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What is the role of Admission Forums in promoting fairness in secondary school choice?

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Background

School Admission Forums, recommended by the 1999 School Admissions

Code and made compulsory in 2002, were intended to provide each local education authority area with a body that would consider school admission arrangements and offer advice to admission authorities. In the ten years that followed their introduction, regulations relating to Admission Forums have changed repeatedly and the policy environment has changed substantially.

The function, membership and reporting arrangements for Forums have been modified by subsequent legislation and regulations. Meanwhile, School Admissions Codes have been issued at frequent intervals and mechanisms for the policing of school admissions have been substantially strengthened. However, the lack of formal powers for Admission Forums has been a constant feature. As described in the most recent regulations, the main purpose of an Admission Forum is to consider and advise on the fairness of admission arrangements.

Research Questions

In view of the somewhat faltering history of Admission Forums, we set out to examine how Forums and local authorities have responded to recent changes in the law relating to secondary school admissions.

This paper presents some findings from the second part of a research project commissioned by the Research and Information on State Education (RISE) Trust with funding from the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation. The first part of the research project, published in March 2009 (West et al., 2009) provided an analysis of secondary schools' admissions criteria and practices in England in light of the new legislative and regulatory context. The second part of the research, which form the basis of this paper, set out to provide some examples of how Admission Forums had responded to legislative and regulatory changes. Once again the main focus was on admissions criteria and practices.

In particular, this paper examines what roles are played by Admission Forums and secondly illustrates how the concept of fairness has been understood and operationalised in relation to secondary school admissions.

Methods

For this qualitative and small scale element of the research study we adopted a case study approach, focusing on admission arrangements and the operation of Admission Forums in five local authority areas. The five case study areas varied in the proportion of schools that were their own admission authority and whether objections relating to school admission arrangements had been referred to the Office of the Schools Adjudicator. The five authorities comprised two two-tier authorities, one London borough and two single tier authorities. Interview and documentary evidence was collected in each case study area. In each area interviews were carried out with a local authority officer responsible for secondary school admissions (five interviews) and with a member of the local Admission Forum (five interviews). Interviews were also carried out with secondary school headteachers (five interviews). The Department for Children, Schools and Families provided written answers to questions posed by the researchers.

Frame

In addressing our research questions we examine the various roles played by Admission Forums as described by interviewees. One recent change in the formal functions of Admission Forums is described in DCSF guidance as a change in focus 'from legality to fairness'. We examine the concept of fairness which may be understood in different ways. For example, substantive fairness relates to outcomes while procedural fairness relates to processes. Fairness may also be understood in relation to notions of justice. Several concepts of fairness may be implicit in the admission policy of a single school. In the case of schools with a religious character an additional complication arises because such schools may be seen as performing an additional function – of passing on a faith or helping sustain a faith community. In keeping with this discussion, the School Admissions Code uses the term 'fair' in a variety of different ways. We then examine how fairness is interpreted in relation to secondary school admissions, either explicitly or implicitly, by interviewees.

Research findings

We identified five roles that may be played by Admission Forums in relation to local admissions: a leadership role, a symbolic role, a scrutiny role, a perfunctory role and an expert role.

In relation to the shift in focus from legality to fairness, interviewees suggested that in some respects increasing fairness was dependent on changes in the law. Substantive fairness could be pursued through the introduction of banding although this was by no means seen as a panacea. Several interviewees acknowledged that substantive fairness was a key concern for parents. However, it was clear that, in relation to secondary school admissions, fairness is most often understood as procedural fairness.

Interviewees suggested that most schools complied with the admissions code and that admissions procedures were followed in accordance with the rules. However, some evidence was reported of rules being broken. In addition some practices were described that, although they may not break the School Admissions Code, would be unlikely to be encouraged by policymakers. In addition, there was some evidence that some interviewees were suspicious of the motives of schools that set their own oversubscription criteria.

While the increasingly demanding compliance regime was thought to have improved admission arrangements, we suggest that there are two reasons why ever more intense policing of admissions arrangements is not the best or only means of improving admissions arrangements. This is because as rules become more complex more schools may inadvertently fall foul of them. Secondly problems can arise, including increasingly 'unfair' outcomes, without the School Admissions Code being broken.

We suggest that there is a need for oversubscription criteria to be 'co-ordinated' within a local area. While it is acknowledged that the achievements of Admission Forums have been limited, we suggest that a duty could be placed on Admission Forums to promote co-ordinated oversubscription criteria. In addition to the requirements that arrangements are 'clear', 'objective' and 'procedurally fair', they should also be 'co-ordinated' with the arrangements for other schools in the area.

We also suggest there may be opportunities to increase substantive fairness by looking for means to increase the number of higher preferences met.