



Selective Comprehensives 2024: Summary Report



Kevin Latham

KEY FINDINGS

Consistent with previous Sutton Trust research on the topic of social segregation in schools, new analysis of comprehensive school intakes shows that the average proportion of pupils eligible for free school meals (FSM) is still lower in the top 500 comprehensive schools compared to all comprehensive schools. These schools also have a significant gap between the FSM rates in their local area (as defined by the areas they draw their pupils from), and the FSM rates of their actual intakes, meaning that disadvantaged pupils are less likely to get into top schools than others, even if they have one in their local area.

- While the intake of the average comprehensive included 22% of students eligible for FSM, for the top 500 schools ranked by pupil progress (Progress 8 score), this was 17.1%, and ranked by exam grades (Attainment 8 score) it was just 13.3%. Furthermore, the FSM rate of the intakes of the top Progress 8 schools was 4.3 percentage points lower than the pupils living in their own catchment areas, and 5.8 percentage points for top Attainment 8 schools.
- Looking at the top schools by Progress 8, this 4.3 percentage point gap was up from 3.5 in 2016. However, taking into account the growth in FSM eligibility over time, the gap proportional to the catchment FSM rate increased from just 19.2% to 20.1%. While this increase is marginal it nonetheless suggests that there has been no improvement since 2016.¹
- There are also signs that segregation at these schools has got worse. The gap in FSM rates between the top schools for Progress 8 and the average school is widening. In 2016 they had 1.6 percentage points fewer FSM pupils than the average school. In 2022, this figure was 4.9 percentage points. While overall FSM rates have gone up during this time, proportionally, this means they have gone from taking 10% fewer FSM pupils than average, to 22% fewer.
- Since 2016, the North East, along with the West Midlands and North West regions have all overtaken London as the region with the highest proportion of FSM pupils in their schools' intakes. Like many regions outside London and the South East, the North East has also seen its proportion of top 500 schools decrease and on average the FSM gaps in those top schools increase. The North East and North West now have the most socially selective top comprehensives in the country by Progress 8 with the North East by far the most selective on the Attainment 8 measure.
- In general, schools with a religious affiliation (faith schools) continue to be more socially selective than non-religious schools. Religious schools are over-represented in the top 500 schools under all the attainment measures. Although only representing 19% of all comprehensives they constitute 29% and 34% of the top 500 schools on Progress 8 and Attainment 8 measures respectively. Schools affiliated with non-Christian religions are the most socially selective overall while Catholic schools continue to be the most socially selective in the top 500.
- For schools in multi-academy trusts (MATs), on average the smaller the MATs they are in, the lower their FSM rates and the larger the FSM gap with their catchment area. Larger MATs are on average less socially selective than smaller MATs.
- Converter academies are over-represented in the top 500 schools, while sponsor-led academies are significantly under-represented. Top 500 sponsor-led academies (on Progress 8) appear representative of their catchment areas whereas converter academies have a negative FSM gap of 4.5 percentage points.
- Schools that converted to sponsor-led academies between 2015/16 and 2021/22 on average admit a higher proportion of FSM pupils than is present in their catchment area. This positive gap has increased over that period. By contrast the FSM gap for schools that became converter academies is negative suggesting these schools are on average more socially selective.
- Free schools, like converter academies and faith schools, are over-represented in the top 500 under both Progress 8 and Attainment 8 measures. Free schools have FSM gaps larger than sponsor-led academies and community schools, but slightly below converter academies. However, they also tend to have catchment areas with slightly higher than the national average FSM rates and higher than those of converter academies.

INTRODUCTION

This research brief accompanies the Sutton Trust report *Selective Comprehensives 2024* written by the National Foundation for Education Research (NFER) outlining the key findings of that report and their implications for understanding their relevance for an education sector in transition. The report takes its title from previous Sutton Trust analysis² of the way many comprehensive schools, with non-selective admissions policies on academic performance, nonetheless poorly represent the social make up of their local areas. The better performing schools on average have fewer FSM students in their intakes than are found in their local area. This phenomenon is what we refer to in this report as de facto 'social selection'. It is the result of a complex mixture of factors that will differ for every school and every catchment area, but in the vast majority of cases is likely to be related to school admissions policies and processes, parental decision-making and degrees of parental agency as well as geography, the social and cultural composition of communities and decisions by local authorities. When we refer to schools being 'socially selective' it is of course not solely as a result of actions on the part of schools.

However, the statistics analysed in this brief, the 2024 report and previous reports show that social selection is often the outcome and it occurs differently and to different degrees among different kinds of schools in different areas. Furthermore, it is top performing comprehensive schools that are most likely to be socially selective compared to other

schools. While not all of the top performing 500 schools are socially selective, the majority are. However, some have positive FSM gaps, meaning they have more disadvantaged children in the school than in their catchment areas.

Selective Comprehensives 2024 comes at an important time in the transformation of the English secondary school system and gives equally important indications of where that transformation may be taking us in terms of equality of access to the best education across all social groups. Although we find that the overall picture of greater social selectivity in the country's top 500 schools persists and by some measures is becoming more marked, nonetheless the character of that inequality is shifting within a changing secondary education landscape.

