

Selective Comprehensives:

The social composition of top comprehensive schools

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**Improving social mobility
through education**



Contents

Foreword by Sir Peter Lampl	3
Summary	4
Introduction	4
Methodology	5
Case Study: Chesterton Community Sports College	5
The overall social composition of top comprehensive schools	6
Characteristics of the top comprehensives	7
Case Study: St Thomas More Catholic School	8
Case Study: Platanos College	8
English Bacallaureate Performance Measures	9

Foreword by Sir Peter Lampl

The best schools in England come in three guises. There are world-class independent schools for the small minority of 7 per cent who can afford their fees. There are still 164 selective grammar schools in the country. And there are a group of comprehensives with non-selective admissions policies, most of which are socially exclusive because of the neighbourhoods or faith communities they serve.

Who gets admitted to these schools matters because they are the ones most likely to attend the best universities and most likely to succeed in the top professions. These schools open the door to social mobility. Yet, the bottom line is that how good a school you go to depends on your parents' income.

In 2005 and 2006, the Sutton Trust looked at the social composition of the top 200 comprehensives in England. We revealed a group of high attaining schools that were more socially exclusive than the national average and other schools in their areas.

Since then, the secondary school landscape has changed significantly. Over 60 per cent of all secondary schools are now their own admissions authorities, either as academies, or as foundation or voluntary-aided schools. New measures are being introduced to rank school achievement - with a focus on English Baccalaureate subjects.

Last year, the OECD reported that we have one of the most socially segregated school systems in the world, an outlier with only four out of 29 advanced countries having a worse record. The Sutton Trust social mobility summit in 2012 also heard evidence of how the attainment gap in England continues to widen after the age of 11.

That is why we have decided to look again at the social composition of the top comprehensives. This time we have widened our scope in two ways. First, we have looked at a larger group of schools – the top 500 comprehensives, which make up nearly one in six of state-funded secondary schools. We have also compared schools using the traditional 5 A*-C measure and the newer English Baccalaureate measure, which emphasises certain academic subjects.

The picture we reveal today is no less worrying than that which we showed seven years ago. Our top 500 have a proportion of children eligible for free school meals that is less than half the national average. More importantly, they also have half the average for their own local authority areas. Many of the schools in this study are not using forms of overt selection. But they are exercising a form of social selection.

However, the averages don't always tell the whole story. Within that group, one in ten comprehensives and academies score in the top 500, yet have a larger than average proportion of poorer pupils. Their success shows what can be done by others. Through our sister charity, the Education Endowment Foundation, we are testing the most effective interventions to raise attainment for the poorest pupils in comprehensives.

But there is a second issue here. While the schools in this study, by and large, are not using forms of overt selection, they are exercising covert selection. There is a tension between fair admissions and setting catchment areas entirely defined by proximity to a school. The two are not always synonymous.

That is why the Sutton Trust believes that schools, particularly in urban areas, should use a system of ballots – where a proportion of school places are allocated randomly - or banding across all abilities to achieve a genuinely balanced intake. Together with the London School of Economics, we are looking further at the admissions policies of English secondary schools and academies, and we will publish more research in this area later this year.

Summary

- This study looks at publicly available data on the proportion of pupils eligible and claiming for free school meals (FSM) in the top 500 comprehensive state schools and at how representative they are of their localities and of their school type. We have looked at the top 500 when measured by five good GCSEs including English and Maths and at the top 500 measured according to success in the relatively new English Baccalaureate (EBacc) league table measure.
- We find that the overall rate of FSM uptake at the top 500 comprehensives measured on the traditional five good GCSE scale is just below half the national average, 7.6% compared to 16.5%, in almost 3,000 state secondary schools. Only 49 of the top 500 schools have free school meal rates higher than the national average.
- 95% of the top 500 comprehensives take fewer pupils on free school meals than the total proportion in their local areas, including almost two thirds (64%) which are unrepresentative of their local authority area with gaps of five or more percentage points.
- Schools controlling their own admissions policies are over-represented in the top 500. 75% of the top 500 comprehensives are their own admissions authorities, compared to 61% of the same types of school nationally. Voluntary-aided schools, making up 24% of the top 500, and converter academies, making up 37%, are the most over-represented.
- Categorising schools in the top 500 list by their religious nature or whether or not they are single-sex, shows again that they are not representative of these types of school nationally. Schools in this group are more likely to have a religious character: faith schools account for 19% nationally, but make up 33% of the top 500. The top 500 are also less likely to be co-educational: single-sex schools account for 11% of our sample nationally but make up 16% of the top 500.
- The average FSM rate at the top 500 schools when ranked by the EBacc measure is even more socially exclusive than the top 500 ranked by the 5A*-C including English and mathematics. Only an average of 7.2% of pupils at these top 500 schools receive free school meals, compared to 7.6% of pupils in schools using the 5A*-C, including English and maths measure, and the 16.5% national average.

