

# **ALLOCATING SECONDARY SCHOOL PLACES**

a study of policy and practice

Sandra Jowett

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SCHOOL PLACES:  
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## Summary

This research investigated how parents are involved in decisions about which secondary school their children will attend and their levels of satisfaction, both with the allocation of school places, and (where appropriate) the appeals procedures. It was concerned with how local education authorities (LEAs) provide information to parents and the procedures they have established to allocate places and deal with subsequent appeals. The role of school staff at the time of transfer was also of interest.

Not surprisingly, parents were virtually unanimous in endorsing the importance to them of a secondary school that was well managed, had a caring environment, good learning facilities, a good local reputation and a strong policy on discipline. That they were virtually unanimous in agreeing on the importance of a support system for children with learning difficulties (indeed nearly two-thirds strongly agreed with the importance of this provision) was of interest. Nearness to home and the existence of a sixth form were also important to most. Sending their child to a single-sex school was not an issue for the majority.

Decisions about school transfer were, for the most part, made jointly by parents and children. The vast majority of parents had attended at least one secondary school open day or evening, although even given this high level of contact it should be noted that nearly one-third of respondents would have welcomed more. Moving on to the appeals system, it was evident that a range of approaches was taken, and opportunities to draw on well-regarded practice would have been valuable. The response parents met when they had contact with schools, LEAs and appeals committees varied substantially and where such contact was helpful, courteous and informative it was appreciated greatly.

The findings highlighted the various admission arrangements in use and the very different circumstances that pertain in different areas (sometimes within the same LEA). Most parents said they were satisfied with the procedures and the outcome, although it



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was clear that there were no easy answers to some of the dilemmas raised by open enrolment policies. For many parents the allocation of secondary school places for their children was not an issue of sustained concern; for others it was a key determinant of their level of satisfaction with the education service they received. The need for clear, accessible, comprehensive information at all levels of the process was apparent, not only for parents but for others (such as governors) taking part in these procedures. There are inevitably advantages and disadvantages to each system and care needs to be taken in developing the optimum approaches, given the diverse circumstances in which transfers to secondary school take place.

## Chapter 1 Introduction

### BACKGROUND

#### The context for the allocation of school places

The right of parents to play a part in the allocation of secondary school places to their children has featured in debates about educational provision in recent times. The opportunity to express a preference for a school, linked to the notion of parents as consumers, has been a key feature of developments in educational policy. A commitment to strengthening the parental role was indicated by the publication of the Parent's Charter in 1991 (updated in 1994) (GB. DES, 1991) and detailed in the subsequent White Paper (GB. DFE, 1992a). The potential impact of the strategies in place has yet to be fully understood, although they represent a significant departure from the situation in the 1980s when admissions rules were set by LEAs and parental preference was only considered where there was selective schooling, or in relation to single-sex provision.

The Parent's Charter (GB. DES, op. cit) lays out clearly the information which schools are obliged to make available to parents, and the White Paper (GB. DFE, op. cit) shows a commitment to enabling school admissions procedures to work smoothly. Circular 6/93 (GB. DFE, 1993a) contains advice about drawing up and operating admissions policies and the appeals procedures, to facilitate a situation whereby 'schools and LEAs should operate clear and appropriate admission policies; that parents should be able to judge their chances of gaining admission to any particular school; if necessary should understand the reason why they have not gained a place; and if they wish should be able to marshal suitable arguments for appeal'.

In general terms, there has been an opening up of the options for enrolment in that parents may apply for a place for their child at any maintained school and will be accommodated if that school is not over-subscribed (unless there is selection by test results or the

potential pupil does not meet certain religious criteria). For most schools, LEAs continue to determine the rules for admitting pupils where demand exceeds capacity. The parents' *preference* plays a part in the decision-making, although it offers no guarantee of a place.

This system is made more complex by the existence of voluntary-aided schools (about 20 per cent of the total), which are mainly funded by LEAs but partly controlled by (usually religious) foundations which appoint a majority of members of the governing bodies, who in turn control admissions policies. In addition, grant-maintained (GM) schools, which have opted out of LEA control, may determine their own admissions arrangements, and city technology colleges (15 of which were operating by 1993) which have centrally funded running costs, also have their own admission arrangements (based on Government guidelines). The Assisted Places Scheme (established in 1981) has added further diversity to this mix.

### **The concept of 'choice'**

The issues surrounding school transfer have been the subject of much debate and research. There has been clarification of the often misused word 'choice', given that what is available is a parental right to state a *preference* for a secondary school (Hunter, 1991). Other writers have focused on the impact of the changes outlined above on schools. Woods (1992), for example, reported that schools were now more enthusiastic about 'selling' themselves and engaging in promotional activity, although not about finding out what parents and others think about the school — the process of 'environmental scanning'.

Edwards and Whitty (1992) criticised the use of the word 'choice', calling it a slogan and something that can act as an obstacle to rational discussion. They reported that 'its connotations of freedom and individual responsibility may make it seem self-evidently a "good thing" requiring no careful justification'. A Centre for Educational Research and Innovation (CERI) report (1994) urged caution in that 'a system that allows every school to define its own clientele will change the structure of schooling in a manner unlikely to ensure the greatest possible choice for the greatest number'.

Bush *et al.* (1993) were concerned that in a climate emphasising

'choice', GM schools would move to the selection of pupils by tests. They reported that 'to date the pressure to control intakes has proved irresistible for some schools', although they added that 'there is nothing inherent in opting out that compels schools to become selective'. They suggested that under-subscribed schools may indeed have a greater incentive to be responsive, but that they may concentrate on making themselves more attractive to certain (notably middle-class) parents and/or find themselves constricted in their capacity to act by a budget limited to pupil numbers. They concluded that 'there are built-in dangers of inequities resulting from the quasi-market and no assurance that it will automatically increase choice and educational opportunities for all'.

To add to the complexity outlined above, Echols *et al.* (1990) reported substantial evidence that the incidence of choice diminishes as the distance of alternative schools from the home increases. Glover (1992) suggested that 'the community at large judges schools according to a variety of factors which, whilst understood by the schools concerned, may not be readily changed. Reputation, as the basis of judgement and choice, appears to lie behind the actual developments within the schools by many years'.

Looking at the principles rather than the practice, Alder *et al.* (1989) explained that 'while the individual parents who exercised choice tended to boost their children's attainment, the accumulated effects of individual choosing were said to increase educational inequalities and social polarisation'. The 'gaining' schools were old-established and formerly selective schools which were larger and located in areas with a relatively low incidence of unemployment and single-parent and low-income families. Ball (1993) explained that 'in the debate about parental choice, issues related to defining the social purposes of public schooling, become obscured, to say the least. The market solution, that choice will satisfy both individual families and the nation, seems little more than an act of faith.' A CERI report (1994) found 'no direct evidence that this competition improves school performance' in that 'studies show that parents and pupils rarely choose schools on the basis of well-informed comparisons of educational quality'.

### **The research**

This study investigated how parents are involved in decisions

about which secondary school their children will attend and their levels of satisfaction, both with the allocation of school places, and (where appropriate) the appeals procedures. It was concerned with how LEAs provide information to parents and the procedures they have established to allocate secondary school places and deal with subsequent appeals. The role of school staff in relation to parents at the time of transfer was also of interest.

The research was undertaken from September 1993 to October 1994. Data were collected from LEA officers (at two points in the research), primary and secondary school headteachers, the chairs of governing bodies and parents. The work was undertaken in ten LEAs in England, and ten primary schools in each were selected for inclusion in the study. Seventy-nine of these 100 schools were able to participate and each was asked to distribute a questionnaire to the parents of children from one Year 6 class. The eight secondary schools visited were selected from LEAs representing four different systems for allocating secondary school places. In this chapter some of the relevant issues have been outlined, to provide a context for the findings contained in the next five chapters. Staff in the LEAs, those working in primary and secondary schools and parents are included. Each group of respondents is dealt with separately, with some of the main issues highlighted in the final chapter.

## Chapter 2

# The Local Education Authorities' Involvement

Contact was made with NFER's Liaison Officer in each of the ten LEAs, who was asked to name an officer with responsibility for the process of transfer to secondary schools. In each of the LEAs this person was interviewed to ascertain policies and practice in their area (in some cases more than one officer chose to provide information during the interview). They were asked about:

- information given to parents
- the system in place to administer transfer to secondary schools
- the role of governors
- the criteria used to allocate places
- the situation with GM schools (if applicable)
- the appeals procedures
- the role of the LEA in facilitating the whole process
- the advantages and disadvantages of the current procedures
- any changes they would like to see in the admissions or appeals procedures.

### Information to parents

In all the LEAs, parents were sent a booklet (via pupil post at the current primary school) with details of the transfer procedures and the schools available to them. In some instances all that parents would receive automatically would be brief details of the secondary schools contained in these booklets. In others they would be given the prospectus of their local school and in yet others the prospectuses of all schools appropriate to that area. The difference in the extent of information passed on to parents and the form it took indicated the different approaches taken to the allocation of places to secondary schools. As stated, some parents received several school prospectuses relating to their area — in one LEA as part of a package consisting of a letter, choice form, and policy statement booklet. Some LEA officers referred to a list of secondary school open days being sent to parents.

### **The content**

The information gathered during the course of the research varied in its appearance, content and readability. Some of the documentation was encouraging in tone, suggesting that parents visit as many schools as they could, read the prospectuses and decide which one was best for their children's future. For example, one LEA had distributed a comprehensive, readable document with a detailed explanation of secondary education in the authority and with several pages of information about each school. In another, an attractive, well-presented booklet contained everyday phrasing such as 'Do brothers or sisters already attend?' — when explaining the significance of sibling attendance in the allocation of places. It also made clear the parents' position by stating in large text that: 'every effort will be made to meet your PREFERENCE, although a place is assured at a County school which serves your area. Applications to other schools depend on places being available. It helps your application to list the REASONS which are appropriate for the School's admissions criteria.'

Conversely, the letter to parents in another LEA was written in the following style. It was a response to the guidance in Circular 6/93 (GB. DFE, 1993a), which explained that parents should be told how the order of preference for schools they gave would be dealt with, and illustrated how difficult it was to convey information of this sort. It had to be digested by parents who may have been unfamiliar with the terms used and confused by the procedures outlined.