There have been various changes occurring over the period since the Sutton Trust published its last report in 2017: more schools control their own admissions policies with continued academisation, and there has been an emergence of ever-larger multi-academy trusts (MATs). In 2010/11 there were only 324 secondary academies compared to 2,766 in 2022/23. In 2022, 13.1% of secondary schools in either MATs or SATs (single-academy trusts) were in a MAT with 30 or more schools and 39% were in MATs with 10 or more schools. This follows the trend in recent years for MATs to be getting bigger.³ In 2016, 80% of schools controlled their own admissions, rising to 90% in 2022. At the same time there have been shifts in educational disparities, particularly since the pandemic, both regionally and socio-economically. The attainment

gap for disadvantaged pupils had been falling, stagnated from 2017, and as a result of the pandemic is now at its highest since 2011,⁴ while London has pulled further ahead of the rest of England since 2019.⁵

It is too early to say with certainty what the long-term effect of these changes will be on social inequality, but with regard to admissions, *Selective Comprehensives 2024* gives us some indications. As we analyse here, this report finds little evidence to suggest that comprehensive schools are becoming less socially selective, strong evidence that things have not improved since 2017 and some clear evidence pointing to increasing levels of social selection in comprehensive admissions in some parts of the system.

Why does this matter?

The current English school system is highly socially segregated. Independent schools most obviously so, given their fees and exclusive intakes, while the social selectivity of grammar schools has also been widely covered elsewhere.⁶ However, within the comprehensive system there is also significant social selectivity. Schools with more affluent intakes are more likely to achieve the highest grades, send more pupils to university, as well as being more attractive to teachers. Schools with high levels of deprivation often have a concentration of high-needs pupils who face significant barriers both inside and outside the school gates. This, in many cases, leads to low Ofsted ratings and league table positions, as well as a greater likelihood of behavioural and other issues that make teacher recruitment and retention difficult.⁷

The most aspirational parents with the right 'know how' and financial resources then gravitate towards the schools with more affluent intakes, which leads to a vicious circle of inequality. The Sutton Trust has been shedding light on this issue for the last two decades,⁸ as we believe this dynamic of segregation underpins much of the inequality seen in the school system. Good teaching is the most effective means of levelling the playing field, and access to good teaching needs to be more evenly spread across the school system.

Research in 2023 showed that high-potential disadvantaged pupils are less likely to attend high performing schools and schools with lower levels of disadvantage, but those that do make more progress in schools with low levels of disadvantage (around one third of a grade per subject).⁹ Greater social mixing is therefore likely to have a positive impact on chances of social mobility.

The Sutton Trust will be launching a campaign to encourage and support schools to review and change their admissions policies. To

register for updates and find out more please complete the form [here](#).

OVERALL FINDINGS

In the [Selective Comprehensives 2017](#) report the top 500 comprehensives by absolute attainment (those with grades 5 A*-C including English and Maths) had FSM levels 7.2 percentage points below the average school (9.1% compared to 16.3%). For the top 500 by the, at the time new, measure of Progress 8, the gap was less than 2 percentage points (14.7% compared to 16.3%). In 2022, the year of the latest data available that this report

is based on, the gap by absolute attainment (now measured using Attainment 8 score) stands at 8.7 percentage points, and by Progress 8, the gap is now 4.9 percentage points (see Table 1). With Progress 8 now bedded in as the main measure of school accountability, this may have had an effect on the choices of parents as well as the high performing schools themselves.

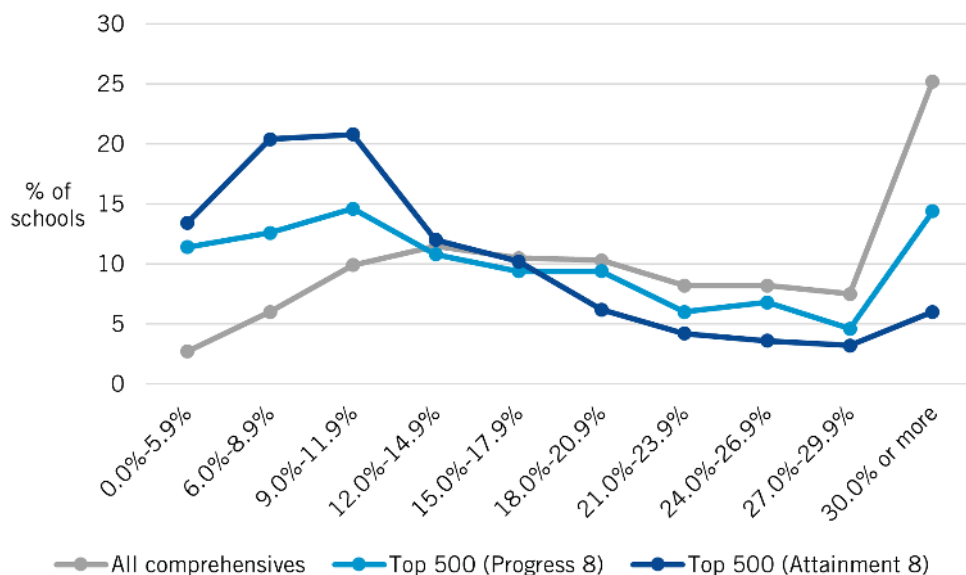
Importantly, these top schools don't just have a gap with the average school in terms of their intake, they also have a gap with their local area. The top 500 schools by Attainment 8 take in 5.8 percentage points fewer pupils eligible for FSM than live in the catchment areas they draw from (see Table 1). This means about one third of the gap is explained by the location of these schools in more affluent areas, but two

