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Evidence shows need for a review of admissions

When parents are deciding in the Autumn which secondary schools to “choose” they need to know the admissions criteria of their local schools. This information is in a composite prospectus which local authorities are required to publish each year in September, and must include the criteria for academies, free schools, foundation, voluntary aided, community and voluntary controlled schools. If they have spare places, schools cannot keep places empty, so making admission criteria irrelevant (grammar schools can keep places empty but in practice the level required for entry from applicants is lowered to ensure the school is full). But for oversubscribed schools the admission criteria are the basis upon which the decision to offer a place or not is made.

Over recent months, 15 *Comprehensive Future* volunteers have been looking at this information for the September 2014 secondary entry. Investigators found that, in some areas, parents face a bewildering range of secondary school admissions policies when choosing (or being chosen by) a secondary school. This confused situation is further evidence of the need for a wide-ranging review of admissions. This will become urgent as pressure on primary places moves on to secondary and as more schools become admission authorities.

In many areas children do not have to sit tests of any kind to get places at any secondary school, whereas in other areas there are tests for ability, aptitude and banding (to get a comprehensive intake). Many schools are selecting all or part of their intake on faith criteria. Some schools are using a combination of these methods. While the majority of schools are using easily measurable criteria, such as distance from home to school and siblings already in the school as well as those required by law, i.e. for looked-after children, some schools have extremely complex criteria. In a few schools, to maximise a child’s chances of admission families would need to worship regularly and obtain a letter to say they do so, and sign up for an aptitude test and attend at the designated time or sign up for the banding test and attend at the designated time.

Our investigators found the experience quite an eye opener – one, Libby Goldby, said:

“I looked at 20 local authorities. I was struck by how differently each LA presented the information. In some the admissions criteria were very clearly presented including information on numbers admitted in the previous year under each criterion, and criteria would have been relatively easy to find. In others it took real persistence – especially when (I think it was only one) primary and secondary schools were listed mixed together, or when one was simply directed to the school’s own website where criteria could be found under different headings. To be fair, I suppose parents are usually focusing on one or two schools, unlike a researcher trying to see the whole picture. The quantity of data resulting from each academy providing its own criteria (even when they vary very little) and consequent size of the information ‘booklet’ is daunting. There was very little use of banding in the LAs I looked at and larger shire counties had very little selection at all, except for the occasional school using faith criteria. A surprising number gave priority to children of school staff.”

Banding arrangements were found to differ from school to school, even in the same local authority. The number of bands used varies from three to nine. In a few areas the test is taken by all children in their primary schools, but in most cases children have to go to the secondary school at a particular time to take the test. The tests of “aptitude” for priority places in music and other subjects also require parents to bring their children to the school to be tested at an appointed time. These forms of selection could be a means of increasing the “advantaged” intake by eliminating some of the most deprived, as well as those children whose sympathetic parents know they struggle at school and do not want them to face tests.

There is wide variation regionally and within regions on the percentage of schools

(continued overleaf)

Government wants more poor children in grammars

In a recent letter to a *Comprehensive Future* supporter in Buckinghamshire the DfE said:

“Many grammar schools are seeking to adopt a combination of measures in order to become more inclusive. We are working with the Grammar School Heads Association to:

- encourage grammar schools to give priority to disadvantaged children in their admissions arrangements where they meet the qualifying standard;
- introduce entrance tests that measure potential more effectively and avoid the need for parents to pay for coaching;
- promote the formation of partnerships with local primary schools to support the raising of attainment and increase parental engagement with grammar schools.”

David Laws, Schools Minister, spoke at a meeting of the Grammar School headteachers outlining this policy. However *Comprehensive Future* will continue instead to lobby for an end to selection. It can be done gradually. Selective schools should take an all-ability intake from Year 7 onwards. As the BBC has reported, some Catholic grammars in Northern Ireland are now making this gradual change: www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-27814197

Please contact David Laws and Tristram Hunt to make the case for ending selection.

AGM, elections and resolutions

Tuesday 25th November 2014, 6.30 pm
Thatcher Room, Portcullis House, Bridge Street, Westminster, London SW1A 2LW

Portcullis House is by the end of Westminster Bridge, opposite the Houses of Parliament. Please allow time to go through security. The room is booked by Lisa Nandy MP

Nominations are now invited to the elections to the steering group, which will be held at the AGM. You can nominate yourself. The steering group meets in London, usually during the day.

Please send any nominations for the steering group, including chair, vice chair, secretary and treasurer, with a short personal statement (no more than 75 words) and any resolutions to Margaret Tulloch at *Comprehensive Future* to arrive by 3rd November 2014.

Comprehensive Future at Labour fringe

If you are coming to the Labour conference in Manchester, please come to our fringe meeting on Sunday 21st September at 5.30 pm in the Stanley Suite of the Midland Hotel.

Melissa Benn will be in the chair and speakers will be Simon Barrow (ACCORD), Owen Jones (*The Guardian*), Patsy Kane (Executive Head of multi-academy co-operative trust, including Whalley Range 11-18 High School and Levenshulme High School) and Fiona Millar (*Comprehensive Future*).

Even if you cannot come please would you do everything you can to publicise this event? We are very grateful for the financial support of CASE, SEA and ACCORD working with us to enable us to put on this meeting.

Donations please!

The steering group of *Comprehensive Future* decided that this year, as the General Election approaches, was the time to arrange a fringe meeting at the Labour party conference to lobby for an end to selection. Even with the generous donations from ACCORD, CASE and the SEA it is likely to cost us close to £2,000.

So our funds are depleted. If you can, please send us a donation or take out a standing order (a form can be downloaded from the website). We are very grateful for your donations and the standing orders we are getting.

Consultation on a new School Admissions Code

The DfE are consulting on revisions to the School Admissions Code. The main change is that all admission authorities will be allowed to give priority to pupils eligible for the pupil premium. Also, the timescales for determining admission arrangements and objecting to the adjudicator are being brought forward.

One change which the DfE have unfortunately not included is to amend the date for admission authorities to inform local authorities of their arrangements and for the LA to publish them on the website which, as currently, is the same day! Consultation ends on September 29th.

www.gov.uk/government/consultations/changes-to-the-school-admissions-code

A Herts parent takes action on selection

In parts of Hertfordshire schools set entry tests for secondary education. Local parent Carole Harris has set up a petition to get support from local parents to end this.

If you know people in Herts please do all you can to publicise this petition.

<https://you.38degrees.org.uk/petitions/abolish-the-south-west-herts-admissions-consortium>

Are you on Facebook?

Bucks activists campaigning to end selection have a Facebook page www.facebook.com/LocalEqualExcellent which they hope you will “like”. You can “like” *Comprehensive Future* too at www.facebook.com/comprehensivefuture

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in a local authority that do not have tests or a faith requirement in their admissions criteria. Only 39% of schools in Inner London do not have them, whereas in Yorkshire and the Humber, for example, 83% of schools do not appear to have them. So there is a real London effect – far more banding and more aptitude selection than anywhere else. It seems unlikely that London children have more defined “aptitudes” than elsewhere! It is interesting to note that the percentage of parents getting their first “choice” is lowest in London.

A fuller report of the analysis is on the website <http://comprehensivefuture.org.uk/parents-choice-or-schools-choice-time-for-a-review-of-school-admissions/> or email info@comprehensivefuture.org.uk for more details.