Introduction

In 2005 the Sutton Trust published a survey¹ showing that free school meal (FSM) eligibility at the country's highest ranked state schools was well below the national average and lower than the areas in which the schools were situated. Only 3% of children in these schools were eligible for free school meals, compared to 12.3% in their local areas and 14.3% nationally.

This prompted the Sutton Trust to look again at the issue in 2006, by focusing exclusively on comprehensive schools (there were only 39 in the original study) and examining the extent to which pupils eligible for free school meals attend these top-performing state schools.

This influential study found that children eligible for free school meals were significantly under-represented in our top 200 comprehensive schools, with only 5.6% eligible for free school meals compared to 13.7% in their neighbourhoods and 14.3% nationally. With the aim of opening up these high-performing schools, this report went on to influence the 2006 Education and Inspections Act and policy developments such as a strengthened school admissions code, the introduction of choice advisers and the extension of free school transport.

Since then, there have been further significant policy changes. There are now almost 1,000 non-selective secondary academies and free schools, which are their own admissions authorities, in addition to 400 voluntary aided and 520 foundation schools. Together they make up almost two thirds of all comprehensive schools in England.

This new report considers whether or not these developments in admissions policy had an impact on social selection and sorting in comprehensive schools. It also looks at the potential impact of using the EBacc performance measure to assess the best schools, as opposed to the previous measure, which included GCSEs in a wider range of subjects.

1. <http://www.suttontrust.com/research/rates-of-eligibility-for-fsm-at-the-top-state-schools/>

Methodology

This report includes data from the 2012 Department for Education performance tables on school performance at GCSE level¹. It also includes data from the School Census 2011² relating to free school meals uptake and eligibility at each school. The report does not consider grammar schools. It only covers those with a comprehensive admissions policy, although some may have a degree of partial selection by aptitude or ability.

The rankings of the top schools were compiled on the basis of the percentage of pupils with five GCSEs or equivalent at grades A*-C including maths and English. Since 2006, this has been the main basis on which school league tables have been compiled. The report also briefly considers the differences using 'EBacc' performance measures instead.

When ranked, there were a number of schools with the same average percentage of students achieving the five GCSEs or equivalent at grades A*-C including maths and English. To select the final top 500 these schools were then ordered alphabetically.

The phrase 'top 500' is used in this report as shorthand for those schools meeting the above criteria. The Trust recognises that there are other schools – for example those with high contextual value added (CVA) scores – which fall outside of this group but which are nonetheless high achieving in challenging circumstances.

For each of the rankings we have excluded those schools which have no data recorded in the performance tables for either free school meals or GCSE results. This will underestimate the number of schools with good GCSE results and very low levels of FSM eligibility because this data is suppressed to maintain anonymity.

Throughout this report the measure of free school meal rate has been taken as the percentage of students at the school eligible for and claiming free school meals. Another way to look at this would be to consider the number of pupils at the school who have been registered for free school meals at any point over the period of the past six years. This measure has been introduced by the current government to allow more accurate targeting of pupil premium funding³. However, because we used the free school meal take-up measure before, we have chosen to use it again.

Free School Meals

In England, children are eligible to receive free school meals if their parents or carers are in receipt of any of the following benefits⁴:

- Income Support
- Income-based Job Seekers' Allowance
- Income-related Employment and Support Allowance
- Support under Part VI of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999
- The Guaranteed element of State Pension Credit
- Child Tax Credit, provided they are not also entitled to Working Tax Credit and have an annual gross income of no more than £16,190, as assessed by Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs

The Welfare Reform Act (2012)⁵ plans to bring all benefits under one 'Universal Credit' benefit will affect the eligibility criteria for free school meals. The government is currently considering proposals for these new criteria.

We have used the measure of 'eligible for and claiming' Free School Meals throughout this report. There are usually fewer students claiming free school meals than are actually eligible for them.