Table 1: FSM rates (school intakes) of top 500 comprehensive schools

	All comprehensive secondary schools (%)	Top 500 schools (%)			
		Progress 8	Attainment 8	EBacc	Eng Maths
FSM rate (school intakes)	22.0	17.1	13.3	14.0	12.9
Catchment rate	23.2	21.4	19.1	19.5	18.5
FSM gap	-1.1	-4.3	-5.8	-5.5	-5.6

Note: The source for all tables and figures is NFER analysis of data from the National Pupil Database matched with data from Get Information about Schools and school performance tables.*

Figure 1: Spread of FSM rates of top 500 schools



thirds represent some form of social selection within that area. In contrast, while the overall gap is lower for the top schools by Progress 8, nearly 90% of that gap is explained by local selectivity.

Figure 1 gives a clear indication of the contrast between the top 500 and all comprehensives. Less than a fifth (18.6%) of all comprehensives have FSM rates lower than 12%, compared to well over half (54.6%) for the top 500 on Attainment 8 and well over a third (38.6%) on Progress 8. At the other end of the distribution, the proportion of schools with FSM rates of more than 27% among all comprehensives is three times that of the top schools on Attainment 8 (32.7% and 9.2% respectively).

As FSM rates overall have increased substantially since the last report, it is important to compare changing FSM gaps proportionally as well as in absolute terms in order to assess change. Looking at the top 500 schools on the Progress 8 measure, while the FSM gap increased from 3.5 percentage points in 2016 to 4.3 percentage points in 2022, as

a proportion of catchment FSM rates, the shift is from 19.2% to 20.1%. While this increase is only marginal, it nonetheless suggests that there has been no improvement since 2016.

However, the gap between the FSM rates of schools ranking highly on Progress 8 and the average school has widened significantly, from 1.6 percentage points to 4.9 percentage points. Proportionate to the overall FSM rate, that means top performing schools have gone from admitting 10% fewer FSM pupils than average, to 22% fewer.

Measuring attainment

Over the last seven years there has been a shift in the evaluation of success in schools, with greater emphasis now on measures of progress made rather than absolute attainment. This is reflected in how the Progress 8 measure has largely replaced the previous 5 A* to C measure, which was based on raw grades achieved. The value-added Progress 8 measure, which takes into account the prior attainment of pupils at the end of primary school, was only introduced in 2016, but has become the principal

accountability measure for secondary schools in recent years. Although not without its problems, this can be seen as an improvement on using absolute attainment measures alone since it recognises the progress that schools which often have more disadvantaged pupils are making; schools that on a simple attainment score would have been lowly ranked. Consequently Progress 8 is more likely to rank schools with a more disadvantaged intake more highly than straight attainment measures, as it takes prior attainment into account.

However, although the measure has changed, in *Selective Comprehensives 2024* patterns of inequality remain. In many cases where all comprehensives are compared with the top 500 schools on both measures the recurring pattern in different data (with a few exceptions) is on average for top schools on Progress 8 to be less representative of their catchment areas (meaning there is less equality of access for disadvantaged students) than all comprehensives, but more representative than the top schools based on Attainment 8. This stands to reason as it is often the schools with high grades and high progression to good universities that are seen as the most prestigious and desirable, even if this is largely as a result of a more advantaged intake.

Table 2 shows how the more successful schools are more socially selective than the less successful schools. The highest performing schools (quintile 5) have lower than the national average FSM rate and lower than all other quintiles while

Table 2: FSM rate (school intake) and FSM gap for all comprehensive

	% of schools*	FSM rate (%)	FSM gap (percentage points)
Quintile 1 (lowest attaining)	21.2	30.7	3.6
Quintile 2	21.9	23.6	-0.2
Quintile 3	20.6	20.5	-1.7
Quintile 4	19.2	18.4	-3.0
Quintile 5 (highest attaining)	17.0	17.1	-4.2

at the same time having the highest negative FSM gap to their catchment areas. By contrast, the lowest attaining schools have higher FSM rates overall, as well as higher rates than in their catchment area, reflected in their positive FSM gap.

School type

Since the last *Selective Comprehensives in 2017*, the control of admissions policies has shifted ever further into the hands of school governing bodies and away from local authorities. In 2016, the year of the data used in the last report, local authorities still

controlled admissions in 20% of secondary schools. By 2022 we find that this has been reduced further to just over 10%. In short, as a result of the ongoing academisation process, most secondary schools are now in charge of their own admissions policies.

As shown in Table 3, in 2021/22 47.6% of all comprehensives were converter academies and 25.8% were sponsor-led academies. The table also shows how sponsor-led academies are under-represented and converter academies over-represented in the top 500 schools.

Overall, although converter academies are slightly more selective, the difference between sponsor-led and converter academies in terms of social selectivity on Progress 8 is little changed from the last *Selective Comprehensives* report. As in 2016, sponsor-led academies in the top 500 schools on Progress 8 still on average take more FSM students than live in their catchment areas (see Figure 2). Their FSM gap is still +0.3 percentage points, the same as 2016, whereas converter academies now have a negative FSM gap of -4.5 percentage points (-3.5 in 2016).