*If your preferred school is not the 'provided' one and your preference cannot be met, you will be notified by the end of January 1994 and will be able to appeal against the decision, if you so wish. At this time you may indicate an alternative preference. However, you should be aware that as the allocation of places will be done on the basis of parents' first preference, it is possible, at this stage, that the school of your second choice will be full — this could be your provided school.*

### **The timing**

In all LEAs, information was sent to parents in the autumn term prior to the transfer, with a range from the middle of September to the middle of November. The revision of the previous year's information generally took place during the summer. An

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indication of the change some LEAs had encountered in recent times came from the officer who said that previously they had not had to start the process until January, but now there was so much more to consider that this had been put back several months. Some officers mentioned responding to requests for information about secondary schools from the independent sector (in one LEA a couple of such schools were said to ask regularly for 15 sets of material). Others had a more systematic approach. In one LEA the parents of pupils in independent primary schools were sent information to their home addresses (provided by the schools) and in another it was sent to the home addresses of all residents in Years 5 and 6 who attended schools outside the authority (this also being the only reference to the parents of pupils below Year 6 being contacted).

The deadline for parents to express their preference(s) ranged from the end of November to the middle of December. All the LEAs allowed at least six weeks for parents to respond (indeed in one case it was 11 weeks). At the time this research was undertaken (1993-4) there were no references to allowing for performance tables of secondary schools exam results and other key features (published annually) to be taken into account. Only one LEA officer referred to flexibility in relation to this deadline. He commented that although responses **should** be in by the middle of December, they asked primary headteachers to ensure that a form had been completed for every child and they allowed an extra two weeks for the results of that chasing up and assistance to arrive.

One geographically large LEA had different dates so that it could stagger the administrative load, and in another, where parents applied to secondary schools individually, there was variation in that each school held an open day and the deadline for applications was about two weeks after that. In different circumstances, one LEA officer commented that the secondary school headteachers had emphasised the need for a common date for applications to be lodged, which was increasingly important to smooth operations now that there were GM schools to include. In an LEA where non-response to the letter from the authority was regarded as acceptance of the place offered in the catchment area school, the date for reply had a rather different significance.



### **Models of practice for the allocation of school places**

The variety of procedures used in different LEAs to deal with transfers to secondary schools has already been referred to. Information collected from the ten LEAs suggested four main approaches. The first was quite distinct in that pupils were allocated a place in a secondary school following an 11-plus examination so the first influence on placement was the results of an assessment. Following that, of course, there were still a range of factors that could come into play to decide whether or not parents' preferences were met, whether it be in the grammar school or high school sector. The second type, again quite distinct, was the authority where parents applied to all schools individually. This radical approach had been instigated because there were several GM schools in the area and pupils moved across the authority borders to other schools.

The other eight LEAs divided into two groups, although the distinction was not as clear-cut as for the two already mentioned. In four of the authorities, parents were asked to name the school(s) of their choice on the relevant documentation and return it to the authority. In the other four they were informed of the school where their child had been allocated a place and were asked to confirm that this was acceptable to them or to name an alternative. As stated, in one of these authorities the letter to parents stated that non-response from them would be taken as acceptance of the allocated place.

These four models for the administration of transfer to secondary school are presented in Table 1. As has been explained, the circumstances in different LEAs led to different arrangements. What were striking, however, were the situations where a choice was made for parents and the onus was on them to oppose it. As soon as parents moved outside the allocated place they had to state why this was their preference (whereas in the open system referred to above, individually initiated choices did not need to be explored in the same way).

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TABLE 1: MODELS FOR PRACTICE

No. of LEAs	Model	Details
1	Selective secondary schooling	Selection by 11-plus examination and then allocation to either grammar or high school. Selective secondary schooling is the central feature although preferences for particular schools within each group must also be considered.
1	Direct applications to schools	Parents apply to each school separately. They may apply to as many as they wish and are then encouraged to hold on to their best offer. Minimal LEA involvement.
4	Parents state preference(s)	Parents name the school(s) of their choice on LEA documentation.
4	Parents accept allocation or state preference(s)	Parents are asked to confirm the LEA allocation or to state their preference(s).

### Criteria for allocation

There were four main factors used to allocate places in the LEA schools — catchment area, siblings attending, medical or personal circumstances and distance between home and school — although the order of significance varied. Half of the LEAs stated catchment area as the primary criterion and the other five used a phrase about distance, e.g. proximity of home address to the school as the crow flies. Siblings already attending the preferred school was either first or second on the list in all ten LEAs. Medical and social factors were referred to by half of the respondents and they came either second or third in the list. One LEA had current siblings as the first criterion, with home address in relation to the preferred school and also to any other school the children **might** attend, as the second. One LEA planned a change to using distance as the main criterion for placement in primary schools in rural areas, and will probably extend this to secondary schools. Only one LEA said that siblings having **previously** attended the school would be considered (after catchment area and siblings currently there).

A single-sex school in one LEA overcame the problem of selection when it was over-subscribed as a result of first choices, by using random selection with a microcomputer (after a sibling already at the school and children in exceptional medical or social

circumstances). This method is against the guidance in the Circular on admissions (G.B. DFE, 1993a), which stated that 'decisions made by lot cannot be tested, and leave no basis for appeal. If there are a number of pupils who have an equal claim to a place on other grounds, distance from home to school is a simple time-breaker; no two pupils are likely to live exactly the same distance away.'

Although there was clearly a pattern to the criteria used to allocate places to pupils, where there were GM schools, rather different systems were evolving and there were some indications of further changes to come. In an LEA with several secondary schools, up to ten per cent of places in these schools were reserved for pupils with particular skills and aptitudes, and pupils with a close relative who had attended the school previously were given priority. In another LEA, the GM schools used siblings at school, distance and attendance at feeder primary schools as their criteria. The point was made here that the GM schools do not guarantee a place to pupils in a catchment area as the LEA schools do. Procedures for schools based on religious groupings were different in that attendance at a denominational primary school was seen as leading automatically to placement in the relevant secondary school (although in one LEA it was said that the Roman Catholic high school reserved a percentage of places for non-Catholic pupils).

Only two LEAs made arrangements to reserve any places in schools. There was general concern expressed in some of the others about the difficulties this could create. One officer described the proposal as 'very fraught indeed'. In the two where there were places held, one referred to a high school holding back five places and the other to all secondary schools retaining five per cent of their standard number or ten places.

### **Appeals**

In all but two of the LEAs, officers reported an increase in the number of appeals, although the position was very different in different parts of the country. At one extreme, one LEA had appeals being heard for eight weeks throughout June and July and needed the administrative framework to deal with approximately 200 cases taking about half an hour each. About one-quarter of the parents not offered the school they had selected were said to appeal and the steady increase in numbers was

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thought to be due to the high profile given to parents' role in transfer, although it was said to be unfortunate that what parents have a right to (to express their preference) had been presented as a **choice**. Another LEA reported a 'fairly constant' figure of between 20 and 40 appeals each year. In another there were only four appeals for LEA schools, with an increasing number being made for places at GM schools.

In one LEA the officer was reluctant to provide any figures on the appeals because he felt that they would be 'meaningless' given that the levels 'depend on the culture of appealing among a group of parents'. Elsewhere, it was generally felt that further increases could be predicted given that there was widespread publicity on parental rights and options and this would encourage people to take up the challenge. In one authority which had seen a large increase in the number of appeals from 1992 to 1993, appealing was said to 'go in cycles'. Of the 106 appeals in 1993, 89 were for three rural secondary schools and 61 of these were for one of them. There was however a general reluctance by others to see a straightforward upward curve in sight. It was explained that many factors came into play and that in some years there could be surprises that would never be properly understood.

To set these figures in a national context, data collected by the DFE (GB. DFE, 1992b and GB. DFE, 1993b) showed a slight fall in the number of appeals from 1991/92 to 1992/93. There was, however, wide variation between authorities - one reported an increase from 152 to 468 and one a fall from 1140 to 62 appeals. Of those providing complete information for both years, just over half had an increase of at least five per cent in the number of appeals, whereas about 40 per cent reported a fall of at least five per cent.

### **The role of governors**

The arrangements for allocating pupils to secondary schools was a standing agenda item at governors' meetings (at the appropriate time) in each LEA. Governors discussed admissions before the documentation for the coming year was produced so that there was an opportunity for their views to be incorporated. The governors' perspectives were summarised and if there was consensus on an issue such as a change in priorities on admissions criteria then this would be taken forward to the Education Committee. These arrangements were in line with the specific statutory functions outlined in Circular 6/93 (GB. DFE, 1993a).

### **The role of the LEA**

Clearly, the diverse arrangements made differing demands on LEA staff. Where parents applied directly to schools, the LEA's role was said to be monitoring what actually happened, acting as parents' advocate when required and strategic planning to meet children's needs in the future. In other circumstances the role of the LEA was described as a 'very active one'. In one area it was said to have 'a coordination role and a responsibility to advise parents and act as an honest broker. To conduct appeals for LEA schools and inform and advise parents about the process. To coordinate admissions between LEA and grant-maintained schools and act as arbiter'. The responses emphasised the LEAs' information-giving work rather than the bureaucratic side — they sought to offer advice and consultancy rather than just to administrate the system. In one LEA, the word counsel was used to describe contact with parents. Another comment was that the LEA was a 'clearing house' where as long as there were good relationships, everything would go smoothly. The LEA could 'sort out the logistics' and 'ensure fairness and equality to pupils' allocations'.

Despite the emphasis on the interactive elements of the work, there undoubtedly was a great deal of administration for LEAs to effect the system smoothly. The role was said in one LEA to have four parts — strategic, enabling, regulatory (explaining why a child was not offered a place) and advisory (mostly explaining the difference between preference and choice). Having outlined these four functions, it was then explained that the greatest amount of time was spent in paperwork and bureaucracy — making lists and planning and processing the preference forms.

