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The Education Bill – now is the time to write to your MP

The Education Bill finished its committee stage in early April and the report and third reading is expected in early May before going to the Lords. If enacted, this Bill will make profound changes to admissions. It will remove the statutory requirement for local authorities to set up admission forums, restrict the powers of the adjudicator so that he/she would be unable to impose admission criteria when there is a reluctance by the admissions authority to make the required changes and end the requirement for local authorities to report annually to the adjudicator on the legality of local admission arrangements. On a positive note it brings complaints about academy admission arrangements under the same regime as maintained schools.

In committee, Nick Gibbs, schools minister, said that local authorities could set up voluntary admission forums but this, of course, would mean that parents across the country would not have an equal entitlement to a forum. He claimed that abolition would save £1.5 million but the Government's own impact statement indicated that the savings were too insignificant to calculate.

A Government policy statement given to the Committee indicated that the Government intends to allow more people to be entitled to complain to the adjudicator. However, this is likely to result in more cost and bureaucracy as evidence suggests (see our survey) that local forums sort out messy issues locally and reduce the possibility of complaints.

On the powers of the adjudicator, the Minister said that we must "trust schools to set their own admission arrangements and respond appropriately to any decision made by the adjudicator". As these powers to enforce decisions are rarely used, the Government's case for removing them from primary legislation seems very thin. They were introduced to avoid messy, long-running arguments. On reports, Nick Gibb said these would still be required but local authorities would publish them locally instead of sending them to the adjudicator. The adjudicator could then download them as "everyone else does". Details of what the reports would be required to report on are in the still awaited Code.

Reports of the debates in committee, including memoranda from several organisations opposed to this part of the Bill, can be found via tinyurl.com/5uea8fw

The Government has failed to make the case for these changes. It is vital that there is opposition now. Please write to your MP urging them to vote against the clause on school admissions.

Amendment could bring in more selection

An amendment to the Education Bill proposed by Graham Brady MP, staunch supporter of selection, would allow any independent schools becoming publicly-funded academies to continue to be selective schools. This would, of course, mean more selection in the state system but would be in line with the Academies Act, which allows grammar schools becoming academies to remain selective, unlike the original remit of academies.

Clearly, supporters of selection are enjoying more support from the Government. The January newsletter of the Grammar School Heads Association (<http://gsha1.web.officelive.com/default.aspx>) reports a meeting with Michael Gove in January. He is said to have "responded positively" to GSHA representations on admissions, "recognising the difficulties that the adjudication process can bring to schools". He is reported to be interested in finding ways in which the headteachers can be given more opportunity for judgement in admissions to Year 7 and the 6th form.

School admissions – back to the free-for-all?

As more schools become admission authorities, either by becoming an academy or as free schools are set up, there is a real danger that admissions will again become the free-for-all that they were in the past.

Potentially, under current government policy, there could be over 20,000 own admissions authority schools. There are only 152 local authorities acting as the admission authority for their community schools, but there are several thousand voluntary aided, trust and foundation schools and academies, all acting as admission authorities.

As a result, large numbers of governing bodies go through the process of setting and consulting on admission criteria, organising appeals and responding, if necessary, to the adjudicator.

By the actions of the previous government through

successive Codes the admissions process has become fairer and clearer for parents. But although covert selection has been reduced, overt selection on faith, ability and aptitude remains and, as more schools become admission authorities, this is likely to increase.

A report for the Sutton Trust in 2010 supported previous research from Sheffield Hallam and the LSE finding that the most socially selective schools were those which controlled their own admissions.

So, despite the clear evidence that social segregation will result and the evidence from the OECD PISA reports, which have consistently shown that the Nordic countries and South Korea, with non-selective and mixed ability comprehensive systems, have more equal educational outcomes and the best outcomes overall, we could be almost back where we were in the '80s.

Pupils' views on admissions are mixed

A recent survey of just over 2,000 children between nine and 16 on their views on education policy illustrates the need for more information and debate about admissions.

The survey, carried out by NFER for the Children's Commissioner, found that only half understood the process of school admissions.

When asked about which school they should be able to go to 79% said they should be able to choose, but in contradiction a majority supported the schools choosing, ie 62% supported selection on ability and 50% on aptitude.

However, only 20% supported selection on faith and only 20% supported giving priority to children in care.

Chamberlain, T., Golden, S. and Bergeron, C. (2011). *Children and Young People's Views of Education Policy*. London: Office of the Children's Commissioner.

Overwhelming opposition to the abolition of admission forums

Our survey shows there is overwhelming opposition to the abolition of admission forums.

The Education Bill will end the requirement for local authorities to set up admission forums – statutory local groups consisting of heads, governors, parents, diocesan authorities and others with the duty to consider the fairness of local school admission arrangements.

Comprehensive Future has surveyed the views of chairs of admission forums across a cross section of all types of local authorities. The survey reveals overwhelming opposition to the abolition – 95% of those responding. Respondents made a strong case for the retention of forums, particularly as more schools are becoming own admission authorities, setting their own criteria for admission. Comments from some chairs were:

"Admission processes will become more school-centric rather than parent-centric".

There would be a "free-for-all on admissions".

Abolition would lead to "less transparency in the admissions system".

"Schools will select by ability; the weak and disadvantaged will lose out."

Abolition would cause "chaos and unfairness and go against the concept of the Big Society".

"Abolition would result in a more piecemeal approach losing an independent and representative body. This could conceivably impact on fairness and equity of access."

"Abolition would lead to inequitable, opaque admission arrangements that would in turn produce poor outcomes for many children and parents."

The evidence from our survey is that these groups are effective, sorting out issues locally and collaboratively. Rather than abolition, *Comprehensive Future* believes the Government should find ways to spread good practice to all admission forums and support these local people working hard to ensure fairness for parents and children in school admissions.

A summary of the survey and the full report is on our website at www.comprehensivefuture.org.uk

Steering group holds next meeting in May

The next *Comprehensive Future* steering group meeting will take place on May 12th.

We will be discussing the best ways in which to continue to lobby on the Education Bill as it passes through the Lords.

If you have any items you would like us to discuss, please contact us.

Please keep us informed of local admission issues.

Where is the Admissions Code?

The White Paper in November promised that the Government would consult on a "simplified and less prescriptive" School Admissions Code "early in the New Year". Most expected a draft Code would be given to the Committee debating the Bill, but as we go to press with this newsletter halfway through April there is still no sign of the Code. A policy statement sent to the Committee says there will be public consultation between March and June and the new Code will come into effect in January 2012 for admissions in September 2013.

Be ready to respond!