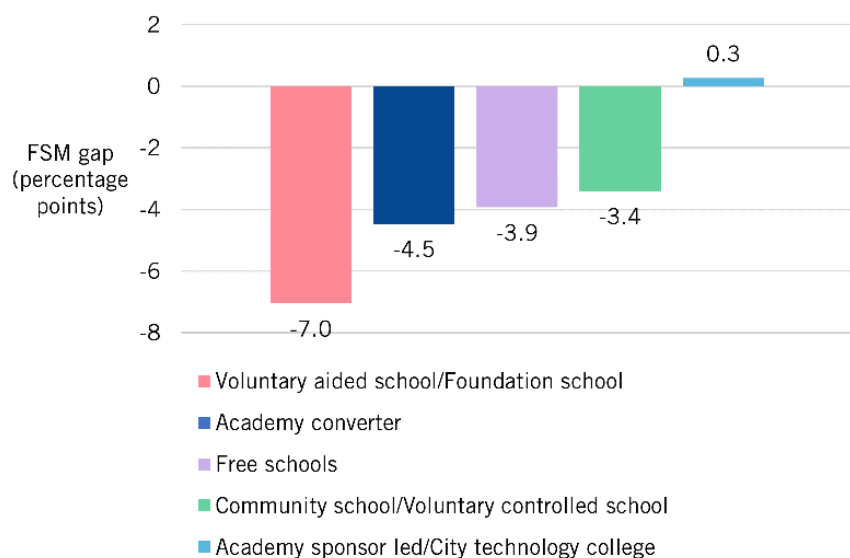
Table 3: FSM rate (school intake) for top 500 schools, by school type

School type	All comprehensive secondary schools		Top 500 (Progress 8)		Top 500 (Attainment 8)	
	% of schools	FSM rate	% of schools	FSM rate	% of schools	FSM rate
<i>Own admissions authorities</i>						
Academy converter	47.6	17.7	56.2	13.7	62.6	11.4
Academy sponsor led ⁺	25.8	31.0	15.2	27.9	9.4	23.8
Free schools	4.8	24.0	8.8	22.8	6.8	19.4
Voluntary aided & foundation schools	11.6	22.5	12.4	16.9	13.4	13.9
Total	89.8	22.1	92.6	16.9	92.2	13.2
<i>LA-controlled admissions</i>						
Community & voluntary controlled schools	10.2	21.4	7.4	19.1	7.8	14.3
Total	10.2	21.4	7.4	19.1	7.8	14.3
Grand total	100	22.0	100	17.1	100	13.3

Note: Some school groups in the table have been combined due to low counts.

+ Includes City technology colleges.

Figure 2: FSM gap for top 500 schools (Progress 8), by school type



Note: School groups with less than 2% of the overall pupil population have been merged with other groups.

However, if we look at the 2022 FSM gaps using the Attainment 8 measure, which, compared to Progress 8, is more like the absolute 5A*-CEM attainment measure used previously, we find that there is some change. In 2016, the top 500 sponsor-led academies on the attainment measure were actually slightly more socially selective than converter academies, with on average a -4.5 percentage point FSM gap, compared to -4.0 percentage points. However, now we find that the difference has reversed. Top 500 converter academies on Attainment 8 have on average a -5.7 FSM gap compared to -2.5 for top 500 sponsor-led academies. This polarisation of top academies by type points to increasing inequality in the system, particularly since converter academies are over-represented in the top 500 schools and sponsor-led academies under-represented on all measures (see Table 3).

Free schools were the most consistent in their FSM rates both among secondary schools

generally and among the top 500 schools on different measures. However, they have lower levels of FSM pupils than their catchment areas. As free schools now constitute the majority of new schools in England this could become an increasingly important school type in the future. Free schools were also the most consistent in their FSM rates both in general and among top 500 schools. Sutton Trust and NFER research in 2018 found that secondary free schools had a slightly higher proportion of pupils eligible for FSM than the national average at the time. However, they had lower levels of FSM-eligible pupils than their catchment areas.¹⁰ This is still the case in 2021/22, although the size of the FSM gap for all free schools has decreased from -3.6 percentage points to -1.7 percentage points. As shown in Table 3, the average free school FSM rate is 24%, meaning that average FSM rates in free school catchment areas is above the national average at 25.7%. We also find that the profile of

free school admissions is the closest among school types that control their own admissions to those of community and voluntary controlled schools whose admissions are controlled by local authorities.

To understand the scale of selectivity within the comprehensive sector, comparison with academically selective schools is useful. Grammar schools, as one would expect, are generally even more socially selective. This research shows that on average grammar schools have an FSM gap with the areas they draw their pupils from of -9.2. All of this shows how disadvantaged students measured in terms of FSM eligibility are systematically excluded from many of the highest attaining schools in the country. However, it is also notable that more than 150 comprehensive schools have a negative FSM gap greater than -9.2 which means that they are less representative of their catchment areas than the average grammar school. Not all of these are in the top 500 schools. Within this group around half are top 500 comprehensives on Attainment 8 and one third on Progress 8, with many of the others religious schools.