Case Study

Chesterton Community Sports College in Newcastle-under-Lyme, Staffordshire has 22.1% of its pupils taking Free School Meals (FSM), compared to the Local Authority average of 9.8%. In 2012, 72% of its pupils achieved 5A*-C grades at GCSE, including English and Maths, well above a national and Staffordshire average of 59%. 63% of FSM pupils reached this GCSE standard.

The community school is a relatively small mixed secondary, with just over 500 students on the roll, and it was rated as 'good, with outstanding features' by Ofsted in its last report, in 2010. Chesterton has been praised for improvements in results in recent years, and also benefits good sports facilities, including a swimming pool and a dance studio.

The executive Headteacher, Mrs Lynn Jackson, believes that the school's good results are "due to the whole staff commitment in aiming for the highest standards possible from each and every pupil. Our personalised curriculum ensures that we meet the requirements of all ages and abilities."

2. http://www.education.gov.uk/schools/performance/download_data.html

3. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/schools-pupils-and-their-characteristics-january-2012>

4. <http://www.education.gov.uk/schools/pupilsupport/premium/ppfaqs/a0076087/frequently-asked-questions-about-the-pupil-premium>

5. <http://www.education.gov.uk/schools/pupilsupport/pastoralcare/a00202841/fsmcriteria>

6. <http://www.dwp.gov.uk/policy/welfare-reform/legislation-and-key-documents/welfare-reform-act-2012/>

The overall social composition of top comprehensive schools

Table 1: Free school meal (FSM) uptake⁷ at the top 500 comprehensive schools by % pupils with five GCSEs at grades A*-C

	Top 500 Comps Average	Secondary School Average ⁸
Average of top 500 school FSM rates	7.6%	16.5%

Young people from poorer homes are under represented at the top 500 comprehensives compared to both national and local averages. The average of the top 500 schools' FSM rates is 7.6%, compared to the average FSM rate at all secondary schools of 16.5%.

Table 2: Spread of top 500¹⁰ comprehensive schools by FSM uptake

FSM Rate	Number of top 500 comprehensives
0-2.9%	106
3.0-5.9%	180
6.0-8.9%	95
9.0-11.9%	41
12.0-14.9%	25
15% plus	53

Table 2 above looks at FSM rate across five groups, up to the Local Authority averages of 15% (see Table 3 below). 57% of these schools have FSM rates which are less than 6%, including 21% with less than 3%.

When comparing to the secondary school average of 16.5% we see that by FSM band, 451 of the top 500 schools, or 90%, have a proportion of pupils on free school meals below the national average.

Table 3: Free school meal (FSM) rates at the top 500 comprehensive schools by % pupils with five GCSEs at grades A*-C, compared to their Local Education Authority average FSM rates

	Top 500 Comps average	Local Education Authority
Percentage of pupils eligible for and claiming FSM	7.6%	15.2%

Schools in the top 500 are more likely to be located in areas with a FSM rate below the national average. But this difference

is not very large. When we compare the average FSM rate at the top 500 comprehensives to their respective local authority proportions, we find that the top 500 comprehensives still take an average proportion of children on free school meals that is slightly less than half the proportion of pupils on free school meals than their respective local authority.

A more useful way of looking at this is to consider how many of the top 500 schools have FSM rates that are different to their respective local authority rates, and by how much.

Table 4: Spread of top 500⁹ comprehensives by difference between school and LEA FSM rates

FSM gap (school FSM rate minus area rate)	Number of top 500	%
positive gap	25	5.2%
0.0-4.9%	152	30.5%
5.0-9.9%	188	37.5%
10.0-14.9%	82	16.4%
15.0-19.9%	33	6.6%
20.0-24.9%	10	2.0%
25.0-29.9%	7	1.4%
30% points +	2	0.4%

Only 26 schools out of the top 500 have a 'positive gap', where they are taking a higher proportion of pupils on free school meals compared to their Local Authority.

For example, Chesterton Community College in Staffordshire has 22.1% of its pupils taking Free School Meals, compared to the Local Authority FSM of 9.8%. Meanwhile 72% of its pupils achieve 5A*-C grades at GCSE, including English and Maths.

95% of the top 500 comprehensives have a lower proportion of their pupils on FSM than their respective local areas, including almost two thirds (64%) which are unrepresentative of their local authority area, with gaps of five or more percentage points.

