

House of Commons
EDUCATION AND SKILLS COMMITTEE INQUIRY

Inquiry into
Secondary Education:
School Admissions

NASUWT Evidence

**Response of the National Association of Schoolmasters
Union of Women Teachers (NASUWT)**

Summary

The submission by NASUWT highlights a number of key concerns relating to the issue of school admissions in the secondary education sector. In particular, the Association's submission highlights the need for the following:

- the establishment of a national framework to achieve consistency in the arrangements for school admissions;
- the policy on the establishment and expansion of specialist schools to be abolished;
- an end to the culture of competition between schools;
- the abolition of the school performance tables;
- a review of the policy to expand the number of selective schools;
- an end to selection within the state schools sector on the basis of aptitude or ability;
- the abolition of school admission forums;
- a review of the implications of the 14-19 agenda for the future of school admissions system.

Main Submission

1. NASUWT is pleased to be invited to contribute to the work of the Work and Pensions Select Committee. NASUWT represents the interests of over 211,000 teachers in schools and colleges throughout the United Kingdom.
2. NASUWT believes that the Inquiry raises a number of highly important issues relating to meeting the needs of young people and their families and for teaching and learning. In particular, the Inquiry has a number of wider implications in terms of addressing issues of social inequality and social justice arising from equality of access to and distribution of school places.
3. The Association recognises that previous international research has demonstrated the importance of socially inclusive education systems for the standards achieved by young people.
4. The existing body of research indicates that low achievement can be tackled effectively by the ending of hierarchical arrangements between schools, which is linked to differential funding arrangements and differences in the mechanisms by which schools select their pupil intake.

Selection

5. The Government has made clear the need for Britain to compete on the global stage. New and higher order knowledge and skills are needed within the workforce. Schools have a vital role to play in terms of the nation's economic future.
6. NASUWT asserts that systems of school organisation and admission must provide equal access to the highest quality learning opportunities for all young people whilst contributing to high expectations for all. There should be no return to the days of the tripartite system that ensured a privileged education for the few whilst limiting opportunities for the many.
7. It was in the 1960s that the then Labour Government recognised how selection in education, and the operation of the 11-plus system, was constraining the country's development. It was a deeply damaging system which affected adversely the lives of many young people branded as "failures" from an early age.
8. The comprehensive model was an attempt to end the elitism of the previous arrangements by guaranteeing the highest quality learning opportunities for all young people. Despite this worthy

aspiration, progress towards the comprehensive ideal has been hampered by the continued existence of grammar and other selective schools, including grant maintained schools, city technology colleges and academies.

9. The available evidence demonstrates that, rather than helping to raise educational standards, the system of selection undermines educational performance which is so central to economic performance.
10. The Organisation for Economic Development (OECD) Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) provides a major comparative analysis of data on skills levels amongst young people at the end of their compulsory schooling. Based on an analysis of student achievement in 32 countries, the report suggested that high educational standards were threatened within those education systems where access to educational opportunity for young people is based on selection on grounds of ability or social, cultural or economic characteristic.
11. Indeed, a major conclusion of the OECD was that high educational achievement for all young people could be improved substantially by educating children from all social and economic backgrounds together.
12. This raises important questions about the purpose, validity and consequences of selection in education systems, and raises further questions about the merits of parental choice and differential funding arrangements for specialist schools.
13. One of the arguments made in favour of the Government's plans to expand the number of specialist schools is that such schools would remain in the state sector. However, it should be borne in mind that specialist schools receive premium funding levels per pupil compared to their non-specialist counterparts and may not be bound by the same regulatory controls that apply to maintained schools, for example in relation to the admission and exclusion of pupils. Rather than promoting social inclusion and excellence for all, the specialist schools developments have exacerbated the problems of social segregation within our education system.
14. But the problems do not end there. It is also the case that the new breed of specialist schools are able to exercise the right to select up to 10% of their pupil intake on the basis of aptitude. Ten per cent is a significant number in its own right and one which could be increased in the future. At the present time, research evidence has identified that the freedoms available to some schools has resulted in an amplified problem of covert selection and exclusion. In short, the creation of "sink schools" is likely under the current arrangements.
15. The potential for comprehensive education to deliver high standards and to tackle the achievement gap between students is undermined by the '*depressing*' effect of continued selective education arrangements. To be clear, research evidence demonstrates that pupils, educated in LEAs that have selective provisions, appear less proportionately in the two highest categories of GCSE performance whilst in greater proportions amongst those students in the average and below average achievement categories.
16. Selection, therefore, suppresses educational performance between schools, LEAs and between nation states. The Association is concerned that despite the fact that the Government has recognised these problems it nevertheless plans to increase the number of specialist schools. NASUWT believes that this is likely to exacerbate the problems of selection and undermine the goal of creating a world-class knowledge economy.