The other important change in the English education system over recent years has been the encouragement of more schools to move into multi-academy trusts (MATs). It is still too early to draw clear conclusions on MATs in terms of their overall levels of social selectivity.

Table 4: FSM gap for different sized MATs

	All comprehensive secondary schools in MATs/SATs	Top 500 (Progress 8)	Top 500 (Attainment 8)
Number of schools in MAT/SAT	FSM gap (percentage points)	FSM gap (percentage points)	FSM gap (percentage points)
1 school	-2.2	-4.9	-5.8
2 - 4 schools	-1.5	-4.4	-5.3
5 - 9 schools	-1.2	-4.2	-4.9
10 - 19 schools	0.2	-4.2	-5.2
20 - 29 schools	-0.5	-2.1	-6.1
30 or more schools	1.4	0.1	-3.6

n = 2,327 for all comprehensive secondary schools in MATs/SATs; n = 399 for top 500 (Progress 8); n = 392 for top 500 (Attainment 8).

However, the data does point to some trends. As Table 4 shows, negative FSM gaps are generally larger in the academy trusts with smaller numbers of schools, both generally and among the top 500 schools. Once again we also find greater social selectivity in top 500 schools, with top schools in all sizes of MATs having negative (or very close to zero) FSM gaps

whereas large MATs (30 schools or more) overall have a positive FSM gap of +1.4. This would seem to suggest that schools in larger MATs may be less socially selective than those in smaller MATs or SATs (single academy trusts).

Looking at the data on MATs also points to another useful indicator of how the new secondary educational

landscape is forming. Schools that joined a MAT and became sponsor-led academies between 2015/16 and 2021/22 appear to have positive FSM gaps, which grew larger by 2021/22 (Table 5). The FSM gap for those schools that joined a MAT and became converter academies, by contrast, became slightly worse, suggesting these schools had on average become more socially selective. This further supports the conclusion that converter academies are generally more socially selective than sponsor-led academies. However, it also suggests that while converter academy schools were already less representative of their catchment areas before becoming MAT academies they have become slightly less so after entering MATs while sponsor-led academies have become more socially inclusive. Consequently, MATs in themselves may not particularly represent greater or lesser social selectivity but may become vehicles for pre-existing inequalities.

Table 5: FSM rate (school intake) and FSM gaps for schools joining MATs between 2015/16 and 2021/22

Type of school	Number of schools	2015/16		2021/22	
		FSM rate (%)	FSM gap (percentage points)	FSM rate (%)	FSM gap (percentage points)
Academy converter	535	13.6	-2.2	19.2	-2.4
Academy sponsor-led	342	23.9	2.3	31.6	3.4

Table 6: FSM rate (school intake) for top 500 schools, by religious affiliation

All comprehensive secondary schools			Top 500 (Progress 8)		Top 500 (Attainment 8)	
	% of schools	FSM rate	% of schools	FSM rate	% of schools	FSM rate
Non-religious	80.9	22.4	70.6	17.9	65.6	13.7
Religious	19.1	20.6	29.4	14.7	34.4	12.5

As shown in Figure 3, among schools with a religious character, Catholic schools appear on average to be the most socially selective with non-Christian religious schools not far behind on both Progress 8 and Attainment 8.¹² By contrast, other Christian schools, of

Religious affiliation

In general, the FSM rates in faith schools – schools with a religious affiliation – are similar to those in all comprehensives (Table 6). However, they are less representative than their catchment areas and on average their FSM gaps are significantly larger for religious schools compared to non-religious schools (Figure 3).

There is also considerable variation in the social selectivity of faith schools depending on the religion. Christian schools, which make up the vast majority of faith schools, are on average slightly more socially selective than non-religious schools. However, other religious schools, which account for 6.5% of all religious schools are on average considerably more socially selective with FSM rates of only 15.6% and the largest average negative FSM gap of 7.4 percentage points. The proportion of religious schools in the top 500 schools under all the attainment measures is larger than should be expected compared to all comprehensives (e.g. 29.4% of Progress 8 top 500

schools compared to 19.1% of all comprehensives) but they have lower FSM rates (14.7% compared to 17.9% for non-religious schools on the Progress 8 measure) and on average a larger (negative) FSM gap. This suggests that religious schools are more likely to be socially selective than non-religious schools even if they often have a larger geographical catchment area compared to non-religious schools due to admissions criteria related to religious observance.¹¹

which the vast majority are Anglican (Church of England) have only half the FSM gap of Catholic schools in the top 500 on the Progress 8 measure.

Region

In 2016 London was already by far the most represented region in the top 500 schools accounting for 21% of the group on 5A*CEM. However, by 2021/22 we find that the proportion of London schools in the top 500 has risen sharply to account for 34.6% and 33.6% of the groups by Progress 8 and Attainment 8 respectively (Table 7).