7. 'FSM rates' throughout this report refers to the proportion of pupils eligible for and claiming Free School Meals, unless stated otherwise. We have excluded 126 schools from the full list of schools that do not have data for FSM or GCSE performance.
 8. This refers to the average for all schools for which we have data, taken from the GCSE performance tables, excluding special schools.
 9. This actually refers to the top 499 schools, as one local authority represented does not have FSM data available

Characteristics of the top comprehensives

We have split the sample by the school's governance structure, whether the school is single sex or mixed, and whether the school is of a religious or non-religious character. This enables us to see the extent to which these factors may correlate with levels of free school meals.

We have also considered whether these top schools set their own admissions arrangements or whether they are controlled by a Local Authority.

Table 5: Top 500 comprehensive schools split by school structure

School Type	% of top 500	Simple average FSM at each school type in the top 500	% of secondary schools	Simple average of FSM at each school type nationally
Own admissions authorities				
Voluntary Aided Schools	24%	9%	14%	12%
Foundation School	8%	8%	17%	14%
City Technology Colleges	0.4%	9%	0.1%	9%
Sponsored Academies	5%	13%	10%	22%
Converter Academies	37%	6%	23%	7%
TOTAL	75%	7%	61%	14%
LEA controlled admissions				
Community Schools	23%	9%	34%	14%
Voluntary Controlled Schools	2%	5%	2%	8%
TOTAL	25%	8%	36%	12%
Average FSM nationally:				16.5%

Schools controlling their own admissions policies are over-represented in the top 500. 75% of the top 500 comprehensives control their own admissions policy, compared to 61% of the same types of school nationally. Voluntary-aided schools, making up 24% of the top 500, and converter academies, making up 37%, are the most over-represented school types.

While schools that are their own admissions authorities have slightly lower FSM intakes than schools with admissions set by local authorities, this conceals some significant differences.

There are 122 voluntary aided schools – largely Catholic or Anglican – in the top 500. Such faith schools are nearly twice as likely to be in the top 500 than their proportion of all state-funded secondary schools. While faith schools are slightly more likely to take FSM pupils than other schools in the Top 500, on average their FSM intake nationally is still well below the national average.

Many foundation schools have become converter academies. The 40 remaining foundation schools within the top 500 have average FSM proportions at half the national average, but these are not significantly different from the intakes of local authority schools. However, the 186 converter academies within this top 500 have significantly lower FSM intakes, averaging just 5.8%.

This reflects a general pattern across converter academies, many of which will have been rated 'outstanding' by Ofsted, showing that all converter academies have an average FSM proportion of 7.3% compared to an average of 16.5% across all schools.

By contrast, sponsored academies – which usually replace failing schools in disadvantaged areas – have a higher FSM intake. Within the top 500, the 24 sponsored academies have an average proportion of 13.2% FSM pupils, while their national average is 22.3%.

Interestingly, the 117 community schools and 9 voluntary controlled schools with LEA-controlled admissions have a lower proportion of FSM pupils than these sponsored academies.

Mixed or single sex

Table 6: Top 500 comprehensive schools split by sex selection

School type	% of top 500	Average School FSM top 500	% of secondary schools	Average School FSM nationally
Mixed	84%	7.3%	89%	16.8%
Single-sex	16%	9.1%	11%	13.6%

Schools within the top 500 are slightly less likely to be co-educational than schools nationally. Single-sex schools are over-represented: 16% of the top 500 schools are single-sex, compared to 11% nationally. Single-sex schools generally have a lower proportion of pupils on free school meals than the national average.

Interestingly, there is a larger gap between FSM rates at mixed schools in the top 500 and their national average than there is for single-sex schools in the top 500 and their national average. Single sex schools with the top 500 have a 9.1% free school meal intake compared with just 7.3% for mixed schools.

Religion

Table 7: Top 500 comprehensive schools split by religious affiliation

School type	% of top 500	School FSM top 500	% of secondary schools	School FSM nationally
Faith School	32.6%	7.9%	19.3%	11.7%
Non-Faith School	67.4%	7.5%	84.8%	17.2%

While voluntary aided and voluntary controlled schools are usually faith schools, an increasing number of academies also have a religious affiliation. Around a third of the top 500 schools is faith-based, compared with just below a fifth state-funded schools. Faith schools in the top 500 have a slightly higher FSM intake than those with no religious affiliation, whereas faith schools generally have a significantly lower FSM intake than the national average.

As a result, there is a lower gap between faith schools in the top 500 and the average for all faith schools than there is between schools without any religious character in the top 500 and other non-faith schools. The gap is 3.8 percentage points for faith schools and 9.7 percentage points for those without a religious character.