In LEAs with GM schools, these schools had either decided to administer their own arrangements for admissions or had 'bought-in' to the LEA system, to continue in much the same way as before. Ideally, where a GM school had adopted the former approach, there would be an agreement to exchange information with the LEA about admissions during the year. The LEA, in these situations, was said to be walking a 'thin line' in that it was 'on the one hand providing a service that the GM schools want ... on the other hand [they] have been seen by our own schools to over-promote the GM', and, as one officer reported, 'I don't think there's an answer to it.' In one LEA with 12 secondary and six primary GM schools, the administration for admissions had gone

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through the LEA but was due to change, one reason being that GM schools were said to be considering retaining a proportion of their places for pupils with particular abilities or talents. In LEAs where there were no GM schools, officers emphasised that they would hope for a common system for transfer with coordinated timing, should any such schools emerge.

### **Officers' views on the current system**

The different arrangements in place for the allocation of secondary school places were seen to have a variety of advantages and disadvantages. The system where parents applied directly to schools was said by the LEA officer involved to work well, being a common system for all schools (both GM and LEA) and being simple for parents to understand and operate. One disadvantage they had anticipated in the LEA was that some parents would fail to apply to any school, but the fear was said to be unfounded. One disadvantage they had found was that there could be considerable delay in people finding out where they had been offered a place. With multiple offers of places (about 800 of 3,000 places will change hands in six months), this delay was said to be inevitable.

This seemingly straightforward system would raise considerable concern in other areas, where great emphasis was placed on the complexities of the system and the need to provide a simple procedure for all parents. Where parents named just one school, and only a second choice if that was unsuccessful, the LEA reported this as constructively simple in that it was 'nice and clear to parents'. Simplicity was the key to what these officers were aiming for. In the LEA which now listed schools (with one of the boxes next to the school names to be ticked) rather than expecting parents to write a name, it was said that this was a response to last year's confusion, caused by different types of school having different arrangements. Parents sometimes named a GM school on the LEA form, for example.

One officer admitted being 'intrigued' by LEAs where applications were made to individual schools, emphasising the concern raised in the LEA where this operated about people being disadvantaged by it. The point made was that 'not all parents are able — some can't complete a form and the Government thinks everybody can cope, but it doesn't work like that. Parents like to go to the LEA and know where to turn if they feel lost.'

Officers displayed ambivalence about the concept of **choice**, believing that it could sometimes gain an unproductive momentum of its own and go beyond what was desirable. As one officer explained: 'We're usually able to keep people within that fairly narrow community. It's becoming harder now to do that because obviously parents are more aware that they can express a choice and they're looking at other options ... partly the greener grass in a different area.' In their efforts to describe the potential difficulties caused by different types of schools and different systems for applying, officers assumed a widespread level of ignorance and, indeed, inability to learn amongst parents. In their efforts to ensure equality, they sometimes seemed to assume that parents **could not** come to understand the system. In an LEA with a selective system and GM schools, the officer commented, for example, that now the system was more complex and 'far more complicated for parents to understand ... many parents just won't know which way to go. They won't understand what a GM school is or understand the nuance of that.'

The emphases in the LEAs' responses were on the need for coordination and a system of checks and balances in all areas to ensure that parents were not disadvantaged by a complex system (particularly where there were GM schools). The belief expressed was that coordination was necessary if the system was to work for the benefit of parents and children. All the best laid plans would be meaningless if there were different systems with different rules operated by individual schools. The difficulties that this could lead to were confusion for parents and the loss of an overview by the LEAs. As one officer suggested, parents may 'hold on to more than one offer and the LEA and school may be unaware of this. As children now mean money, the problem is becoming more acute.'

In an LEA where preference forms were no longer sent to the authority, but were sent on to secondary schools by the primary headteachers, the latter were asked to complete a pro forma identifying each child and their first and second choice to ensure that every child was covered. From the LEA perspective, 'to have six or seven [pupils] fall through the net would be a disaster'. When GM schools were considered the aim was to maintain this coordination as much as possible so that good relationships were formed and close working relationships ensured as effortless a transfer system as possible.

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More fundamentally there was a need, as one officer explained it, 'to balance parental preference with common sense'. Several officers referred to potential difficulties, one example being whether you would hold a place at an over-subscribed local school for a pupil who lived next door but whose parents had expressed a preference for a school eight miles away. As one officer explained, 'If they don't get their first choice do you say "Tough, you should not have applied"', because if you save a place you are giving them two first choices. It is not enough to have an intellectually pleasing system. It has got to fit in practice.' Clearly, the LEA was seen as best placed to offer an overview, and the belief was that it was still seen as the place to go when there were problems. As one LEA officer explained: 'Parents still want to know why there was no place for them, even if it was a GM school.' Another explained that 'someone is looking after them [the parents] if it is handled centrally'. If there is flexibility in the standard number a school is prepared to admit (some schools 'taking risks' because they know some pupils will not take up places), then parents will understandably be confused and will seek an explanation.

### **Points arising**

- Some procedures patronised parents and assumed that they had a limited capacity for becoming informed, rather than seeking to involve them in a system that was comprehensive and informative.
- There is a need for checks and balances to ensure that all parents take part and have their wishes represented. A CERI Report (1994) recommended intervention to ensure that 'educationally underserved' groups are able to benefit fully where choices are made, the point being that 'creating the possibility is not enough'.
- The importance of clear, accessible information for parents that provides a basis for them to make informed decisions was evident.
- There is a need to recognise the very different circumstances that pertain in different areas (sometimes within the same LEA) and to acknowledge that no one solution will apply across the board.
- It is noteworthy that catchment area was the first criterion used in the allocation of secondary school places in half the LEAs.



- It is crucial to have a system for the coordination of admissions arrangements with a structure and timetable, particularly when GM schools are involved.
- The climate is changing and there needs to be clarification of what 'preference' and 'choice' mean and what parents' decisions are based on.
- There are philosophical problems raised here — about access to choice, the meaning of choice and how to reconcile the 'winners' and 'losers'— which could be clarified by further debate and analysis. There are no easy answers to what, for many people, is not an issue of sustained concern and yet for others is a key determinant of their level of satisfaction with the education service they receive.
- What may appear to be a very open system maximising real choice may simply not be a realistic approach in some places. There are inevitably advantages and disadvantages to each system, and care needs to be taken in developing the optimum approaches, given that circumstances vary so much.
- The terms in which 'choices' are presented will make a significant difference and a range of options were addressed here. A broader context was set by a CERI report (1994), which explained that in Sweden schools are allocated and there is a system for choosing a different one if preferred whereas in New Zealand there is no steering towards a particular school.

## Chapter 3

### Primary School Headteachers' Involvement in Transfer

#### The primary headteachers' pro forma

A pro forma was sent to the headteacher in the 100 primary schools selected. The sampling here sought reasonably self-contained districts with several secondary schools and their associated feeder primary schools. The pro forma asked about headteachers' involvement with parents in relation to secondary school transfer and for their views on the current system in their area. The accompanying letter sought their assistance in distributing a questionnaire to parents of pupils in Year 6 (via pupil post) and they were asked to state the number of pupils in Year 6 in their school (or the number in one class if they had more than one class). The response to the pro forma is shown in Table 2.

**TABLE 2: RESPONSE TO THE PRO FORMA**

Returning pro forma	79
Unable to take part	14
No response	7
Total	100

#### Assistance to parents

When asked what assistance they or their colleagues gave to parents who were in the process of selecting a secondary school, the majority of headteachers said that they handed out information and/or prospectuses. The emphasis in their comments was on local provision and only one specifically referred to information on schools outside the authority. More than half of the headteachers said that they (or one of their senior colleagues) were available to parents and willing to talk about the transition to secondary school. Just over one-quarter said that they held meetings to inform parents (sometimes stating that headteachers from local secondary schools would also attend these).

Other assistance given included appraisal of the child at parents' evenings (presumably in terms of academic potential, in an authority with selection); writing letters of support for families experiencing difficulty in obtaining a place at the school of their choice; publicising open evenings at the secondary schools and encouraging parents to visit; and arranging for children in their top year to spend time in local secondary schools. Clearly, most of what was reported related to the passing on of information and the **opportunity** for further discussion if required. A major concern was that some families would be disadvantaged in that they were unfamiliar with the formal, sometimes complex, and potentially misleading, system they faced. There were a few references to providing practical help for parents who may have found the procedures somewhat daunting. One headteacher explained that 'one teacher focuses on this area and follows-up families who do not return forms, visits homes and takes parents to the schools for interviews where necessary'.

What was clear from these headteachers' responses was that there was great diversity among the ten LEAs involved. For some primary headteachers there was relatively little to do in the sense that most of their pupils went on to one (or possibly two) local schools and the only expectation of them was to keep that predictable process going — perhaps by handing out brochures or hosting an evening meeting. In other circumstances there was little primary schools could do because a pattern of choice was well established and there appeared to be little room for change. As one headteacher explained 'two-thirds of the pupils go to a secondary school in the neighbouring authority. We have never actively encouraged this school [as a choice] (because of loyalty to the LEA) but parents prefer it.'

In other situations there was, potentially, a large-scale coordinating and information-giving exercise for schools to engage in. Where there were several secondary schools for parents to consider, this obviously meant that more information and meetings were required and that parents were more likely to have queries and concerns. Indeed, the sheer complexity could reduce the input primary schools could have. As one headteacher explained, 'in this area secondary schools have their own arrangements, and due to the complex nature of the system, primary schools can do little other than pass on any information as and when it appears. It is very much a parental choice situation and most primary schools feed several secondary schools.'

### Views on the current arrangements

As stated, the diversity across the LEAs was striking. Indeed, **within** the same LEA very different responses emerged, reflecting local differences in options for choice. Headteachers' comments from the **same** authority illustrated this point. One said he felt that the 'appeals process in the Borough is fair but I do not know much about its workings. Every child from our catchment area goes to the school they request on the Secondary School Choice Form.' Another lamented: 'Too many appeals, too protracted'; and a third complained of a widespread 'lack of understanding *re* criteria for places when schools are over-subscribed. The LEA look to the first choice and often parents are unable to get their first choice and lose their second choice also because places there are filled by others making that school their first choice.'