Parental preference

17. The converse of the practice of schools selecting pupils, it has been suggested, is the policy of parental preference, which was intended to provide the opportunity for parents to select schools which they would want their children to attend. In fact, the policy has been a fallacy.
18. It remains the case that many parents find the admissions process confusing. Often, parents mistakenly believe that a place will be available for their child at their first preference school. Successive governments have fostered a misguided belief amongst parents in the myth of parental choice, exacerbated by the publication of school performance data in the form of the

league tables. In turn, this has encouraged a socially and educationally divisive belief in the existence of 'good schools' and 'bad schools', which has, in turn, undermined educational standards by depressing pupil and parental expectations and motivation at those schools deemed to be less desirable. The Association recommends strongly that the divisive policy to publish school performance tables be rescinded, whilst taking appropriate steps to improve the transparency and equity of the admissions system.

Co-ordinating admissions

19. LEAs play a key role in the co-ordination of admissions. However, the effectiveness of local co-ordination is also dependent upon the manner in which foundation and voluntary aided schools operate. Successive governments have established arrangements which have encouraged a free market system in relation to school admissions. Regulations which enable certain schools to apply their own admission practices have caused considerable distress and confusion to many pupils and their parents. The Association does not believe that equality of educational opportunity and high expectations can be fostered within an environment for school admissions in which there are winners and losers. At the heart of the Association's concerns is the impact of selection.
20. The Association believes that national consistency is required to afford improved transparency and confidence in the admissions system as a whole. This would also benefit young people and their parents who need to make applications for a school place in a neighbouring local authority area.

Admissions forums

21. NASUWT has long questioned the merits of the admissions forums. The Association believes that LEAs are perfectly able to organise consultative mechanisms to address the difficulties which may arise from the admission process and to arrive at outcomes which consider local issues in the context of the overall provision of the authority. The Association is further concerned that issues of representation, transparency and democratic accountability have been inadequately addressed in the establishment of the forums. For these reasons, NASUWT recommends that the admissions forums be abolished.

Number of school places

22. The Association asserts that the formula for determining the number of school places should have a high level of transparency. It should take account of health and safety requirements not only on overall capacity but also for specialist curriculum provision. Governing bodies and heads should not be allowed to admit more and more pupils into unsuitable accommodation. NASUWT casework demonstrates that accidents are occurring in schools when vast numbers of pupils are moving round the school, particularly at change of lessons in corridors that were never built to accommodate them. Overcrowding also contributes to pupil indiscipline.
23. At the same time, it should be recognised that deregulation has intensified competition between schools with deleterious effects. Schools continue to compete to attract a limited number of pupils by seeking to develop a "market" advantage over neighbouring schools. Competition between schools has failed to deliver improved educational outcomes and has deflected schools from their principal purpose: to ensure high educational standards for all. This policy of competition continues to be encouraged, as successive governments have extended the operational freedoms of certain schools and sought to expand the number of selective provisions. The Association believes that these measures have not contributed to an open and fair admissions system, and it might reasonably be assumed that the current system has produced discriminatory outcomes. The practices of the new cadre of schools such as the academies must be carefully monitored and scrutinised to avoid any unintended adverse outcomes.
24. The Association is also minded to note the new arrangements which are being established in a number of LEAs for the provision of 14-19 education. Notwithstanding the outcome of the Tomlinson review of the 14-19 phase, it is nevertheless the case that the Learning and Skills Act 2000 and the Education Act 2002 have encouraged schools to secure collaborative arrangements with other local schools and colleges, not only to ensure the delivery of a diverse curriculum but also to assure their future financial viability. The present deliberations on the future arrangements for school admissions, must take account of these developments, where pupils

might need to be enrolled at more than one institution to receive access to their curriculum entitlement.

Equality Impact

25. The absence of comprehensive, rigorous and systematic ethnic monitoring and other equal opportunities data has served as a major blockage to progressing equality of pupil achievement, a point which has been made by a range of bodies, including OFSTED and the Commission for Racial Equality. It is essential that data are available to track the transition of students (for example, those from black and minority ethnic groups) from primary to secondary education, not only in terms of their overall progress and achievement, but also in relation to the type and 'quality' of secondary schools to which they gain admission.
26. In this submission, the Association has made the case that initiatives such as the establishment of specialist schools may have operated counter to equal opportunities considerations. The Government should report on the equality impact of the specialist schools programme and other measures taken which have altered local arrangements for comprehensive school admissions. The Association also recommends that the potential equality impact of all proposed Government programmes should be the subject of report prior to their introduction.

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