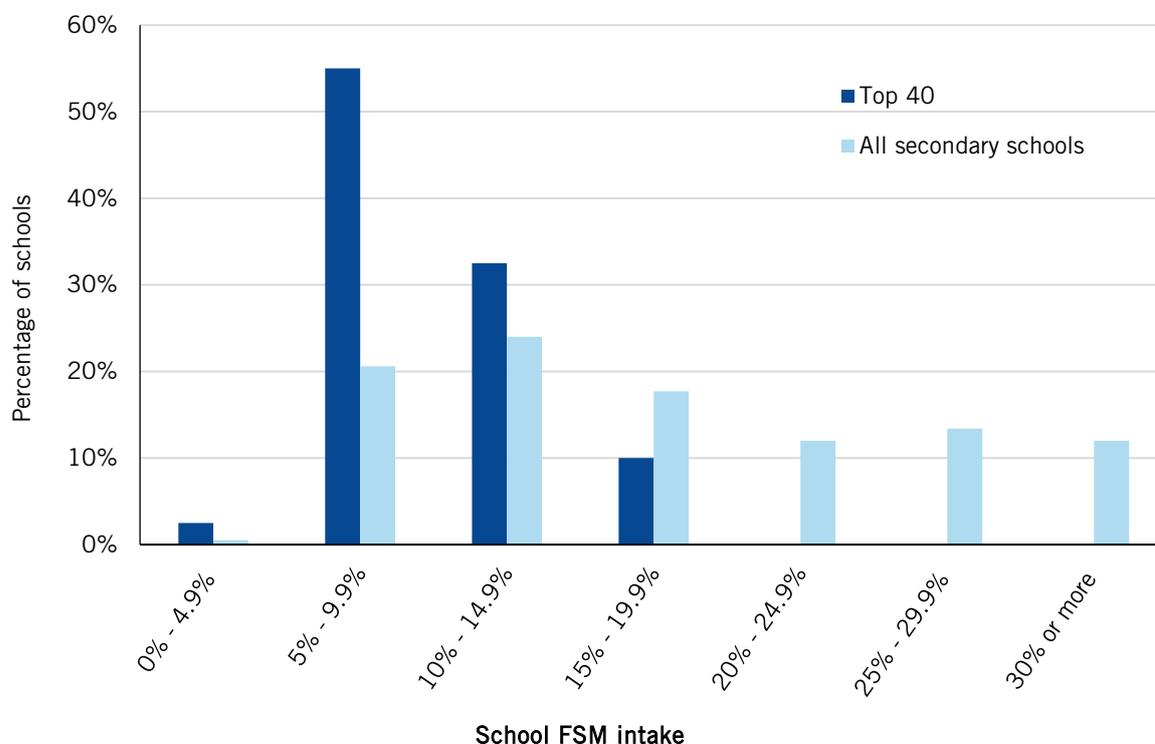
**Table 1: FSM rate of the top 40 schools**

	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%.