As was to be expected, what headteachers felt about the workings of the present system reflected the extent to which an active choice of school was an issue in their area. Where it was, they were more likely to refer to difficulties or complexities. Where the situation was very straightforward, headteachers were unlikely to have strong views on these issues. The latter group included the headteacher who reported that 'we have 97 per cent of our children opting for, and attending, the local secondary school, which is high on everybody's choice list' and the one who commented on the local secondary school's excellent reputation, and the fact that it was many people's first choice in the area. The primary school staff were said to be 'fortunate' in that 'when parents discover that staff at this school send their children to the local secondary school we find that we do not need to give them any assistance save to reassure them that, despite the size, their children will be well cared for'.

Where headteachers identified concerns about choice, these focused on parents' difficulties in understanding and finding a way through the arrangements. There was very little comment on the principles of choice and whether the current arrangements were right in their general approach. Most focused on the practicalities, although there was one headteacher who commented that choice was a 'good thing', and another who said that the 'zone' system previously in operation had seemed to work well and allowed for a small number of pupils going outside 'their' zone without the current levels of 'marketing'.

Headteachers' responses reflected the very different situations they were working in. Some distinguishing features were not easily overcome — rural areas where the need for transport gave a new perspective on choice and well-established 'popular' schools that drew students in high numbers were examples. As one headteacher explained: 'The local high school is a popular choice. Their limit on pupil numbers [intake] is too low. Therefore it would appear many parents who would like their children to transfer to the school have to go through an appeals procedure. There is no true parental choice.' What also came through from these comments was the point that where parents were making a considered choice, weighing up the options (certainly not the case in some of these LEAs), the system for effecting this needed to be simple and had to be seen to be equitable. Parents need to understand how the procedures work and what their role is and support structures are needed to ensure that parents (and of course the main players in all this, the students) are not disadvantaged. Any delay in completing the preference forms could result in the loss of a place at the school chosen. Headteachers wanted some checks and balances to ensure equity. As one explained: 'There is now no way that primary schools know for certain whether parents have submitted their application forms. Until two years ago all forms came back to the primary school. In socially deprived areas this is a problem.'

### Points arising

- The headteachers reported uncertainty for parents if too many options were offered, which suggests a need for more concerted efforts to involve parents. The point about taking care not to patronise parents was raised here again.
- There is undoubtedly some confusion where GM schools are working within LEA procedures, and there is a need to provide as much information as possible.
- There were problems with the criteria for allocating places — sometimes these were too 'woolly'.
- Headteachers were uneasy where parents sought staffs' views on which school was 'best' and needed to be clear about, and to explain, what their role was.
- Headteachers were anxious about the 'administrative

### 3. PRIMARY SCHOOL HEADTEACHERS' INVOLVEMENT

nightmare' of parents applying to several schools and there being no central administration monitoring this. From their perspective, there had to be some way of ensuring that all parents were involved and that there were no abuses of the system.

- There were concerns about the lengthy appeals procedures.
- In terms of equality of access, headteachers were concerned where parents applied directly to GM schools and had another LEA first choice. This gave parents choice but was complex to administer.
- In some areas geographical boundaries meant being on the border of three LEAs (and potentially having GM schools) — a situation which caused confusion for parents and, again, called for strong structures of information and support.
- The limitations of an LEA only allowing one choice on the form were raised — a system which was very restrictive if parents' preferences were to be taken seriously.
- The concerns identified in the literature about choice becoming the preserve of the influential/mobile were reinforced here .
- Headteachers were disappointed that some traditional patterns of attending local schools had been broken, with some pupils now unable to obtain a local place.

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## Chapter 4

### Secondary School Headteachers' and Governors' Views

As stated, the various arrangements for administering transfer to secondary school in the ten selected LEAs fell into four main types. Four LEAs were selected, one to represent each type — selection by the 11-plus, parents applying directly to individual schools, parents naming a school(s) and parents responding to the LEA's school allocation. In each of these four LEAs, the officer who had previously been interviewed was asked to suggest two headteachers who could be invited to discuss the issues around secondary transfer in their area. In each case the chair of governors was also interviewed. Where appropriate, officers were asked to include GM schools in their selection.

Of the eight schools, six were comprehensives, one a grammar school and one a high school. Four were GM schools. Those interviewed were well established in their posts. Apart from one headteacher who had only served two terms at his present school, all the others had been in post for at least four years (with two having been there for 13 years). Similarly, apart from one governor with one year's experience, and another with four, the others had held their positions for at least five years; indeed two had been governors for more than 20 years (eight and 16 years respectively as chairs).

The interviews covered :

- respondents' background in the school
- the history of admissions and appeals
- the local situation - other schools, competition
- contact with primary schools (headteachers' interviews only)
- the role of governors
- contact with the LEA
- the position with regard to active 'choice' by parents for their school.



### History of admissions

For five of the eight schools, the position was one of a steady growth in the number of pupils admitted. Only one of these five had a significant number of appeals from parents in the current year (34, of which seven resulted in a place at the school). This was a school that had increased in popularity to the extent that over 100 applicants had not been awarded a place over the last two years. The headteacher believed that the transition from being a school for 11-plus 'failures' to a comprehensive school had made a considerable difference to the applications. The school became GM in 1993. The headteacher felt that prospective parents whose children were not given a place were very disappointed — the Parent's Charter (GB. DES, 1991) had made them much more aware of their rights and had raised expectations. The intake had risen from 150 in 1989 to 200 in the current year, and as plans to increase accommodation had been thwarted, this number could not increase, meaning that parents' choices could not be honoured. The headteacher's view was that without central resourcing for extra accommodation 'the whole business of parental choice is rather a mockery'. The proposed building of more than 300 new houses in the vicinity of the school was predicted to aggravate the problem.

In another three of these schools, there were more school places than pupils available to fill them, although the reasons for this and the implications varied. In one rural area, a decrease over several years from a roll of 1100 to one of 740 was because of a falling population. Schools in the area actively discouraged 'competition' amongst themselves and all sought to retain catchment areas. The headteacher of this school felt that, apart from a few pupils who transferred to the private sector, most of those from the established area feeding the school sought a place there. The situation was more problematic for the school which the headteacher said had an unrealistic catchment area. This had not been modified in 1971 when the area had changed from a selective to a comprehensive system of secondary education and this school had been left with a small area resulting in a shortfall of between 40 and 60 pupils each year. All the secondary schools in the area were now GM, which this headteacher felt resulted in 'very unfortunate competition'.

The situation in the last of the five schools illustrated the complexities that can arise. In this area there were four secondary schools served by the LEA and the remaining ten were GM.

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There was currently shared responsibility between the LEA and the GM schools' funding agency to allocate places (although if one more school became GM the LEA would no longer be involved). The school was established as a result of an amalgamation, and in the build up to that merger, recruitment was poor as parents reacted to the uncertain future. When the first year's intake was being organised, parents were still uncertain and one of the traditional feeder primary schools decided to avoid sending pupils to the school. For 1992, continuing building work was said by the headteacher to have made the school look 'a mess' so that it was a challenge to recruit 173 pupils.

The following year the school was asked by the LEA to plan to take 210 pupils. Extra numbers of staff were recruited accordingly. However, there were many successful appeals to other schools in the area, resulting in only these 173 pupils for the school, which meant staff redundancies. The school was seen as an institution without a clear focus and the headteacher believed that the widespread move to GM status had exacerbated the problem — parents felt that these were somehow 'better' schools. She reported that at the end of the school year there were 29 pupils in the area without a secondary school place (one family having appealed to three GM schools and finally being offered an out-of-borough place). Some parents were reported to be appealing to the Secretary of State on the grounds that their choice was limited because an estimated 500 out-of-borough pupils were taking secondary school places.

##### **The local context for admissions**

When headteachers and governors were asked about the local situation and which other schools were realistic options for pupils, a very mixed picture emerged. In the school referred to above with the complex history, it was said that the 'kudos' GM schools seemed to have attracted many parents, some of whom would have preferred the private sector. This school was seeking to build a positive reputation as a fully comprehensive school, meeting the needs of pupils across the ability range. They would never compare favourably in terms of examination results, with other schools drawing from more advantaged areas, but needed to promote the strengths they did have. The governor here made the point that although in theory parents had an enormous choice (in a system where applications were made directly to a school), in practice the choice was less than ever and it was difficult to

obtain a place at a preferred school unless a sibling was already there. There were rising rolls across the borough and more out-of-borough pupils coming, so that many parents were 'struggling' to find a place in the school of their choice. She believed that even up to the autumn term some parents were holding several places for their children, whereas others had none, leading to confusion all round.

Elsewhere, a headteacher reported little recruitment from outside the catchment area to the school. Pupils choosing that school would have a difficult journey, passing another secondary school on the way. Despite feeling that too much competition could prove unethical, the headteacher had sought advice from marketing consultants (who had influenced the school brochure), and it was hoped that the change to single-sex classes would prove attractive to parents. In this situation, the aim was to ensure that the school's strengths were publicised, whilst acknowledging that it was only possible to make so much progress in attracting pupils when other schools were more accessible and traditional catchment areas were adhered to unless there was good reason to do otherwise. Yet another situation, reported in two schools from the same LEA (where there were no GM secondary schools), was of the active discouragement of competition amongst schools. The headteachers collaborated and told parents that all the available schools were of a high standard and that catchment areas should be noted, unless there was a strong case to do otherwise.

In an area with selective education there were no concerns about recruitment for the school that had changed its image from one of a place for 'failures' to that of a truly comprehensive school. The headteacher said that it was the most popular choice amongst the GM schools. Since becoming GM, the three geographical zones for admitting pupils had been abolished and the school now admitted the nearest 200 pupils. The headteacher believed that the well-established teaching staff, good examination results and strong extra-curricular activities ensured the school's popularity. The importance of a school's reputation was clear in this situation, as it was in the case of one grammar school whose prestige the governor believed was based on the reputation of the two schools from which it had been formed. This reputation was something that could be built on to good effect. In an area where all the secondary schools had become GM and now managed their own admissions, a change in marketing was identified. There was

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more effort to attract parents and one headteacher outlined the extra events that were now run to inform them about the school.