Figure 3: FSM gap by religious character

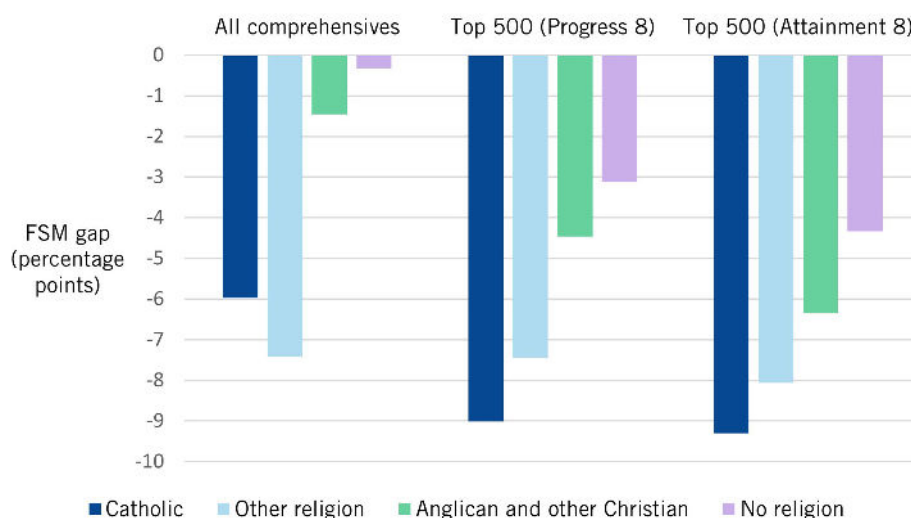


Table 7: FSM rate (school intake) for top 500 schools, by region

Region	All comprehensive secondary schools		Top 500 (Progress 8)		Top 500 (Attainment 8)	
	% of schools	FSM rate	% of schools	FSM rate	% of schools	FSM rate
East Midlands	8.8	20.4	8.0	13.5	6.0	9.6
East of England	11.6	17.1	12.0	10.5	13.0	8.7
London	15.2	24.8	34.6	21.2	33.6	19.2
North East	4.9	28.8	1.2	18.8	4.0	15.6
North West	14.0	25.2	6.8	19.8	11.0	10.8
South East	14.3	17.1	12.2	9.4	14.4	8.7
South West	9.5	18.5	5.8	16.5	4.6	11.9
West Midlands	11.9	25.7	9.4	22.4	5.8	13.9
Yorkshire and the Humber	10.0	24.2	10	17.9	7.6	12.6

The FSM gaps of these two regions have both increased to -9.9 and -7.2 percentage points on the Attainment 8 measure and -6.9 and -7.0 percentage points by Progress 8, representing the regions with the most socially selective top schools. However, while the top schools in these regions have become on average more socially selective, the regions themselves – the North East in particular - have seen their proportions of top 500 schools decline. In 2016 the North East had 5.4% of the top schools on the 5A*CEM measure but this had dropped to 4% and 1.2% on attainment and progress measures

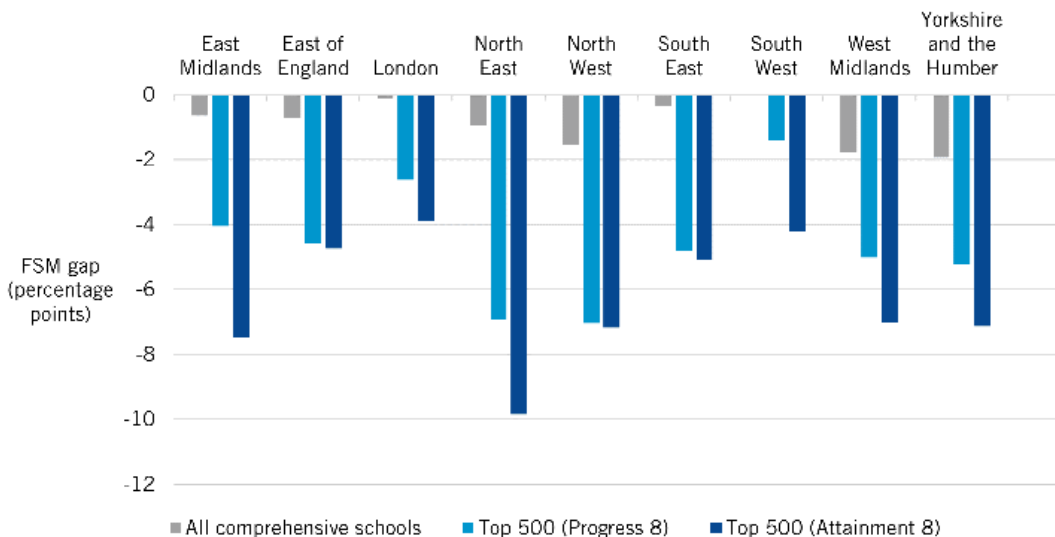
At the same time, we find that the FSM gap in London top 500 schools has dropped from -5.2 percentage points on the 5A*CEM measure in 2016 (2024 methodology) to -3.9 and -2.6 percentage points on progress and attainment measures respectively in

2021/22 (Figure 4).

However, other parts of the country have seen contrasting changes. Along with London, the North East – which has now become the English region with highest levels of FSM eligibility - and North West were the most socially selective in 2016.

respectively in 2021/22. There has been a similar drop in the North West. There are similar, though smaller, declines in all other regions on attainment and all but two on progress measures, further emphasising the increasing regional disparities between London and the rest of the country.

