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Secondary school admissions in England 2001 to 2008: Changing legislation, policy and practice in England

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Background

Secondary school admissions in England have had a high political, policy and media profile since the late 1980s. A greater priority to parental choice followed the 1980 Education Act and this together with the changes arising from the 1988 Education Reform Act, including funding following pupils, resulted in the creation of a 'quasi-market'. The 1988 Act allowed schools to opt out of local authority control and become responsible for their own admissions. The proportion of such schools more than doubled between 1988 and 2008. Schools responsible for their own admissions and who administer the process themselves may seek to 'select in' pupils who are likely to maximise their examination 'league table' results and not select others. However, only oversubscribed schools that are their own admission authorities are in this position, namely foundation and voluntary aided (in the main religious) schools, academies and city technology colleges.

Research Questions

The paper focuses on the changes to school admissions between 2001 and 2008, and the impact the legislative and regulatory instruments have had on admissions criteria and practices. In short, how have secondary school admissions criteria and practices changed between 2001 and 2008? In particular, to what extent have those relating to equality, social justice and school selectivity changed? The paper focuses on variation between schools of different types.

Methods

Two databases of admissions criteria to individual state-maintained secondary schools in September 2001 and 2008 were used. For 2001, data were collated for the vast majority (95%) of secondary/high schools in England (N=3013); 15 city technology colleges, classified as 'independent' were excluded. Data on admissions criteria and practices for secondary schools for September 2008 were obtained from information provided by the 150 LAs in England with publicly-funded secondary schools (excluding the Isles of Scilly). In some cases inadequate information was provided about schools responsible for their own admissions so individual schools were contacted. A total of 3134 secondary schools were included in our sample, virtually all secondary schools in England. Academies and city technology colleges were included given that the former are required to adhere to certain aspects of legislation and guidance.

Frame

The paper provides an analysis of policy. Principal-agent theory is used as the overarching framework. The government has been seeking to ensure that its agents – local authorities and voluntary aided and foundation schools – behave as intended in terms of their admissions policies and practices (academies' admissions criteria are part of the funding agreement with the Secretary of State, the principal). However individual schools, as admission authorities, may seek to circumvent guidance if they feel that there are opportunities to do so and the incentives are great enough.

Research findings

In 2008, unlike 2001, virtually all schools gave priority (and in the main top priority) to children in care as required by legislation. Very few schools used interviews or criteria that could be used for

social/covert selection (e.g., giving priority to the children of former pupils/staff). More, however, selected on the basis of aptitude/ability in a subject area (5% compared with 3%). A larger proportion of schools used random allocation in the event of oversubscription in 2008. Finally, more voluntary aided schools gave priority to children of other faiths than in 2001 (42% versus 23%). In a significant minority of schools, in the main those with responsibility for their own admissions, some criteria that are used appear designed to select in certain groups of pupils. Very few schools reported the use of interviews, although there was some evidence of pre-admission meetings by schools that were their own admission authority.

Supplementary information forms (SIFs) were used by some schools. These may request information not permitted by the School Admissions Code or information which is unrelated to the school's admissions criteria. There is a concern about the nature of the SIFs which may result in some parents being disadvantaged during the admissions process and raises questions about the 'fairness' of the process. Certain questions could be used to 'select out' particular children. The SIFs which parents/carers needed to fill in were in some cases lengthy and complex.

The research has brought to light a range of issues relating to the admissions process. One concern is that the admissions process is unduly complex. Admissions criteria for community and voluntary controlled schools are, in the main, clear, objective and relatively simple for parents/carers to understand. With voluntary aided schools there can be a high number of criteria relating to religion and religious practice, creating difficulties for parents/carers and allowing scope for discretion in many cases.

A significant proportion of academies and foundation schools select a proportion of children on the basis of aptitude/ability in a subject area, so privileging some children over others. If the aim is to secure a more academically balanced intake, to widen access to particular schools and create greater social equity, 'fair banding' across a wide area on the basis of the range of ability of children in that area or a form of random allocation across the area are likely to be more effective.