##### **Contact with primary schools**

All eight schools were reported to have links with the primary schools they drew pupils from, although these varied in their form and comprehensiveness. Even in the LEA where there was explicit cooperation amongst headteachers, there were visits for pupils to 'confirm this as the place to come' and meetings in primary schools where the headteacher sought to influence parents 'on the margins'. In one situation, with more than 20 primary schools to consider, the head of lower school was said to visit each during the summer term, after which pupils were invited to an induction day. Curriculum links had proved too difficult to establish. In another area much the same pattern had been established, although here there had been joint in-service work to look at progression as children moved between schools. Another school said there were four meetings for parents prior to new children coming and although they did not want to do a 'hard-sell' they did want to make sure there was plenty of good information available to parents. They did not wish to 'take' from other schools, but to retain pupils from their traditional areas. Another school followed a similar pattern, but the headteacher stressed the curricular links. A newly created coordinator's post would focus on ensuring continuity for pupils. One note of discord was struck by the headteacher who said that he had offered to talk at a parents' evening in the 32 primary schools from which his pupils were drawn, but only four had taken this up.

##### **The governing body**

The governors were generally said to have to make decisions that had an impact on how the school would be perceived, although the extent to which this was a debate or an expression of support for the headteacher varied, influenced, of course, by the varying responsibilities of governors in different types of schools. One headteacher felt that governors were very supportive, but said that they did not have a 'high profile' although they were kept fully informed. In one school, governors were said to be debating whether to have six- or seven- form entry, whether to pursue GM status and whether to offer specialist achievements in such areas as music or drama as an entry priority. The governor here said that the most important decision the governors made was the number of pupils to be admitted each year. As stated previously,

they had accepted the LEA's request to expand, and this had led to redundancies. This year they had refused to take an extra form. More usually, the governors' role was described as monitoring progress, rather than initiating or rejecting changes. In one school, for example, they were reported to be considering why there might have been decreases in the number of pupils coming in, and to be trying to remedy any shortfalls.

In the LEA where parents applied directly to schools, the GM schools had a combined admissions policy, which meant they informed each other of acceptances from pupils. There was a governors' admissions panel, which monitored all the admissions, and in this fluid situation there were some key decisions to make. Schools had the option of staying as a local over-subscribed small school or becoming a (potentially) under-subscribed large school. A more active decision-making role for governors was described in these circumstances. One maintained school in another LEA had an admissions sub-committee which dealt with applications and checked that admissions criteria were adhered to. All such committees had parent governor representation and membership debarred governors from serving on the appeals committee.

### **The role of the LEA**

Where schools were GM, they had a range of options regarding contact with the LEA. In one area the LEA acted as a clearing house to ensure that no pupil was left without a place and that parents were not holding more than one place. They prepared a list of all children of transfer age, and schools were able to buy the relevant section for their area. Contact did not extend beyond this and admissions committees in the schools administered the process. One headteacher in this area said that he was very pleased to date with how this was working, although he acknowledged the far greater responsibility placed on the chair of governors. In another area the GM schools' clearing house was said to be working well. They had common dates for letters offering places and deadlines for acceptance. Towards the end of the summer term, the LEA sent out to all schools a list of pupils who were still without a secondary place, thereby maintaining a check on the system. During this term all the headteachers met with the LEA officer to discuss any difficulties, and the headteacher who described this procedure emphasised the importance of the good working relationships among headteachers and between them and the LEA. In another area the GM schools had bought

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into the LEA's personnel package for two years so that they could draw on their expertise. Things had gone smoothly to date. Here the LEA had retained the function of administering the admissions forms.

Where schools were served by the LEA, the procedures were said to run smoothly and no problems were identified. The monitoring overview that the LEA provided was taken for granted and working relationships were described as constructive. The main issue to arise on the contact with the LEA was the extent to which GM schools wished to, or needed to, liaise with staff in the authority.

##### **The situation regarding choice**

The area where parents applied directly to individual schools was said, by one headteacher, to illustrate some of the implications of opening up choice. The point, she felt, was that this was a relatively prosperous middle-class area and caution would be needed if such a system were used in other areas. Already, there were parents who had 'learnt their way round the system' and were 'very vocal in their demands'. There had been instances of false addresses being given and one child's aunt had been made her legal guardian because she lived close to the desired school. The placement of out-of-borough children in this area had created a potentially very frustrating situation, adding to what was already a complex scenario. The governor here felt that 'parents are now more aware of their right to choose but many feel bitter because it seems impossible to obtain their choice in practice'. It was difficult to generalise about what parents were seeking to achieve. This was illustrated in the school where the headteacher said that 'parents are keen to see every school and are making informed choices' and the governor felt that 'the majority of parents accept the local school, but there is an active minority who look at all schools and make an active choice'.

In the schools where headteachers actively sought to diminish competition, one of the governors felt that most parents were content for their child to move to the local school and that it was only a small minority who visited two or three schools before making a decision. He felt there was 'brand loyalty' and parents only looked elsewhere if they had a particular concern. The headteacher here agreed that making a choice would be an inappropriate way to describe what most parents did. He felt that

if something was 'free and convenient', there would always be some people who would automatically feel that they didn't want it. There was an excellent primary school in their village, he said, but there were always a few people who went to one which was inconvenient and these were probably the people who chose a different secondary school. Transport was a real issue in this rural area, because there were long journeys for those not attending their local school, although the headteachers believed, in principle, in promoting all the schools as providing a good service.

Where parents were said to be making an active choice, it was agreed to be very frustrating for them to be told that the school of their choice was full. As one headteacher explained, 'it means that after all their hard work they have no real choice'. When asked directly about choice, headteachers and governors emphasised the value there was for parents in attending open evenings in secondary schools and visiting the school during the day, but there was also a recognition that, in practice, choice was limited, even for those who wished to exercise it. One governor explained that there was no such thing as parental choice. He felt that 'parents can indicate a preference but they do not have ultimate choice. This would only happen if all schools were under-subscribed. Parental choice is an illusion, it's only their preference indicator, not their right.' As another headteacher explained, there was spare capacity in this area so there was 'real choice' although as schools became fuller in future parents would find it more difficult.

**Points arising:**

- There are many factors, often beyond the influence of staff, that determine the number of applications for places schools receive — local reputation being one obvious example.
- The concept of choice had resulted in disappointment for some parents who had interpreted the word literally.
- There were very different views on how schools should collaborate or compete.
- Policies to promote some schools at the expense of others may disadvantage those catering very successfully for less able pupils, as they may not be seen as 'good' schools if the emphasis is on outcomes, rather than the process of education they offer.

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As the CERI report (1994) explained, 'schools in more affluent areas are usually considered more desirable than those in poorer areas', a situation that is self-perpetuating in that 'schools that are more popular in a choice system get more resources and therefore tend to improve, while less chosen ones deteriorate'.

- There were concerns about the 'kudos' GM schools could attain which would disadvantage, unfairly, comparable LEA schools.
- There were well-established links with primary schools to facilitate a smooth transition.
- In some instances governors played a central role in the admissions and appeals procedures, obviously dictated by the type of school they governed.
- The need for an overall checking system where there were separate arrangements for GM schools was clear.
- There was evidence that the relevant guidance documents and legislation had not always been read or understood by those involved. Some guidance (e.g. that in Circular 6/93 (GB, DFE, 1993a) on the need to record in school prospectuses the number of applications in the previous year) had not always been acted upon. Some concerns expressed were a result of this lack of awareness of the current position, suggesting that further attempts to disseminate accessible information would be of value.



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## Chapter 5

### The Parents' Perspective

There were three versions of the questionnaire for parents relating to the different transfer procedures in the ten LEAs. Version 1 was for six LEAs where the vast majority of parents would be using non-selective schools, version 2 was for three LEAs where selective schools were an option and version 3 for the one LEA with selective secondary schools, allocated on the results of the 11+ examination. A distinction is made between groups (versions) 1, 2 and 3 in the text, where appropriate.

The parents' questionnaire covered:

- the name of the preferred school for the child
- factors that influenced their views on a school
- who chose the school(s)
- what the pupils wanted from a school
- contact with secondary school(s)
- sources of information and advice
- level of satisfaction with procedures
- contact details.

The questionnaires were distributed via primary schools and response was entirely voluntary. In total, 79 primary schools in ten LEAs agreed to take part. Children in top junior classes were given a questionnaire to take home which, when completed, was returned directly to the NFER.

In all, 2192 questionnaires were dispatched and 990 returned. This represents an overall response rate of 45 per cent which, as Table 3 shows, was similar across all three groups.

**TABLE 3: RESPONSE TO THE PARENTS' QUESTIONNAIRE**

	No. of LEAs	No. of schools	Questionnaires sent	Questionnaires returned	Response rate %
Version 1	6	44	1197	552	46
Version 2	3	26	726	326	44
Version 3	1	9	269	112	42
<b>Total</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>79</b>	<b>2192</b>	<b>990</b>	<b>45</b>

The sample of parent respondents was almost equally divided between those with male and female children (50 and 49 per cent respectively). A few omitted to specify.

**Which school features attracted parents?**

In order to identify the characteristics of secondary schools which parents found most attractive or important, the questionnaire offered a number of statements, most describing positive school features. Parents were invited to respond to each on a five-point scale ranging from 'strongly agree' through 'not sure' to 'strongly disagree'.

**TABLE 4: CHOOSING A SECONDARY SCHOOL — PERCENTAGES OF PARENTS AGREEING OR DISAGREEING WITH EACH STATEMENT**

I would like my child to go to a school:	Strongly agree %	Agree %	Not sure %	Disagree %	Strongly disagree %
• with good learning facilities	91	8			
• with a caring environment	80	20			
• that is well managed	78	22			
• with a good local reputation	74	24			
• with a strong policy on discipline	71	26	2		
• with a support system for children with learning difficulties	64	30	3	1	
• with a uniform	59	32	4	2	1
• with a sixth form	53	30	12	2	1

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I would like my child to go to a school:	Strongly agree %	Agree %	Not sure %	Disagree %	Strongly disagree %
• that is near home	40	44	8	6	
• with a range of out-of-school activities	37	56	6	1	
• with links with child's primary school	25	37	20	15	1
• with a reputation for success in competitive sport	18	54	19	8	
• with a reputation for success in music	16	52	24	7	1
• that is grant maintained	14	25	45	8	5
• with a reputation for success in drama	12	52	27	7	1
• *which is single sex	6	11	12	47	19
(Daughters)	9	13	12	47	15
(Sons)	3	10	11	48	23

(Where percentages do not add up to 100, it is because data were missing.)

