

## The impact of Brighton and Hove's secondary school admissions reforms on pupil sorting

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### Background

In February 2007, Brighton and Hove Local Authority launched a significant new policy for schools admissions. The LA announced plans to introduce school lotteries as the assignment mechanism for places in over-subscribed schools. The results of this policy experiment are of national as well as local interest, as many policy makers are keen to learn whether this is a way of reducing educational inequalities. Our aim is to investigate the effects of these reforms on many dimensions of school composition and performance. In this paper, we report the first findings of this project.

Brighton and Hove is a unitary authority area in the south of England, with around a quarter of a million residents. Prior to the 2007 reforms, school places in Brighton were allocated according to the following three priorities: Compelling medical or other exceptional reasons for attending the school; a sibling link; the home to school distance. Parents were required to submit a rank order list of up to three schools by October in order to obtain a place the following September. Places were assigned using a First Preferences First mechanism, using proximity from school as the tie breaker when pupils had the same priority can be inequitable as it allows access to high-scoring schools to be bought, by paying the premium for housing close to a desirable school. This is a particular concern given the geographical locations of schools in Brighton and Hove. Furthermore, the residential sorting in Brighton, with the large council estates concentrated in the east of the city, meant that certain schools in that area became highly deprived.

The reform had a number of features, including redrawn catchment boundaries, a changed set of priorities, the use of Equal Preferences assignment mechanism, and the introduction of lotteries for over-subscribed schools. These school lotteries are designed to give every child in the catchment area – who have the same priority – an equal chance of securing a place at the oversubscribed schools rather than giving preferential treatment to those who live closest; reducing the ability to “buy your way” into the school of your choice.

### Research Questions

The specific questions we address in this paper are as follows:

1. What, if anything, is the immediate impact of reforms on school intake profiles? This considers the impact on social composition; the degree of ability sorting in schools; the ethnic composition of schools; and the distribution of children with special educational needs within schools.
2. What is the impact of reforms on the decisions of families to leave the Brighton and Hove LA for other neighbouring LAs, or for the private sector? This is done separately for the catchment zones of different schools.
3. We evaluate the impact of the reforms relative to selected comparison areas. We analyse differences in trends in social segregation between Brighton and Hove and the comparison LAs.
4. The core research question is to accurately model school assignment. We use Geographical Information System techniques to define a set of small areas within Brighton and Hove, and then study the school destinations of children living in those areas, and examine whether there were any significant changes in these patterns over the reform date.

5. There is a more in-depth analysis of 3 more localised areas, to look closely at patterns of admission in 3 neighbourhoods that we believe would be most affected by the reforms.

## **Methods**

This paper uses two major sources of data. The first is data held in the National Pupil Database for eight school Censuses. This is matched to local neighbourhood information and used to analyse changes in the social composition of schools and neighbourhoods. The second data set contains unique information on school choice. For the first time, a local authority has agreed to give researchers access to their database of stated parental preferences for schools. One is then able to compare the three school preferences of the parents in addition to the realised outcome and how this changes between social groups.

## **Frame**

The paper presents three different types of analysis. Firstly, descriptive analysis of changes in patterns of residential and school location are presented for Brighton and Hove, including an analysis of migration patterns to other LAs and to the private sector. These are calculated using a Geographical Information System to map pupil home postcodes into catchment areas. Secondly, changes in school and residential sorting in Brighton and Hove LA are matched to other LAs with comparable demographic characteristics. This 'difference-in-differences' approach enables us to control for wider demographic and policy changes that were taking place since 2002 across England. Thirdly, the parental preference data allows us to test theories regarding how preferences for schools are formed since it enables us to separate the parent's own preferences from the realised outcome of the school choice process. Through this we can validate other school choice studies that make predictions about the relative importance of school quality, league table position, proximity to school, and so on.

## **Research findings**

The major finding of impact of the reforms is that in the short term there was very little change in social and ability stratification of pupils. The reform produced very large changes in who got to go to which school, but the poorest pupils in Brighton and Hove remained concentrated in a few schools because the re-drawing of the catchment boundaries did not give them access to the popular schools. FSM segregation is now actually very marginally higher.

There was a reduction in outflows from the state to the private sector. This suggests that some parents at least were more satisfied with their allocation under the new system and thus did not feel the need to move from state education. This effect was more pronounced in certain catchment areas. Parental preference data will give us new evidence on the extent to which preferences for schools differ between households from different social backgrounds.