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## What can be done to mitigate the persistent social segregation of secondary schools in England?

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### Background

Social segregation of schooling is generally thought to be a source of unfairness because more affluent and more highly educated parents are gaining access more easily to the better schools thus compounding, and doing nothing to redress, the already existing inequality of educational opportunity between rich and poor. Another argument is that when poor pupils are educated in schools with concentrations of other poor pupils they do not progress as well as they would in a school with a more balanced intake, while those already advantaged and educated with their more affluent peers flourish educationally. Socially segregated schooling is also implicated in the reduction of social cohesion and civility. In densely populated urban contexts it creates polarisation with extremely popular and extremely unpopular schools. Children and adults from different social backgrounds rarely interact and the polarisation adds to inequality of opportunity the injustice of mal-recognition and denigration. In England, social segregation also affects the manageability of admissions and causes seasonal political embarrassment. Segregation and polarisation result in fewer parents getting their preferred places and a higher level of appeals with accompanying costs of time, money and stress. In these ways segregated schooling is seen as a problem.

### Research Questions

In the light of recent analyses of the mechanisms that generate socially segregated schooling this paper presents a critical review of policy responses to date in order to explore the question as to what might effectively be done to reduce the social segregation of intakes to secondary schools in England.

### Methods

The paper takes a broadly critical realist approach in that different mechanisms at different levels are assumed to be operating to generate segregation in open contexts. Coldron et al (2008) identified multiple mechanisms at work that result in parents in different social groups seeking separation. Segregated schooling, they concluded, is not simply a result of flaws in the way the market works.

### Frame

Class is an essential factor but the idea of a class strategy or collective action needs careful formulation. Ultimately the drivers of segregated schooling are in the fundamental wish of individuals and families to optimise their social position given the resources at their disposal. Existing inequalities in social position and wealth largely determine different approaches to and returns on engagement with choice of school. The great social distance and material inequality between the most advantaged and the least, the benefits of solidarity and the effects of social policing lead the majority of both groups to opt for segregated schooling. Other mechanisms operating at a less deep level are identified that ratchet segregation. One is that undersubscribed schools have spare places and therefore are allocated more of the students who move into the area and a greater proportion than average of these students present the schools with multiple educational challenges. This reinforces the negative signals of low exam performance to which affluent and highly educated parents are attuned.

These generative mechanisms are actualised in particular and variable contexts illustrated by the different ways in which socially segregated intakes occur in relation to three major types of maintained schools –comprehensive schools, grammar schools and faith schools. For comprehensive schools residential segregation is the proximate cause of segregated intakes and for grammar it is the greater

education and wealth of some parents and the social and financial costs that less affluent parents have to consider for whom it often means choosing exit over solidarity. Two kinds of segregation can be distinguished in relation to faith schools. Firstly, faith schools as a whole have a more socially advantaged intake than other types of school. Secondly, the intake of religious schools in the same area can differ with some having a more socially advantaged intake than others. The statistical evidence that religious families tend to be more affluent offers a partial explanation of the first kind of segregation and arguments akin to those for community schools partially account for the second.

## **Research findings**

The main body of the paper is a review and critique of policy options to mitigate social segregation. It begins with a review of policies adopted by successive governments. Two main approaches are noted. The first is the sustained attempt to regulate the behaviour of schools to prevent them selecting children who are easier to educate. The second is to intervene with consumers by ensuring that an array of information is available and then to redress a perceived imbalance in accessing that information and engaging with the process of choice, an imbalance that is assumed to give some social groups more access to the good schools than others. An argument is presented that these interventions, being based on an inadequate understanding of the deep mechanisms that generate segregated schooling, miss the mark because it is not simply caused by the bad behaviour on the part of some providers, or the competence or incompetence of different groups of consumers.

Before turning to consider what policies might be effective there is a discussion of the need to be clear about the rationale and ultimate objectives of action. The programme of reform proposed by Tough and Brooks (2007) is critically discussed and the questions posed by Coldron et al (2010) considered. It is acknowledged that these questions cannot be adequately dealt with in the space of this paper but that any evaluation of policy options can only be made with ultimate objectives in view. A set of objectives is therefore outlined as the basis on which the authors' evaluations are made while accepting that these are contestable.

The pros and cons of a range of options are assessed as to how far they would mitigate the persistent social segregation and contribute to the development of a system of allocation to schools that would be effective, just and respectful of all students and parents.