\*This factor was linked to whether the parents were answering in relation to a son or daughter. Where it was a son, 13 per cent of parents either agreed or strongly agreed with a single-sex placement and the figure where daughters were considered was 22 per cent. The figures for strong disagreement followed this pattern (23 and 15 per cent respectively). These differences reached statistical significance.

There was very widespread agreement among respondents across the whole sample (with over 90 per cent agreeing or strongly agreeing) that the school of their choice should:

- have a caring environment
- be well managed

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- have good learning facilities
- have a good local reputation
- have a strong policy on discipline
- have a support system for children with learning difficulties
- offer a range of out-of-school activities, such as sports and clubs
- have a school uniform.

Only on the last of these features was there any significant difference between the groups' responses. More Group 2 parents (64 per cent) **strongly agreed** on the importance of a school uniform than did parents in either Group 1 (47 per cent) or Group 3 (51 per cent).

Most parents (84 per cent) also felt it important that their chosen secondary school be situated near to their home. The existence of a sixth form in a secondary school was considered a valuable asset by 83 per cent of the sample, most especially to those in Group 2 (of whom 92 per cent agreed or strongly agreed). These findings equated with Coldron and Boulton's (1991) work on 'happiness'. They reported that parents' reasons for choice had the security of their child very much in mind, with the emphasis falling on being with friends, having a safe and disciplined environment, caring teachers and proximity to home. As they concluded, 'it is important that schools and LEAs, in their increasing concern with marketing and concepts of school image, avoid a total preoccupation with academic standards. There is clear evidence of other equally important factors coming into play.'

Asked to indicate how significant a school's reputation for success in competitive sport, or music and or drama was to them, parents across the groups gave similar responses. Around two-thirds (72 per cent, 68 per cent and 64 per cent respectively) regarded these as attractive features. Eight per cent or less of the sample disagreed on the importance of a school's reputation in these areas: the rest were not sure.

Given the importance generally attached to continuity and progression in children's educational experiences, it was perhaps surprising that only just over half of the parents in Groups 2 and 3 (54 per cent in each case) agreed or strongly agreed that it was important to them to choose a secondary school with established

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links with their child's primary school. The proportion of parents regarding such links as desirable rose to over two-thirds (69 per cent) in Group 1. While only 16 per cent of all respondents disagreed about the importance of primary school links, 20 per cent were not sure it mattered.

There were two issues which did **not** elicit majority agreement from parents:

- Well under a half (39 per cent) felt it important that their child transfer to a GM school, while almost half (45 per cent) were 'not sure'.
- Only 17 per cent favoured single-sex education at secondary stage, the largest proportion of these (24 per cent) being in Group 2. Almost three-quarters (72 per cent) of Group 1 parents disagreed with single-sex education at secondary stage.

### What influence did children's views have?

Parents were also asked to consider three issues relating to the child's social world and his/her preferences.

**TABLE 5: INFLUENCE ON PUPILS**

It is important to me:	Strongly agree %	Agree %	Not sure %	Disagree %	Strongly disagree %
• to take my child's preference into account when choosing	40	50	6	3	
• that children from the same family attend the same school	39	37	12	10	
• that my child should go to a school where his/her friends are going	19	43	18	17	2

*Where percentages do not add up to 100, it is because data are missing*

### Table 5 shows that:

- The vast majority (90 per cent) agreed that it was important to take the child's preference into account when choosing a secondary school.

- More than three-quarters (76 per cent) also considered it advantageous that children from the same family should attend the same school. This proportion rose to 82 per cent for parents in Group 1.
- About three-fifths of all parents (62 per cent) agreed on the importance of pupils attending the same school as their friends. However, almost a fifth of parents (19 per cent), more of them in Groups 2 and 3, disagreed that this was important.

#### **What other factors influenced school choice?**

In addition to the school features listed on the questionnaire, a quarter of parents volunteered other considerations (sometimes more than one) which had influenced their choice of secondary school. These included (in order of the frequency with which they were mentioned):

- examination results or known academic success
- school philosophy and/or policy
- religious denomination
- recommendations of others
- motivation, attitude, enthusiasm of staff
- current pupils' attitudes, behaviour and progress
- school and/or class size, i.e. not too large
- accessibility of transport to school
- good racial/cultural mix
- the fact that the school was comprehensive
- existence of a PTA
- good pastoral care
- parents had attended same school
- nice environment
- existing community links.

#### **What mattered most to prospective pupils?**

Parents were asked to suggest what mattered most to their child when it came to secondary school selection. The three most

popular responses were that:

- the school was friendly, had a happy atmosphere, was caring (35 per cent)
- their friends were going there/were there already (31 per cent)
- the school had high standards of education, good exam results, good learning environment (28 per cent).

Other considerations thought to be important to children included:

- quality of staff, i.e. enthusiastic
- the fact that the school was local
- good facilities and amenities
- a school where they could make friends/get on with other children/fit in
- good discipline policy/no bullying
- a school with a good reputation
- sporting activities
- a school where the child felt s/he could cope with the work
- familiar surroundings.

### **Making the decision**

In all three groups, the decision about which secondary school to choose or apply for had most commonly been made jointly by parents and children (69 per cent). Just over a fifth of parents (22 per cent) reported that they had been the major decision makers, with only small proportions reporting either that their child's preference had been the most important factor (four per cent) or that they did not really make a choice (five per cent). These figures reflected those of Thomas and Dennison (1991), who found that children themselves had the biggest say in selecting a secondary school, suggesting that the focus on parental views needs some reinterpretation.

### **What types of contact did parents have with secondary schools?**

Respondents were asked to indicate the nature of any contact they had had with the schools from which they were selecting. Of the total sample:



- 90 per cent had been to a secondary school open day or evening
- under half (43 per cent) had made other visits to the school
- a fifth (21 per cent) had attended a meeting at their child's primary school where secondary school staff were present
- Ten per cent already had a child in the secondary school of their choice
- a small number (four per cent in each case) had either attended events (e.g. shows, PTA meetings) at the secondary school or had spoken with staff, parents or pupils there
- a handful of parents had personal experience of a school: they had attended themselves or had worked there.

Some parents had, of course, had more than one type of contact.

#### **How did parents rate the contact they had?**

While 64 per cent of the parents were satisfied with the amount of contact they had had with prospective secondary schools, this left 30 per cent of respondents feeling that they would have welcomed more. When asked to describe what form of contact they would have liked, respondents made a number of concrete suggestions including:

- more opportunities for visits for parents / more open evenings or assemblies (seven per cent)
- more opportunities for prospective pupils to have contact with the secondary school (five per cent)
- working visits during school hours (four per cent)
- more opportunities for personal contact with the secondary school (four per cent)
- more information about the workings of the schools (three per cent)
- opportunities for secondary school pupils to come to the primary schools (three per cent).

#### **How many schools did parents visit?**

Parents had either visited one school (34 per cent) or two (27 per cent). A further 20 per cent had visited three or more, many more of them from Group 2 (28 per cent) and Group 3 (34 per cent).

Group 1 parents were more likely to have visited one school or none or to have omitted to respond to this question.

While very few of the total sample (three per cent) claimed to have made no school visits, as many as 19 per cent did not respond to this question. This last figure is confusing given that in answer to another question, 90 per cent said they had attended an open evening or day. Perhaps an open evening and a visit were seen as different by some parents.

### **Information**

Parents were asked to say what information and advice they had received to help them choose a secondary school and from which source — primary school, secondary school, local education authority or elsewhere. (As respondents were not asked to tick boxes in this question, the data only include those that volunteered. Parents could of course have received information from several sources.)

#### **...from their child's primary school**

The most frequently cited types of information received from (or via) the primary school were written documents: leaflets, booklets, information packs, letters, application forms and school lists. These were mentioned by almost half the sample (49 per cent).

A smaller proportion of parents (22 per cent) had received some kind of verbal advice or information through talks or meetings with or organised by primary school staff.

A handful of parents said their children had visited the secondary school on an outing arranged by the primary school or that secondary school staff had visited primary classes.

As many as 12 per cent of parents actually said they had received nothing from their child's primary school, while another 26 per cent did not respond to the question, suggesting perhaps that they too felt they received no information from this source.

#### **...from the secondary schools from which they were selecting**

Parents most often (45 per cent) cited prospectuses, school booklets and/or leaflets as the information most commonly received from secondary schools. Some (12 per cent) had also

received additional information such as lists of exam results and other school achievements.

Seven per cent had had no information or advice from the secondary schools. Almost a third (30 per cent) made no response to this question, implying perhaps that they received their information from elsewhere.

Only a tiny number of parents (three per cent) mentioned meetings and/or tours, other than on open days, with secondary school staff.

**...from the local education authority (LEA)**

Almost half of the sample (47 per cent) did not respond to this question. A further 14 per cent had received no information directly from this source. The rest cited brochures, leaflets and information packages as coming from the LEA. A very few from each group also mentioned lists of schools, letters or open evening information.

**...from friends, acquaintances who already had children in the schools**

Under a third of parents (30 per cent) detailed any information they had received from other parents or acquaintances. This took the form mainly of recommendation or opinion or specific information about logistics, e.g. transport arrangements or homework policies.

**Which source of information and advice was the most useful?**

From the range of sources of information and advice on which parents had drawn, respondents were asked to select one as being the most useful in helping them to reach a decision. For all three groups, the secondary school itself had been the most useful source (46 per cent).

There were, however, differences in emphasis between the responses of parents in the different groups. Parents in Groups 2 and 3 were especially likely to have benefited from information and advice received from the chosen secondary school (53 per cent and 55 per cent respectively), while more in Group 1 (20 per cent) were likely to have found that offered by sources other than the schools and the LEA useful.