Figure 4: FSM gap for top 500 schools, by region



This comes at a time when we are also seeing increasing regional disparities in public examination results nationally. In 2023, while London saw a 3.1 percentage point increase in the number of A*/A grades at A level compared to 2019, the North East saw a drop of 1 percentage point widening an already existing marked regional gap. The difference between the proportion of top grades in the capital compared to the North East rose from 3.9 percentage points in 2019 to 8 percentage points in 2023.¹³

There is a similar story with GCSE results where regional disparities remain. In 2023 28.4% of GCSEs entered in London achieved top grades of 7-9 while in the North East this was only 17.6%. Once again this gap has actually widened from before the pandemic when the figures were 25.7% for London and 16.4% for the North East.¹⁴

Against this backdrop, the findings in *Selective Comprehensives 2024* are significant in helping to fill out the picture of what is happening nationally with secondary education. The picture is complex and varies from region to region, but comparing just the North East and London as an example, we see increasing levels of FSM eligibility generally, fewer top 500 schools and increasing

levels of social selectivity in the top schools that there are in the North East. Meanwhile in London we see sharply increasing numbers of top 500 schools, improving public exam results and decreasing levels of social selectivity in those top schools. This emphasises the need to understand the shifting landscape of not only social disadvantage in the country but also educational disadvantage. These are two quite different regional stories – one of broad improvement in London, but one of decline in attainment and increasing social selectivity in the North East. These educational stories highlight the need for careful attention to geographical differences in the formulation of policies aimed at overcoming social and educational disadvantage.

CONCLUSION

Selective Comprehensives 2024 aims to better understand the landscape of social segregation in English comprehensive schools through an analysis of how socially advantaged or disadvantaged groups tend to cluster in particular schools. Recent studies looking to evaluate the effectiveness of pupil premium funding through understanding trends in social segregation in schools¹⁵ have concluded that since 2010 'long-term disadvantaged pupils became substantially less clustered in specific schools in

their first year and throughout their remaining school life'.¹⁶ However, the evidence here, which focuses on the highest performing schools, is less encouraging and in some senses may have got worse in these schools. In the top 500 schools on the Progress 8 measure, FSM gaps with their catchment areas have not reduced, and actually marginally increased, there is a polarisation of converter and sponsor-led academies in terms of degrees of representativeness of their local areas, the proportion of schools with local authority controlled admissions – which have been consistently shown to be on average less socially selective – has dropped to 10% and the proportion of converter academies which are on average more socially selective has increased; FSM gaps of the top 500 schools have increased in regions with the highest social disadvantage; schools with a religious character, generally the most socially selective in 2016, are on average still so in 2021/22. However, despite indications that social segregation in the school system as a whole is on the decline, evidence here shows at best the situation has not improved at the highest performing secondary schools since 2016 and suggests that the challenge ahead when it comes to social selectivity and school admissions remains significant.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Over the coming year, the Sutton Trust will be developing and testing its policy recommendations with schools and other stakeholders. The list here represents our view at the outset of this process of refinement.

Recommendations for schools

• **School leaders, including school governors, should implement a fair access review for their school.** This should include reflecting on their year 7 intake each year and reviewing whether it reflects the local and national pictures in terms of levels of socio-economic disadvantage, as well as reviewing how their admissions policies could be adapted to address any inequalities. It is important to do this periodically, as intakes can see fluctuations year on year.

Schools looking to become more socially diverse and inclusive should consider the following range of measures in relation to a) admissions policies and oversubscription criteria and b) the wider cost of schooling:

Making admissions policies fairer:

• **Include pupil premium students in oversubscription priority criteria.** The Schools Admissions Code currently allows for the use of pupil premium status as an oversubscription criterion, so more schools, particularly high performing schools, should move to implement this in order to create a more socially balanced intake and better reflect their local communities. This could for example mean giving pupil premium students priority up to the average proportion of those students in the local area, or up to a set level higher than this group's proportion in the school's current intake.

• **Introducing either ballots or a banding system to determine the allocation of places when the school is oversubscribed.** Introducing pupil premium priority is likely to help to improve access for the most disadvantaged pupils but will not necessarily alter the wider socio-economic mix of the student body. Introducing a system of ballots or banding has the potential to make a school's intake more representative across the socio-economic spectrum.

- Ballots are where potential students are selected for admission using a lottery, meaning everyone entered for a place via the ballot has an equal chance of getting in. This could be done as a full ballot for all places or used only for a proportion of the school's intake, such as 'marginal lotteries'. This is where most school places could be allocated on the basis of existing criteria with a smaller proportion, say 20%, reserved for applicants outside the catchment allocated by lottery. The appropriate balance of ballot allocated places will depend on a school's specific circumstances, including the profile of the neighbourhoods around the school.

- Banding tests are currently used by a number of schools. Pupils sit an entrance test, but rather than allocating places based on ability, places are allocated equally across all ability 'bands'. This means a balance of abilities are admitted, which is likely to have a knock-on effect on the socio-economic profile of the school. Banding is most effective when there is cooperation between schools in an area, and where all children are entered for banding tests, with tests ideally being carried out in local primary schools. Groups of schools should thus be encouraged to develop a shared approach to admissions, possibly facilitated by a local authority or a local admissions forum.