Case Study

St Thomas More Catholic School in Wood Green, North London has shown a dramatic improvement in results in recent years and is now achieving good results for all its pupils.

With 43% of pupils eligible for free school meals, the 728-student mixed voluntary aided school which has recently converted to academy status has seen significant improvements in results in recent years, with the proportion achieving five good GCSEs including English and Maths rising from 31% in 2010, when the school had just been rated 'satisfactory' by Ofsted, to 77% in 2012. This is significantly higher than the national and Haringey average of 59%.

Pupils of all abilities do well in English and Maths, and 74% of the school's FSM pupils reach the five GCSE standard. Headteacher, Mr Martin Tissot, says: "I believe the improvement in results is a reflection of a new collective effort since my appointment in 2010 to put in place a strong disciplinary and pastoral system to counteract some poor pupil behaviour. The Governors were keen to ensure that pupil discipline was accorded the highest priority, because a well-disciplined school is the bedrock upon which educational success is built."

Mr Tissot notes that improvements in teaching and better monitoring of pupil progress were crucial: "Tailored support was provided for those pupils who were fall short of reaching their progress targets. Capability procedures were instituted swiftly and effectively for those teachers unable or unwilling to make the improvements necessary."

Case Study

Platanos College, in Stockwell, South London is an 11-16 mixed converter Academy rated outstanding by Ofsted that achieves good results for all its pupils.

Although 59% of its 988 pupils are eligible for free school meals, a remarkable 80% achieve five good GCSEs in English and Maths; the proportion rose from 68% in 2011. 77% of FSM pupils reached this standard in 2012. In the London Borough of Lambeth as a whole, where Platanos is located, 32% of pupils receive free school meals and 63% of all pupils achieve five good GCSEs.

Platanos uses a banding system to try to achieve a balanced intake. Three ability bands are determined by the results of Cognitive Ability Tests and the school admits around 20% of pupils from the top ability band, 60% of pupils from the middle band and 20% of pupils from the lower band.

The school has a "Grammar pathways" programme aimed at all pupils who show academic ability and are developing skills as independent learners. Students enrolled in to the Grammar School Pathway are expected to achieve high academic success, as well as being well-rounded, cultured individuals with a high level of social skills. The ethos is based on the celebration of excellence in a caring, supportive environment which encourages pupils to achieve beyond their expectations.

The headteacher, Miss Judette Tapper said: "We simply continue to work with pupils regardless of where they start. We have an unshakeable belief in our pupils. Our simple yet effective systems have to be refined each year. The sharp focus on Learning and Teaching as well as data tracking builds on this unshakeable belief in our pupils".

English Baccalaureate Performance Measures

The English Baccalaureate (EBacc) performance measures were introduced in 2010 to capture pupils' performance across a range of subjects. Data is collected nationally on the percentage of pupils in each school who have achieved a grade C or better in English, mathematics, history or geography, the sciences and a language¹⁰.

The Department for Education hopes to encourage more students to take these "key academic subjects" and increase the number of pupils who take this combination of subjects. In 2011, only eight per cent of children qualifying for FSM nationally took these subjects; further, only four per cent achieved a grade C or above in each of them. In our data, the average rate of children qualifying for FSM and also achieving the EBacc measure was seven per cent.

Table 8: Free school meal rates at the top 500 comprehensive schools by % pupils EBacc measure

	Top 500 Comps by EBacc measure	Secondary School Average
Average school FSM rate	7.2%	16.5%

We can see that the average FSM rate at the top 500 schools when ranked by the EBacc measure (With an average of 7.2% FSM) is even less than the average FSM rate at the top 500 schools ranked by the 5A*-C including English and mathematics at GCSE measure (With an average of 7.6%).

Looking at schools in the top 500 based on the EBacc, only 24 have a higher FSM rate than their local authority area.

Top 200 comprehensives

In our previous published reports we have looked at the social composition of the top 200 comprehensive schools. We have calculated the figures for the top 200 in 2012, for completeness, but these may not be directly comparable to our 2006 research¹¹. We have found that the average FSM rate at the top 200 comprehensive schools, for which we have data, is 6.4 per cent. This suggests some small improvement on the 2006 figure of 5.6%, but the lack of comparability with some of the data suggests the comparison should be treated with caution.

10. <http://www.education.gov.uk/schools/teachingandlearning/qualifications/englishbac/a0075975/the-english-baccalaureate>

11. Care should be taken making direct comparisons with the figures from 2006 as this was based on NPD data