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Asked whether they would have appreciated any other kind of information and advice to assist them in reaching a decision, most (70 per cent) thought not and were satisfied with what had been made available to them. Seventeen per cent thought otherwise, and the rest did not respond.

Those who volunteered a comment on the nature of the help they **had** received in choosing a school (15 per cent) mostly felt they either wanted more, broader and/or earlier information and advice or more on specific issues, including: selection procedures (where applicable); GM status; appeals procedures; schools' policy, philosophy or results; and staff expertise and experience. A few parents simply wanted more opportunities for contact.

### **The application procedures**

Most parents were satisfied (67 per cent) or very satisfied (18 per cent) with the procedures for applying to secondary school. There were no significant differences between groups.

Those who chose to comment further on their choice of school and/or application procedures tended to be those who were critical. They most commonly mentioned the following factors:

- more choice within the LEA would be desirable (seven per cent overall, mainly from Groups 1 and 2)
- applications procedures should be quicker (three per cent).

Very few expressed other concerns, such as questions about GM status, 11+ selection (especially Group 3), and the opportunity for choosing outside their LEA.

Although most parents were generally satisfied with the position, examples of concern included:

- 'Parental choice is a myth. Good schools are often oversubscribed.'
- 'The application procedure is a complete farce. It is unfair to entice children to view schools across the borough and end up with some children bitterly disappointed. It is ridiculous that some children in this borough are deemed to live outside every school's catchment area.'
- 'If there is no guarantee of selection other than the designated school, what is the point of choice? There is no real choice.'

- 'GM schools select a certain type of child, but what about the others? A two-tier system is emerging which defeats the object of quality education for all.'
- 'I'm not very happy about having to score a certain number of points to get my child into the chosen school.'
- 'Within the authority, places are guaranteed at the catchment school. Those wishing to apply to another school are immediately at a disadvantage because of the 'distance' rule. Living in certain areas in effect means no choice of school. Children living in other LEA areas can have advantage over council tax payers.'

#### **Points arising**

- Despite very different selection procedures in the three groups of LEAs studied, there was overwhelming agreement among parents on most issues raised in the questionnaire.
- Not surprisingly, parents were virtually unanimous in endorsing the importance to them of a secondary school that was well managed, had a caring environment, good learning facilities, a good local reputation and a strong policy on discipline. That they were virtually unanimous in agreeing on the importance of a support system for children with learning difficulties (indeed nearly two-thirds strongly agreed with the importance of this provision) is of interest. Nearness to home and the existence of a sixth form were also important to most. Sending their child to a single-sex school was not an issue for the majority.
- There were very few differences between groups on what mattered most to parents in choosing a secondary school. In the LEAs where there was no selection, parents tended to be slightly more in favour of close primary—secondary school links and of having children from the same family in the same school. Parents from LEAs where there was some selection tended to be keener on a sixth form, on school uniform and on single-sex schooling. Together with parents from the Group 3 LEA which was exclusively selective, they were more likely to have visited three or more schools before making a final decision.

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- Choice of the secondary school was usually a joint decision shared between parents and children.
- Parents were generally satisfied with the information and advice offered to help them at this stage in their children's school career. They did not express strong views on the content and form of the documentation received. Yet it is perhaps surprising that fewer than half thought that the information which came from the secondary school was the most useful. Local reputation, advice from primary school staff and other parents' opinions seemed to carry a fair amount of credence.
- Hardly any parents referred to literature other than an information booklet from the LEA about schools or school prospectuses. School performance tables and more general information leaflets for parents were not influential.
- It is encouraging that, despite the concerns noted, parents in all ten LEAs were satisfied with application procedures to secondary schools in their area.

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## Chapter 6 Parents and Appeals

All those parents who completed a questionnaire and who gave their contact details (indicating that they were willing to be contacted again) were sent a pro forma. This asked whether their child had been allocated a place at their preferred school and, if not, whether they were intending to appeal against that decision. (There were two versions — one for the authority with the 11-plus system and another for the rest.) The response to the pro forma is shown in Table 6.

**TABLE 6: RESPONSE TO THE PRO FORMA**

	Sent	Returned	Returned 'gone away'	Response Rate %
Version 1	456	330	2	72
Version 2	66	40	-	60
Total	522	373	2	71

From these 373 returns, there were 58 parents (15 per cent) whose child had not been allocated a place at their preferred school. Of those 58, 29 said on their pro forma that they had decided to appeal and 26 that they had decided not to (the response from three parents was unclear). All 58 who had said they had not been offered a place at their preferred school (and for whom a number was available) were telephoned. Each number was tried at least three times, and a total of 52 parents (27 who had decided to appeal and 25 who had decided not to) were available for a telephone interview.

**Those not intending to appeal** were asked to clarify whether they had considered an appeal and to outline any influences on their decision. They were also asked for their views on the school allocation they had received and on the process they had been through.

**Those intending to appeal** were asked what was involved in registering their appeal. They were asked whether they had



discussed the appeal with anyone and whether they had been assisted in any way. Parents were asked to identify the grounds for their appeal and to provide details of the location and conduct of the appeals meeting. The timescale for the appeals procedure was also discussed with them. Parents were asked whether they were satisfied with the opportunities available to them to state their case and how they felt about the decision and the process they had been through.

**Those not intending to appeal (25 parents)**

Of those parents who were not appealing, four had children who had taken a selective examination and had not been allocated a place at the preferred school on the basis of their results. Even for these parents, the outcome could change. One parent had been told that her son had not been awarded a grammar school place and then two weeks later had been offered a place at their second choice of grammar school. She reported that this had been very destabilising for her son and suggested that parents be told if there was a chance of a place at a grammar school so that they would at least know they were being considered. What she had thought was a firm refusal was in fact an allocation to a waiting list that had a successful outcome. One parent in these circumstances had opted for the private sector.

For the parents without selection there was a sense of resignation in that they did not feel they had any grounds for appeal that would have any influence and so there seemed little point in making a stand. One parent said that she did not realise she could appeal until it was too late (end of summer term). One mother felt 'lucky'. In February they had been told there was not a place at the preferred school, but were advised that a waiting list was available. In May they were interviewed and awarded a place on that list (although not told of their position). In July a place was awarded which the mother saw as being a result of being prepared to be patient (although they had accepted another school place 'to be on the safe side').

One mother's report highlighted the unsatisfactory situation some parents were in. She wanted a single-sex school for her daughter but had decided not to appeal because she did not feel that this would be adequate grounds for being awarded a place. She was unhappy with the large (ten-form entry), mixed school her daughter attended and bitter about the 'so-called' Parent's

Charter. Her point was that if they lived 100 yards nearer to the school, her daughter would have been in the catchment area, while girls who live two miles away went there. This illustrated the confusion parents in these circumstances conveyed. She was critical of GM schools (such as the one she preferred) that drew-up their catchment areas to include 'desirable areas of housing', and was of the view that parents have no choice at all.

Coupled with the belief, of the majority of these 'non-appealers', that there was no point in appealing unless you had special grounds was a concern to keep the situation stable for the child concerned. As one parent said, 'to be seen by the child to appeal would have endorsed her view that her next school was unacceptable'. There was only one parent who stated complacently that there was 'not much to choose between them [the schools available] so [the one offered was] fine'. There was one parent for whom the issue was not one of 'insufficient' grounds or ambivalence about the effect on the child, but of frustration with LEA boundaries. Her position illustrated the complex nature of decisions about boundaries. She wanted a school that was four miles away in a neighbouring LEA but had been offered a place at one six miles away that was in her LEA. She was dismayed to find that 'LEA boundaries are stronger than European ones'.

#### **Those who appealed (27 parents)**

Apart from a few parents who mentioned support from staff in primary school in their appeals procedure and a handful who were satisfied with the conduct of their appeals meetings, the evidence from these parents was that making an appeal had been a frustrating (indeed for some distressing) experience. There were frequent references to the stress participants (parents and children) had suffered and to the delays and limited access to information with which they had had to contend. The appeals procedure was a very negative experience for most of these parents, irrespective of the area they lived in. To set the context, Morgan *et al.* (1993) reported that 'deciding where to send a child to school is regarded by many parents as a crucial decision which will have significant long-term implications for their child's future career and life style ... Frequently, parents perceive much of the child's prospects as depending on that one decision, and so inevitably when choices are available their exercise arouses deep feelings and a complex mixture of intellectual judgement and personal emotions.'

Of the 27 parents who had taken part in an appeal, 12 had been offered a place at the school they preferred. Even where the result was favourable, parents were still dismayed by the time taken and the insecurity this produced for their child. One parent, whose son was given a place at their preferred school, said she was very angry about the wait of several months. Her son had become very anxious and she felt very uncomfortable about having to 'appear' before the panel. She felt that it was 'who you know' that was important, rather than the principles of parental choice. Another parent, who obtained a place as requested, was intrigued as to why they had been successful (only 14 out of 109 appeals for that school were) and felt that parents did not have an effective 'choice' and that to say otherwise was 'rubbish'. They were just persistent and 'lucky'.

One parent recalled the three appeals she had been through, which she described as 'an horrendous experience'. In May she had lodged her first appeal and it was not until September that a place had been secured. This parent felt that you needed to be 'very determined and persevering' to exercise your choice and that many parents would not have been willing or able to take on the task. She had had to take time off work and had found the two appeals meetings she had attended very unpleasant. They had been in the Town Hall with 12 people sitting around a large table and a stenographer taking notes. She had felt 'on trial'. From her first appeal she had been offered a school ten miles away which she had found unacceptable, and it had taken considerable determination to go through the process again.

Parents were confused by some criteria that did not seem to them to give an equitable result. One mother explained that her family lived opposite the (Catholic) school of her choice, she was a Catholic and yet her son had a much longer walk to a school they did not want. Her family now believed that parental choice did not work and would have liked more explanation of what they could reasonably have expected. At its worst, the lack of information was described as 'traumatic and stressful'. One parent, who was studying for a law degree, felt that many parents would not have persevered as she had. The appeals hearing she had attended had been unsatisfactory and they should have been given more help and more straightforward information on how to appeal. She had been asked by the school to say which criteria she would use in her appeal, according to the Articles of Governance. The school had been unhelpful when she had asked for clarification

## 6. PARENTS AND APPEALS

and there had been a drawn-out process of negotiation from November until May (when she heard her appeal had been unsuccessful). The hearing had lasted for 20 minutes but she felt the case had not been discussed and members of the committee had not seemed to take a genuine interest in her points. Her disappointment at not obtaining the place she wanted and her frustration with the procedures were clear and she felt that the school had been 'secretive and unhelpful'.

