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Some important changes to admissions in White Paper

Despite its title, *The Importance of Teaching*, the White Paper includes important changes in school admissions. It says that, 'The local authority's democratic mandate to act on behalf of all its population also means that local authorities have a critical role in securing fair access to schools'. This role includes 'continuing to coordinate admissions and ensuring fair access to all schools, including Academies and Free Schools'. But 'to make the system more flexible' legislation will 'end the bureaucratic requirements for local authorities to establish an admissions forum and provide annual reports to a central schools adjudicator'. Instead, 'local authorities' role will be to make the process as fair and simple as possible for parents and pupils, setting up local arrangements which work for that area'.

The schools adjudicator's role will be extended to review specific complaints about admissions arrangements for all schools, including Academies and Free Schools, 'ensuring that every child has access to the same mechanisms where there are specific concerns'. A 'simplified and less prescriptive' School Admissions Code is expected early in the New Year for consultation. There is a promise to 'retain the principles and priorities of the current Code'. There will be consultation on allowing Academies and Free Schools to choose to prioritise children from disadvantaged backgrounds in their oversubscription criteria 'if they wish', although this would be out of line with the claim that all schools will follow the same Code.

What we think

In the White Paper's evidence background document, *The Case for Change*, Finland is quoted without any reference to one essential difference with England – its non selective system! Ending selection on ability and aptitude would make the system fairer and simplify the Code at a stroke. If thousands of new admission authorities were to be set up, effective monitoring of admissions would become even more essential. Even the DfE's impact assessment says this could lead to an increase in stratification, ie pecking order, unless there is a 'strong and effective Admissions Code'.

We welcome the extended role of the Adjudicator to all schools, which we have campaigned for, as parents will now have one route to complain for academies or maintained schools. But we oppose the intention to dismantle other procedures for promoting fair admissions, such as ending the requirement on LAs to report on admissions to the Adjudicator and the abolition of the school admissions forum. There is no convincing reason given for this and the Government needs to explain what it means by 'making the system more flexible'. Instead, the role of the LA in admissions should be strengthened and the admission forums given more support. LAs should be encouraged to report more effectively on their local arrangements and, as the OSA recommends, the admission forum should scrutinise the report before it is sent to the Adjudicator.

The status and membership of admission forums has been subject to change since they were set up in the SSFA 1998. Their main focus in the current code is to consider the fairness of arrangements in their local context. Membership includes representatives of local schools, parents and the community. Instead of being abolished we believe admission forums should be given more support to carry out their work to monitor fairness in admissions. We would like to go further and see all admissions criteria agreed locally by a properly supported admission forum rather than by the school's governing body. Furthermore, current regulations allow the local authority, as well as coordinating applications, to make the decision about which applicants meet the admissions criteria. Making this a requirement would take this management burden off schools and bring openness to the procedure.

See over page for what you can do.

CF questionnaire discovers attitude of MPs

Comprehensive Future wanted to find out which MPs supported our aims, whether they would like to join us and the extent of their involvement with state education.

We also wanted to raise awareness of the issues surrounding school admissions and that CF was a useful source of information. The number of questionnaires returned was disappointing but the positive nature of most responses was encouraging.

There were responses from 22 Labour, three Conservative, no Liberal and one unidentified MPs. Of these, 22 Labour, one Conservative and A.N.Other supported our aims. Two Conservatives did not, while the third qualified his support with 'broadly speaking'. Some 19 were or had been school governors and seven members of the local authority; four had taught in state schools and five had children in state schools – and 17 wanted to join the campaign. We will contact MPs again.

Nick Gibb, the Schools Minister in the Coalition Government, passed our letter to a civil servant in the DfE to reply. His response said: 'Understandably, there are strong views among pupils, parents and teachers about whether academic selection should remain. Because of this, and the current legal position which outlaws new grammar schools or new arrangements for selection by ability, Ministers do not intend to change this policy area. However, Ministers believe that, where grammar schools do exist, parents should decide whether selective arrangements should continue. Local parents are able to trigger a ballot.'

'Selection by aptitude . . . can play an important part in widening access to particular schools . . . I want to assure you of the rigour this Government places in ensuring that the admissions system is regulated to ensure fair access for all children.'

Adjudicator's annual report shows referrals doubling in a year

The Chief Adjudicator reports that referrals have doubled since last year, with the majority of objections coming from parents.

Objections were based on several grounds, some claiming that entry tests were on ability while claiming to be aptitude tests. Local authorities' annual reports to the Office of the Schools Adjudicator (OSA) had claimed that all areas were compliant with the Code. But when the OSA carried out a compliance exercise on 14 LAs it found not all were compliant in every respect.

Recommendations included two proposals that there should be one independent route for objections to admission arrangements of all schools, ie including Academies and Free Schools (now Government policy) and

that the required Annual Report from the local authority should be discussed or approved by the Admission Forum. The report also recommended that instead of the compliance exercise carried out by the OSA this 'policing' should be done by LAs, admission forums, other schools and parents.

A recommendation, outstanding since 2008 that the Code should define key terms such as parent and sibling is still awaiting ministerial decisions and there has been no progress on another recommendation, that model supplementary information forms should be drawn up.

OSA *Annual Report 2010* can be downloaded as a PDF file from tinyurl.com/34198vy

The White Paper

– what you can do

- Please write to your MP now with concerns about the proposed changes to admissions, particularly if you are on an Admissions Forum.

- Be ready to respond to the consultation on the 'simplified' Code.

- Contact us with information on local admissions; next steering group meeting is January 13th.

The Importance of Teaching can be downloaded from tinyurl.com/2ukoqgg

The Case for Change is available at tinyurl.com/2uhrdsu

Capita conference on school admissions

A very timely conference on school admissions is on Thursday 27th January in London.

Speakers include Sam Murray (ACE), Dr Ian Craig (Chief Adjudicator), Dr Lee Elliott Major (Sutton Trust), Donald Rae (LGA) and many others.

For details phone 020 7202 or email ben.khalil@capita.co.uk
www.capitaconferences.co.uk/pdfgen.html?filename=School_Admissions.pdf&code=TSBK

Please donate!

There is more than ever a need to campaign for fair admissions and we rely entirely on donations.

Please send us a cheque payable to *Comprehensive Future* or download a banker's order form from the website and make a regular donation.

Good attendance for AGM 2010

Despite the tube strike there was a good attendance at the AGM in November. The following were elected to the steering group for 2010-2011:

Chair: Fiona Millar, Vice Chair: Paul Holmes, Secretary: Margaret Tulloch, Treasurer: Michael Sterne. Members: Francis Beckett, Melissa Benn, Martin Carroll, Janet Dobson, John Edmonds, Adrian Elliott, John Fowler, Richard Harris, Graeme Hitchen, Malcolm Horne, Saeed Malik, Peter Mortimore, Lisa Nandy MP, Chris Storr, Bob Tutton.

It was agreed to amend the constitution to increase the number of members of the steering group to 16. Discussion centred on the need to encourage local groups of supporters, welcoming a Labour shadow secretary clearly supporting comprehensive education and concerns about fair admissions as more schools might become admission authorities.

The meeting recorded its recognition of the sterling work done by David Chaytor (retiring from the steering group) and Malcolm Horne, in setting up and supporting *Comprehensive Future* as Chair and Treasurer respectively. A report of the seminar which followed will be on the website soon.