

Report: Schools in England about 20 times more likely to give priority to local rather than disadvantaged pupils

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On the day parents across the country discover which secondary school their child can attend, a new report exposes how entry rules are thwarting

social mobility especially at the most sought-after state schools.

The research, led by the University of Bristol, is the first national analysis since widespread academization of what determines school admissions for all state secondary schools in England—and where you live is a key deciding factor.

Lead author Simon Burgess, Professor of Economics at the University of Bristol, said, "The report provides a much-needed comprehensive overview of how secondary schools are accepting [pupils](#). Its findings raise important concerns about the chances of England successfully leveling up achievement and opportunity for children and young people from all social backgrounds."

While Local Authorities used to set such criteria, changes in recent years such as the introduction of Academies and Free Schools mean most (more than 90% of around 3,250) [secondary schools](#) now decide this themselves. Families submit a list of their preferred schools, and oversubscribed ones, which applies to the majority of the strongest performers, select pupils according to their own admissions criteria, subject to the Government's School Admissions Code.

The report findings show how this has resulted in a raft of different, highly complicated processes which, in some cases, are not only hard for parents to understand but also serve to perpetuate social inequalities and division.

Despite clear Government extra funding incentives to admit disadvantaged pupils, very few schools (just 5%) prioritized them in the admissions process. Recent analysis has shown grammar schools are failing to make it easier for children from the poorest households to get a place. Similarly, this report found grammar schools that gave priority to pupils from households in receipt of welfare benefits, and therefore

eligible for the Pupil Premium, are no more socially inclusive than those that don't, as the priority is conditional on the pupil's score in an academic test.

Apart from meeting legal obligations, having a sibling already at the school was the most common criterion, with 96% adopting this rule. Geographical location, including catchment areas and distance or travel time from home to school, was also widely used—by 88% of schools. In tie-break cases where would-be pupils met the same criteria, how close they lived to the school was typically found to be given precedence. The few grammar schools plus some other schools (11% in total) use academic tests to determine admissions, while very few schools (1%) use a random allocation as the tie-breaker.

Co-author Dr. Ellen Greaves, who completed a Ph.D. on the economics of school choice at the University of Bristol, said, "As schools achieving the strongest outcomes for pupils are more likely to be oversubscribed, they have the power to devise entry systems to choose who attends. Picking pupils according to where they live can mean students from the poorest families are assigned to the least effective schools. Top-performing schools get to indirectly select pupils from affluent households in the vicinity, effectively freezing out those less fortunate and hindering [social mobility](#)."

The report also highlighted examples of more innovative admissions arrangements, including random allocation of some places to applicants regardless of where they lived, test-based selection processes to ensure mixed-ability intake, and constructive use of the Pupil Premium as a priority for admissions.

"Although these cases were relatively isolated, they illustrate that the most successful schools can introduce systems which favor pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds and further [social progress](#)," said co-author

Professor Estelle Cantillon, from the Solvay Brussels School of Economics and Management.

"Hopefully these will be championed as best practice and act as a catalyst for future positive policy change in an area which through decentralization has become geared to benefit the more fortunate."

As part of this research, work to investigate the impact of such admissions arrangements on the attainment gap between pupils from poor and more affluent households is also in progress, and will form the basis of further reports.

Ruth Maisey, Program Head of Education at Nuffield Foundation, said, "This research highlights the very real barrier that pupils from lower-income households face when applying for their [secondary school](#) place.

"Prioritizing local pupils reinforces geographic inequalities by excluding those who can't afford to live close to the top-performing schools. We hope this research encourages more schools to think creatively about using their admissions criteria to promote opportunity and fairer access."

More information: School admissions in England: The rules schools choose on which pupils to admit: bristol.ac.uk/media-library/school-admissions-criteria.pdf

Provided by University of Bristol

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