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Academies Act encourages schools to change status

After hurtling through both Houses, the Academies Act became law just as Parliament went into its Summer recess. The Act creates the possibility of more schools becoming admission authorities as schools change status to academies. This trend was already well established because, as well as setting up academies, the previous government encouraged schools to become trust schools. In the early '90s the then Tory government encouraged schools to shift to grant maintained status. All these schools joined voluntary aided schools in being their own admission authorities. Research by Vignoles and Allen at the LSE found more social segregation in areas where there were more schools which were admission authorities.

Selection on aptitude, which can be introduced by an admission authority acting within the School Admissions Code, is likely to increase as a result of more schools becoming admission authorities. The Act overturned the requirement that academies admit children of all abilities by allowing grammar schools to become academies. Ed Balls raised the prospect that this Act will allow more selection as grammars will find it easier to expand. As a result of challenges in both Houses about admissions and selection the Government was forced to put on record its support for comprehensive education:

'I shall start by saying what the Bill is not about. It is not about a "full-scale assault" on comprehensive education – a ludicrous claim by the shadow Secretary of State in The Guardian on Saturday. We believe in comprehensive education and are committed to it, and the Bill will strengthen it. Nor is it about scrapping the admissions code, another spurious claim about the Government's education policies by the shadow Secretary of State. We are committed to fair admissions through the code, and all academies will be bound by it through the model funding agreement.'

Nick Gibb, Minister for Schools, winding up for the Government on the Academies Bill, July 27 2010.

AGM and seminar on fair admissions

The *Comprehensive Future* AGM will be held at the House of Commons on November 3rd, immediately before a seminar asking the question 'Will admissions be fair in the new education landscape?' Speakers at the seminar will include Francis Gilbert, teacher and author, whose books include *I'm a Teacher Get Me Out of Here*.

The AGM will be held at 6.30pm in Committee Room 15, before the seminar so that members can come to the AGM and then stay for the seminar. Please allow time to go through security which can take a long time depending on what else is on that evening. More details will be sent later.

Elections and resolutions

Elections will be held at the AGM. 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 October 13th.

In London again?

Last year our AGM, held in London before an evening parliamentary seminar, was well attended so we decided to adopt the same format this year. At our next steering group meeting we will discuss how we can organise other meetings in different parts of the country so that supporters across the country can meet to discuss the campaign. Please get in touch with your thoughts on this.

What the future holds for fair admissions

Is the Code in danger?

Last month, in *Local Authority Approaches to the Schools Admissions Process*, the National Foundation for Educational Research reported that a large majority of local authority admissions officers had found the School Admissions Code to be increasingly helpful and useful. At the moment promises are being made that new schools and academies will follow the Code.

The previous government made successive changes to the Code to try to end unfairness and make admissions an easier process to understand. Changes included the ending of interviewing and the coordination of applications by the local authority. But will the Code stay the same?

Before the election Michael Gove indicated that the Code might be simplified. The Code has been attacked by *The Spectator* and on the Blog *Conservative Home*. This is an indication of the pressure the Government might come under from its supporters. For example, suggestions include reintroducing parental interviews and ending 'burdensome consultation'. Indeed *Conservative Home* says Michael Gove should swing his axe and scrap the whole thing.

In any case, schools that become admission authorities can make many changes within the existing Code, for example introduce selection on aptitude or change their catchment areas.

If, contrary to current indications, all schools become academies, we could see over 20,000 admission authorities. This would dramatically increase the workload of the School Adjudicator trying to ensure fairness and investigating complaints that schools are proposing changes that do not comply with the Code. Or will simplification mean the School Adjudicator is for the chop to save money?

A strategic role for local authorities?

In January this year *Comprehensive Future* went to see

MP David Laws, then the Liberal Democrat education spokesperson. He assured us that, although their sponsor school policy gave more autonomy to schools, local authorities would have a strong strategic role, which would include admissions.

Michael Gove wrote to local authorities on May 26th, encouraging them to engage in a dialogue with him to ensure they 'continue to play a full strategic part' in securing improvement. However, a clear, stronger role for local authorities in admissions is as yet unclear.

The Communities and Local Government Committee has decided to conduct an inquiry into the Government's plans for localism, including consideration of 'the role of local government in a decentralised model of local public service delivery'.

Submissions are invited by October 1st. www.parliament.uk/business/committees/committees-a-z/commons-select/communities-and-local-government-committee/news/localism/

Changes we want to see

Comprehensive Future believes that there is indeed much scope for simplification of the School Admissions Code.

Ending selection on ability and aptitude would remove the label of failure from children and families and save money on testing, appeals and school travel.

Requiring all admissions criteria to be agreed locally by a strengthened admission forum rather than within the school's governing body would go some way to ensuring that local collaboration is paramount.

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 the burden off schools and bring openness to the procedure.

Elected local authorities have democratic legitimacy. We want to see them hold the ring to ensure admissions are fair.

New on our website

New additions to the website, which is at www.comprehensivefuture.org.uk include a summary of the current regulations on grammar school ballots and answers to five big questions about ending selection.

Please send us reports about admissions in your area. You can also join the *Comprehensive Future* Facebook group from the website.

Donations needed!

Comprehensive Future relies entirely on donations and everyone volunteering their work. There is going to be a lot of work to do to campaign for fair admissions.

Please send a donation, cheques payable to *Comprehensive Future*, or take out a standing order by downloading a form from the website.

Going to the party conferences?

Our chair, Fiona Millar, will be speaking at all the party conferences at joint NUT/NASUWT/ATL fringe meetings. All are in the conference secure zones so passes will be needed. She will be speaking on *England's schools: a free for all* at the following venues:

Liberal Democrat, Liverpool ACC, September 21st, 1.00pm, Hall 3b.

Labour, Manchester Central, September 28th, 1.00pm, Charter 7.

Conservative, Birmingham ICC, October 5th, 5.00pm, Hall 10b.

'Will admissions be fair in the new education landscape?'

Parliamentary Seminar (and AGM)

Committee Room 15, House of Commons

6.30pm Wednesday November 3rd

Speakers include Francis Gilbert, teacher and author of *I'm a Teacher Get Me Out of Here*