• **Particular care should be taken by schools with additional admissions criteria, including faith schools or those with a focus on a specific subject specialism (such as musical aptitude).** This work has shown that on average faith schools are consistently more socially selective than non-religious schools. These schools should therefore take particular care to ensure their criteria are not contributing to socio-economic inequalities in access. This could be done, for example, by implementing policies such as pupil premium priority and having this priority apply before any of their own specific admissions criteria.

Reducing the cost of attending the school:

• **School leaders should ensure that wherever possible, they remove potential financial barriers to attendance at their school.** Financial concerns are a significant factor for parents from low-income households when making school choices. Therefore, schools should look to reduce these costs wherever practically possible. Unnecessary costs can include expensive uniforms, extensive equipment lists or expansive costs for trips or extra-curricular activities. On uniforms specifically, schools should commit to having no more than one branded item in their uniform, keeping total uniform costs under (or as near as possible to) £100 and ensuring second hand items are available for purchase or for free. Schools should also avoid collaborating with single uniform suppliers where possible, as this often increases the cost of uniforms. Where costs on any of these items cannot be avoided, schools should look to give financial support to lower income families, and to clearly advertise the availability of this support on the admissions pages of their website and at open days.

- **Secondary and primary schools should collaborate to ensure that parents are well informed before making school choices, especially regarding their rights to free transport to school.** For children eligible for FSM this extends to their three nearest suitable schools within six miles of their home, 15 miles for a faith school or up to 15 miles to their closest grammar school. Schools should ensure parents are aware of this support, and given information on how to access it, when making school choices.

Recommendations for government

- **The government should review existing admissions code policies, including making pupil premium eligibility a required part of school's oversubscription criteria.** As well as requiring schools to include pupil premium, they should also ensure schools justify where it is placed within the order of their oversubscription criteria. Schools should be able to decide if this is an unlimited priority for this group, or whether it applies up to a certain proportion or number (e.g. the proportion of pupil premium students in the local authority, or nationally), but would need a justification behind their decision. Where schools use distance from the school or a defined catchment area among their oversubscription criteria, these should not apply to pupil premium eligible students.

- **The government should hold schools accountable for the fairness of their admissions policies.** School admissions policies should be better regulated, with a focus on improving access. Schools should be held accountable for their admissions policies and the impact of those policies on the socio-economic mix of their student body. This could for example, form a part of a school's Ofsted inspection.

- **Government should review current eligibility for free school transport, so that it does not become a hidden barrier to parental choice.** This could include extending eligibility to all pupils eligible for pupil premium (and, therefore, those eligible for FSM in the last six years), so that families have greater certainty about the support that will be available over a longer time period. Current support also limits parents to support in a relatively small geographical area, which is likely to be particularly limiting for families in lower density or more rural areas, who could have few schools within the current maximum distance of six miles. Government should look at greater flexibility or extending the maximum distance within which this support is available.

- **Government should do more to ensure the cost of school uniforms is not a barrier for school choice, by strengthening existing rules and guidelines.** Existing government guidance requires school governing bodies to 'consider' issues related to uniform costs but falls short of stipulating concrete actions. The government should impose limits in key areas. This could include only allowing one piece of branded uniform, and not allowing single suppliers for uniforms unless this can be shown to lead to more economical outcomes for parents.

- **The government should work to raise the quality of all schools, with a view to increasing the representativeness of their intakes compared to their surrounding areas and making the school system fairer.** Reducing FSM gaps in schools and a more equal school system are likely to be a virtuous circle. Previous Sutton Trust research has found that schools serving disadvantaged communities experience greater difficulties in, for instance, teacher recruitment and retention, particularly in secondary schools. Data here has found the greatest disparities between the social make up of schools and their catchment areas, and lowest number of top schools, concentrated in some parts of the country with the highest FSM rates. The government should make extra funding and resources available for tackling such issues at the local level in the most disadvantaged areas.

Table 8: 2016 FSM rates and gaps updated using the 2024 methodology.

	School FSM rate	Catchment FSM rate	FSM gap
All comprehensives	16.3	18.4	-2.1
Top 500 (Progress 8)	14.7	18.2	-3.5
Top 500 (5A*CEM)	9.1	13.5	-4.5

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*This work contains statistical data from ONS which is Crown Copyright. The use of the ONS statistical data in this work does not imply the endorsement of the ONS in relation to the interpretation or analysis of the statistical data. This work uses research datasets which may not exactly reproduce National Statistics aggregates. The analysis was carried out in the Secure Research Service, part of the Office for National Statistics.

1. Note that the 2017 report and this one have been compiled using slightly different methodologies (see methodology section of this report below and Cullinane, C., Hillary, J., Andrade, J., & McNamara, S. (2017). *Selective Comprehensives 2017*. <https://www.suttontrust.com/our-research/selective-comprehensives-2017-state-school-attainment/>). To make comparisons between the two reports more reliable we have used updated figures from 2016 using the 2024 methodology. Consequently, some figures from 2016 cited in this report may be slightly different from those in the original. This will apply to group level statistics such as Top 500 schools. The 2016 data updated with the 2024 methodology is included at the end of the report in Table 8 and in the separate Appendix to this report. In addition, the attainment measures used in the two reports have changed (5A*CEM to Attainment 8). Consequently, all comparisons between the two reports using the attainment measures should be treated as indicative rather than absolute.
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