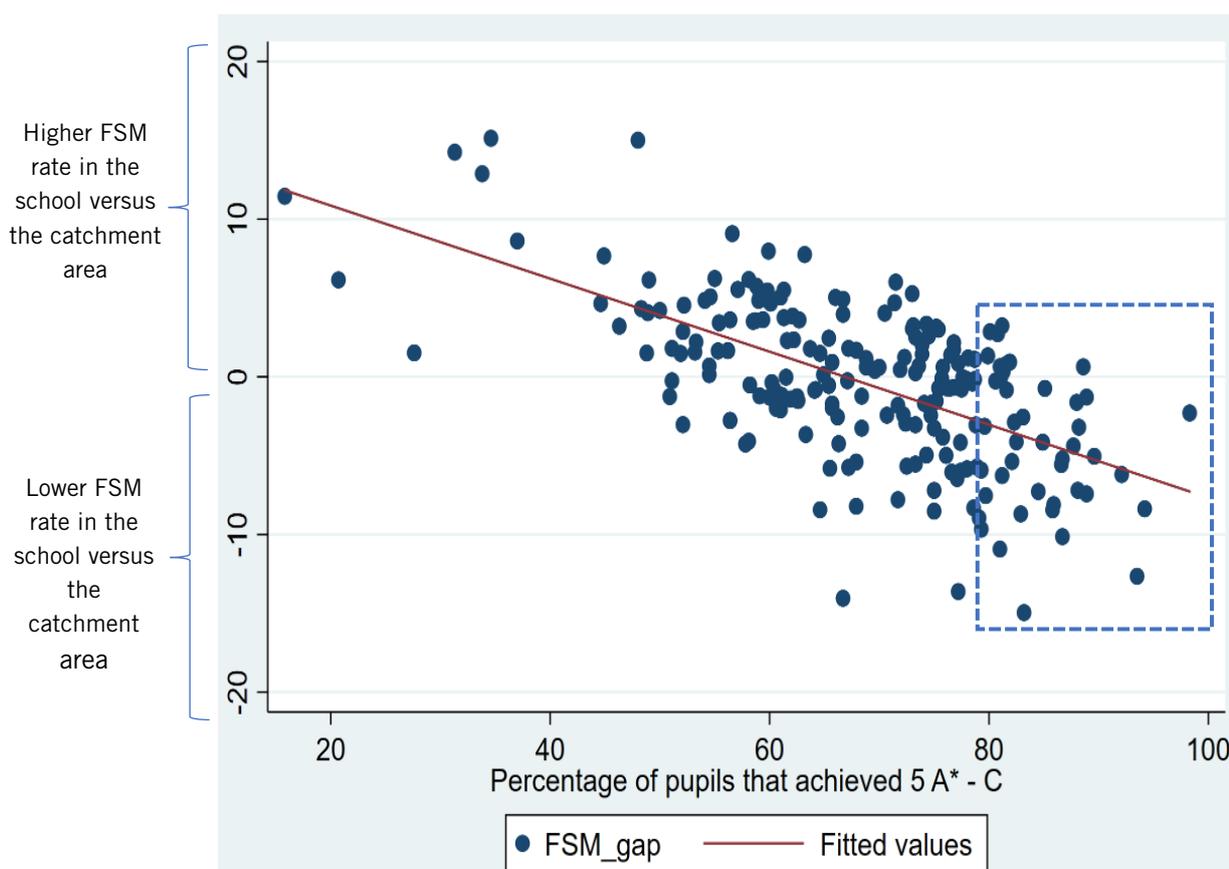
Figure 1 also shows there is also less variation in the FSM rate amongst the 40 top performing comprehensives. In these schools, the proportion of pupils who are eligible for FSM varies between 0% and 20%, whereas the distribution for all schools is much wider.

**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>3</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>4</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>3</sup> Shaw B. et al (2017) Low income pupils' progress at secondary school. London: LKMCo

<sup>4</sup> National Assembly for Wales (2015) Inquiry into Educational Outcomes for Children from Low Income Households. Wales

## Socio-economic disadvantage and school catchment areas

---

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.

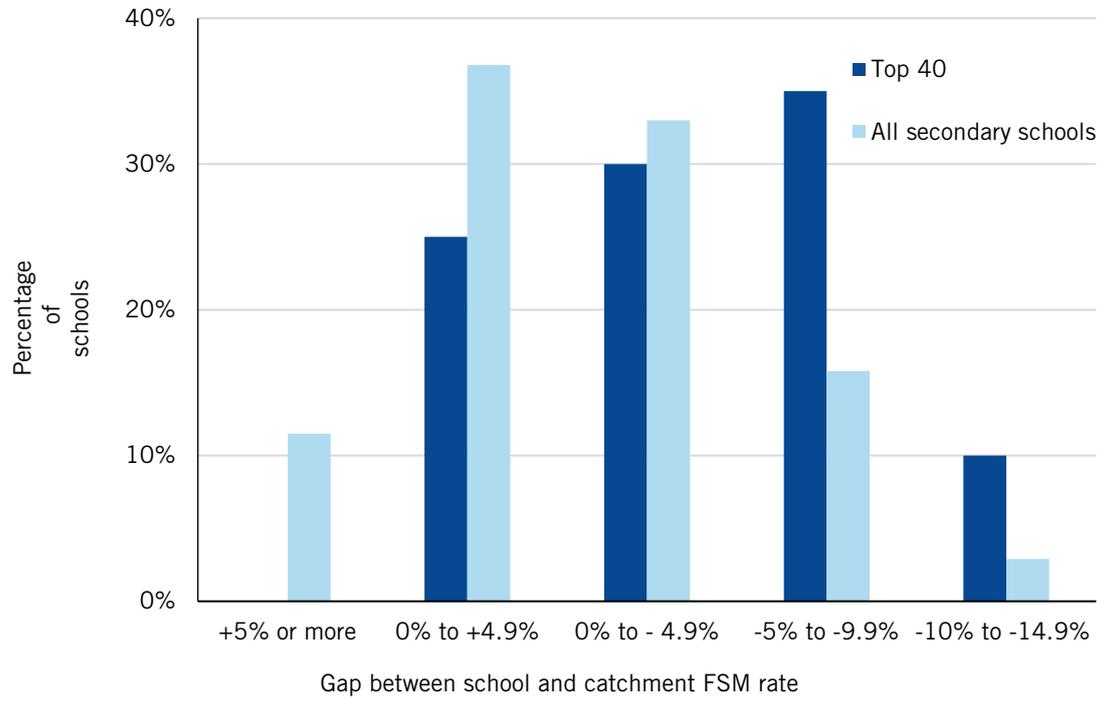
**Table 2: FSM rates in the school catchment areas**

