
The Question of Admission: the RISE Report

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ABSTRACT This article examines the findings of the recent London School of Economics RISE Report looking at policies relating to secondary school admissions in England.

The subject of secondary school admissions in England is rarely out of the news. Linked, of course, to issues of parental choice and school catchment areas, it can be guaranteed to provoke controversy in a way that most politicians find discomfiting and disturbing. And the subject is not confined to the secondary sector: primary schools have a local hierarchy of their own, and many acquire extraordinary popularity.

To take *two* recent examples: On 3 July 2009, Harrow Council decided to abandon its case against Mrinal Patel, the first parent to be prosecuted for fraud over a school application, when it was unclear as to whether or not the Fraud Act of 2006 actually covered the offence. Mrinal Patel had faced up to a year in jail or a £5,000 fine after Harrow Council took her to court for using her mother's address to apply for a place for her five-year-old son.

And with secondary schools, it is often the cost of the school uniform that can be used to deter children from low-income households from applying for a place. A story in *The Guardian* on 18 August 2009 told of parental anger upon discovering that the new girls uniform for Oaklands Catholic Comprehensive School in Waterlooville, Hampshire cost £97.

What, then, is the situation with regard to admission, and can it be described as fair? We can turn to the recently-published RISE Report for help in answering these questions.

The 2009 RISE Report

The RISE Report *Secondary School Admissions in England: policy and practice* was launched at a press conference in London on 2 March 2009. It presented the initial findings of a research project commissioned by the Research and Information on State Education (RISE) Trust (with funding from the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation) and carried out by Professor Anne West and a team of colleagues at the London School of Economics. The main aim of the Project was to provide a detailed analysis of secondary schools' admissions criteria and practices in England in light of reforms carried out by the new Government since 2001 and of the provisions of the third School Admissions Code which came into force in February 2007 and applied to school admissions from September 2008. (A new School Admissions Code came into force in February 2009; but this was obviously too late for consideration by Professor West and her team and did not, in any case, differ markedly from the earlier Code).

The 2007 Code stipulated that in allocating secondary school places, admission authorities must ensure that the criteria used were clear 'in the sense of being free from doubt and easily understood'. The criteria must also be 'objective and based on the known facts', with governing bodies forbidden to make subjective decisions. Procedures must be equitable for all groups of children, including those with special educational needs or disabilities and those in public care. Steps must also be taken to enable parents' preferences for the schools of their choice to be met 'to the maximum extent possible'.

Professor West's Report pointed out in the Introduction that all the so-called education 'reforms' introduced since the Conservatives' Education 'Reform' Act of 1988 had resulted in the introduction of a 'quasi-market' in school-based education. This had meant a marked increase in the number of schools becoming their own 'admission authorities': in January 1988 the percentage was 15 and this had increased to 33 per cent by January 2008. Obviously, oversubscribed schools that are their own admission authorities have been in a position to 'select out' those youngsters thought likely to have a negative impact on school examination results.

Concentrating on the situation since 2001, the researchers found that *most* schools abided by the provisions of the various Admissions Codes, although a minority of secondary schools had criteria that could not be considered 'clear or objective'. Virtually all schools gave priority to children in care, as required by legislation, although a small minority of schools responsible for their own admissions did not.

A growing proportion of schools (5 per cent in 2008 as against 3 per cent in 2001) – mainly voluntary aided and foundation schools and Academics with responsibility for their own admissions – used criteria designed to select pupils on grounds of 'aptitude' or ability in a subject area. A minority of schools admitted the use of interviews, prohibited by the Education and Information Act of 2006, and some agreed that they held pre-admission 'meetings'. A number of schools made use of SIFs (Supplementary Information Forms) which requested information *not permitted by the School Admission Code*.

Implications for Future Policy

There were two main areas which gave Professor West and her researchers cause for concern:

1. Schools with responsibility for their own admissions could use their power to operate a process of selection. There was a strong case for either the local authority or, where appropriate, a religious body with no vested interest in the outcome, to take over responsibility for the allocation process;
2. Schools should not be allowed to use SIFs to ask questions designed to 'select in' or 'select out' certain groups of pupils. The abuse of the system meant that many parent or carers were being disadvantaged during the admissions process.

The authors concluded that key questions still remained in relation to the link between admissions criteria and practices and the precise composition of secondary schools.

Until data are made available enabling the patterns of application to be related to patterns of offers, it is still unclear whether school autonomy in relation to school admissions may be a factor in determining which pupils apply to which schools and which pupils are actually offered places. (p. 37)

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