	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>5</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>

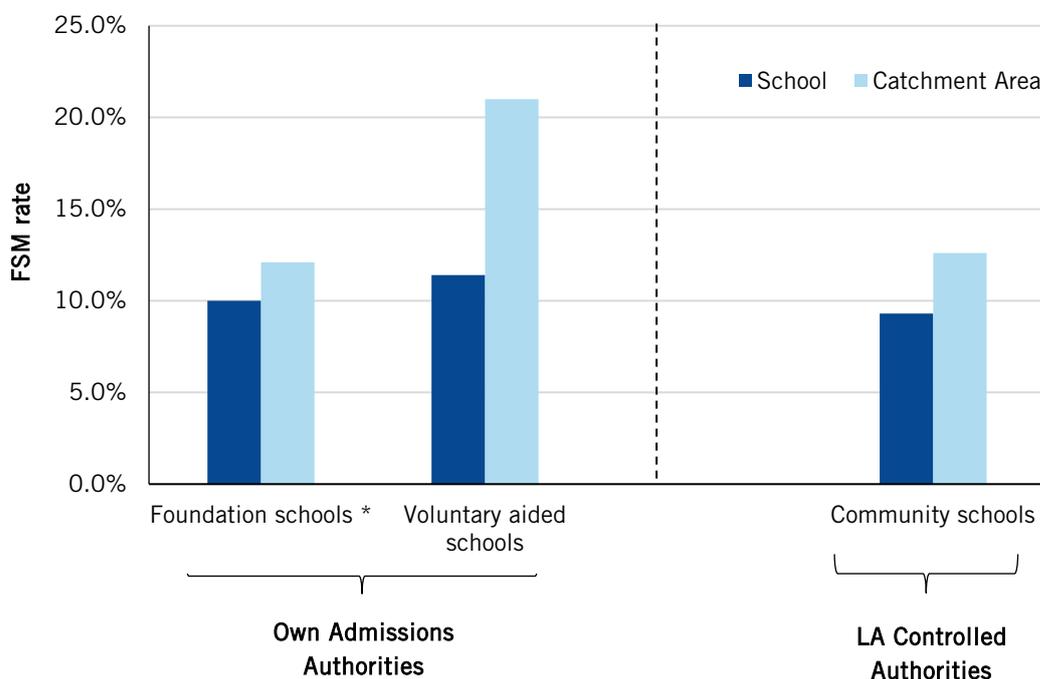
Note: Number of schools in parenthesis

<sup>5</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%

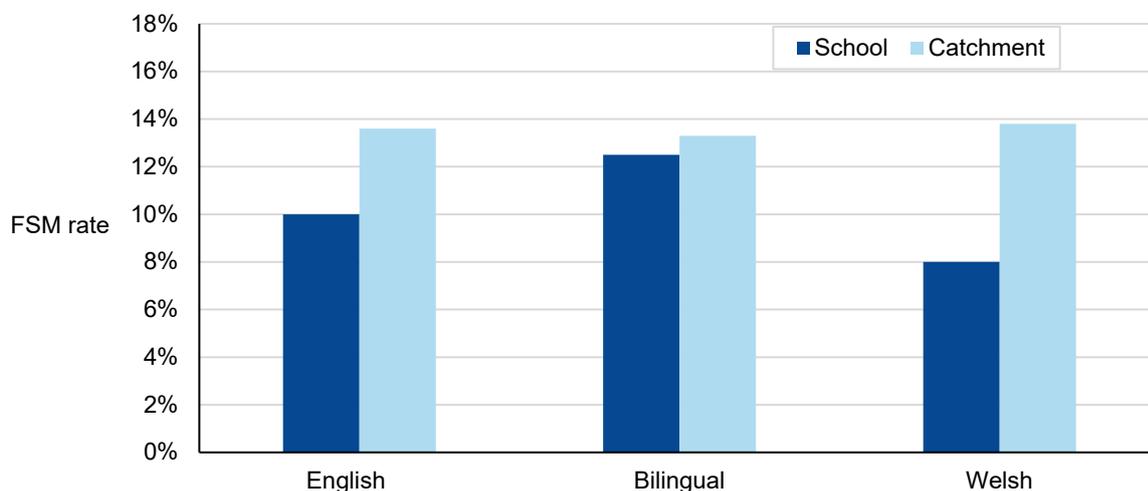
Note: Number of schools in parenthesis

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>6</sup> This is likely to be more the case for disadvantaged families, who therefore may choose a closer local school for their children.

<sup>6</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>7</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>8</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>9</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>7</sup> <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/opendemocracyuk/home-truths-decline-of-welsh-language/>

<sup>8</sup> Four Errors ... and a Conspiracy? The effectiveness of schools in Wales. Gorard et al.

<sup>9</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>10</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>10</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.

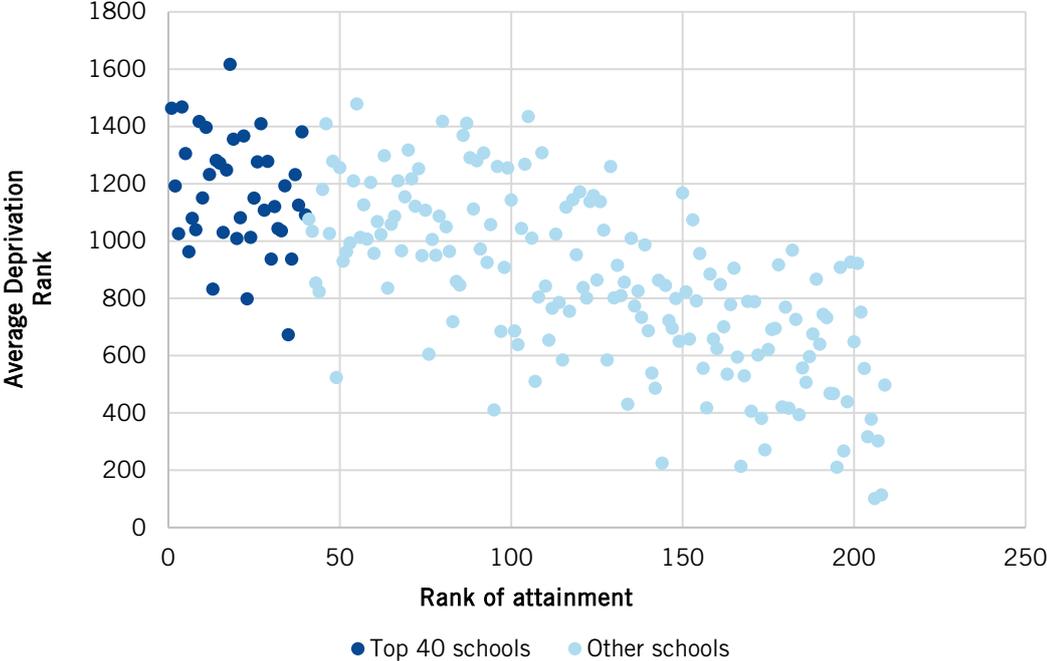
**Table 6: FSM rate of top 40 and all schools by deprivation score of area**

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
<b>Quintile 1 (least deprived)</b>	45%	8.4%	11.3%	20%	9.9%	11.0%
<b>Quintile 2</b>	35%	9.9%	14.8%	20%	12.6%	14.4%
<b>Quintile 3</b>	13%	12.4%	14.3%	20%	16.6%	17.1%
<b>Quintile 4</b>	7%	11.2%*	21.1%*	20%	20.9%	22.1%
<b>Quintile 5 (most deprived)</b>	-	-	-	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>11</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>11</sup> <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-wales-47528827?>

## Discussion

---

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>12</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>13</sup> The Trust has long advocated

---

<sup>12</sup> <https://gov.wales/topics/welshlanguage/welsh-language-strategy-and-policies/cymraeg-2050-welsh-language-strategy/?lang=en>

<sup>13</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.

The Sutton Trust  
9th Floor  
Millbank Tower  
21-24 Millbank  
London, SW1P 4QP

T: 020 7802 1660  
F: 020 7802 1661  
W: [www.suttontrust.com](http://www.suttontrust.com)

Twitter: [@suttontrust](https://twitter.com/suttontrust)