The point about there being no real decision-making as a result of the meeting was taken up by the parent who reported that their family had been the last to be seen one Saturday afternoon and they had received a standard letter saying their appeal had been refused on the following Monday, which had made them think that the result was a 'foregone conclusion'. In the same vein, a parent reported that the Appeals Committee were 'quite pleasant' but had already made their decisions. The hearing had lasted three or four minutes (although it had meant a morning off work) and there had been no sense of debate or deliberation, as 'they were just going through the motions'.

One parent who had telephoned her first-choice school (throughout the spring in an LEA where contact was directly to schools) had been told repeatedly that 'we haven't got round to you yet'. This was another example of a parent saying, with some frustration, that she knew that other children from outside the borough had already been offered places while her child was still waiting. A parent who appealed because her son had a medical condition such that she would have liked him to have attended the only school with a qualified nurse as matron felt 'hurt, aggrieved, sad and rejected' and that she had 'failed' her son, when a place was not available for him.

As already stated, a few parents had valued the support they had received from their child's primary school, but only two mentioned their LEA. One had been told the matter was not the LEA's concern because the school was GM and another had found the LEA 'not helpful at all', telling her that she had 'no chance' of a place for her child as she lived outside the catchment area and there were nearly 100 names on the waiting list. During the summer holidays she heard that there was indeed a place available.

Taking up the point some parents made about whether others would have been as determined as they themselves had been, one

parent said that her first hearing had been fair and prompt and that her second had made her angry because she knew of pupils living further from the school who had been given places and so having been told you did not meet the criteria was frustrating. For her third appeal she decided that she had had enough and declined to attend. Her appeal was unsuccessful and her son was offered a place at a Catholic School (they were not Catholics) with a longer journey from home than the others they had tried for. Her third choice of school had recently rung to ask if she would like to go on the waiting list and that had now been arranged. She felt that parents had no choice at all and that 'you are manipulated by the system'. The process had been misleading in that 'parents are deceived. You visit schools for open evenings and it all seems very good and then you can't get in.'

The findings from these interviews with parents reinforced the evidence already presented about the *ad hoc* nature of the process parents were confronting. The situation varied considerably in different circumstances, and levels of satisfaction with the process varied accordingly. The findings also confirmed what had been evident from other data presented here — the fact that for most parents obtaining a secondary school place for their child was relatively straightforward and they were either satisfied with the 'obvious' local school or easily able to obtain a place at another, but that for a minority of parents the process was fraught and complex. Indeed for some, the experience was deeply unsettling. What these interviews also confirmed was that the use of the word 'choice' was not only misleading but actually contributed to parents' frustration and disappointment. When realistically what was available was the opportunity to express a *preference*, the realisation that you had not been given a 'choice' could be very hard to accept.

#### Points arising

- Different procedures applied for handling appeals, and opportunities to draw on well-regarded practice would be valuable.
- Where parents were treated courteously and as if they had a legitimate role to play in the appeals procedure, this was appreciated. Where they were not they felt embittered.
- Whatever parents felt about not being offered a place at the school of their choice following an appeal, their disappointment was exacerbated if they believed that they had not received adequate information or advice.

- Parents reported their dismay when only inadequate (or non-existent) explanations for decisions were given to them. The requirement to inform parents of the reason for the decision may have been met to a minimum standard only, leaving parents bewildered. Being uninformed made it easy for rumours and charges of 'favouritism' to flourish.
- Parents went through the process of appealing on their own, although there was some contact with primary school staff.
- For some parents who had chosen not to appeal, this was a considered response, based on concerns about their child's need for stability.
- Out-of-authority placements were perceived as particularly unfair by parents whose children had been denied a place in their own LEA preferred school. This was a very fraught issue. The converse was parents whose children had to travel further to school than they would have liked because their preferred local school was in another LEA.
- Whatever overall system the LEA had in place for allocating school places, the central themes of frustration and stress were sustained. There was no system that in itself minimised these outcomes. A CERI report (1994) suggested that 'the biggest frustration to parents and pupils is to be promised free choice of school, only to find that the most attractive schools are full'. The solution it proposed was to 'intervene in less popular schools to help replicate the qualities sought by parents in less successful ones or to help successful schools to expand'.
- The evidence from this early phase of GM status was that there was potential for exacerbating the confusion and resentment felt by parents who needed to negotiate the system. There was more scope for misunderstandings and protestations of 'unfairness' with an additional set of procedures to work through.
- This was evidence from a small number of parents, many of whom had been disappointed by the outcome of their case. However, the very negative encounters many of them reported could usefully be seen as pointers for improving the situation.
- The process parents are involved in is likely to be strained, and their responses highlighted the problems of administering a satisfactory system. For most parents, the length of time between registering an appeal and hearing the result was

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protracted, but it was also possible for a shorter timescale to seem 'rushed and unfair'. Rather than any one administrative framework, the evidence suggested that it was the conduct of the appeal and the amount of information available that was crucial.

- As well as information about the process of appeals and what their position was, parents would welcome knowing the reason for the outcome.

## Chapter 7

### Transfer to Secondary School — Some Issues Arising

This research drew together the views and experiences of several groups of those involved in the transfer to secondary school and provided an opportunity for their different perspectives to be compared and contrasted. Overall, there was much that was positive to report. Most LEA staff felt that the procedures in place were working well and the majority of parents were satisfied with the process they had engaged in. Some key issues that could usefully be addressed are presented here.

- There was clearly scope for improving the quality and comprehensiveness of some of the written material produced for parents and some excellent examples, which could act as models for development, emerged from some schools taking part in the study. These documents contained what was required in an accessible way and were comprehensive in their coverage of issues of interest to prospective parents. Their tone was welcoming and open, rather than didactic and formal.
- Similarly, the style and clarity of some of the material produced by the LEAs was varied and the same points applied. Further reference to the guidance contained in Circular 6/93 (GB, DFE, 1993a) would serve to clarify the position where uncertainties persist. This emphasises the critical need for arrangements and outcomes to be made clear to all concerned and for procedures to be used consistently.
- The value of more than a bland presentation of the information required statutorily was most evident where the appeals procedures were considered. While most parents, as stated, were satisfied with their children's allocation to secondary school, there were undoubtedly a minority for whom this was an extremely fraught and unsatisfactory experience. These were people making an active and deliberate choice (which was not so for many of those in this sample who were satisfied with the obvious option open to them) and where they had to move through the appeals process, there were many opportunities for misunderstandings and difficult encounters.



- The evidence on the appeals work highlighted the need for these practices to be reconsidered. Irrespective of the outcome for their family, respondents had been on the receiving end of some unsatisfactory practices.
- There has been much debate about the principles underpinning concepts of 'choice' and the simulation of market forces in maintained education provision. As has been suggested, the relevant literature points out the complexity of these moves and the range of unanticipated outcomes that can emerge. What can appear to be a relatively straightforward exercise — to extend 'choice' and provide parents with what they need to make an informed decision — may serve to advantage some groups of parents over others and have other divisive consequences. A CERI report (1994) found 'strong evidence' in a number of countries that choice can increase social segregation in that the more privileged parents are able to be more 'active' in choosing and are likely to live in more privileged neighbourhoods. The report observed that many parents and pupils do not live close enough to more than one school to consider choice a reality and that while choices are made by people from all social classes, they are not always made in the same way. The CERI work also highlighted the significant influence in choosing a school of 'who else chooses it' in that nobody likes choosing a school that is considered unsatisfactory by one's friends. The report explained that 'such considerations and particularly those associated with race and class, do not tend to show up directly in surveys of reasons for choosing schools. Few people like to admit to social or racial prejudice.'
- While the present research showed the outcomes of current practices at the point of delivery, many of those taking part expressed their concerns about some of these issues surrounding the concept of 'choice'. The potential pitfalls of schools aggressively marketing themselves, the probability of selective admissions policies becoming more widespread (there was evidence of this in GM schools reported by Bush *et al.* 1993) and a more confusing system emerging were all mentioned.
- The fact that 'popular', i.e. over-subscribed, schools may have attained this status for a wide variety of reasons — some historic and some not open to change — was seen as unconstructive in terms of other less 'popular' schools' development. To equate 'popular' with 'good' missed the complexity of the decision-making process and the geographical and

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historical constraints many schools operate under. 'Reputations' and location are difficult factors to change.

- From the LEAs' perspective, there was a need to scrutinise the system in place to check on the quality and accessibility of information available to parents at all levels and to ensure that the optimum balance between patronising parents and presenting them with indigestible information was sought. The response parents met when they had contact with schools, LEAs and appeals committees varied substantially and, where such contact was helpful, courteous and informative it was greatly appreciated.
- From the schools' perspective, the factors that parents focused on when considering where their child should move to are of interest. Some variables were outside the sphere of influence of individual schools and others were pointers for development. The points about information applied to them also and schools had a valuable role to play in ensuring parents had as smooth a passage through the system as possible. For most parents the contact they needed was relatively simple to administer and procedures were in place to deliver this. The open days and evenings and the opportunities to meet staff were well attended. It was a minority of parents, for whom the process was more complex, who needed careful support and consideration.
- From the parents' perspective, the 'choice' of school was often an unproblematic phase in their children's development. They were happy with the range of options and often settled amicably for their local school. It was the minority eager to express a preference who were vulnerable and who needed to feel that they have had a fair hearing. As the CERI report (1994) identified, the choice process may be 'complex, emotive, arbitrary, high stakes and difficult' as parents are increasingly given the message that education determines a child's life chances. Taking an international perspective, the CERI work identified in Britain the major problem of a 'national habit of ranking educational alternatives rather than seeing them as being of possibly equal value. This approach makes school 'choice' 'an exercise in which for every winner there is a loser'. All those involved need to work toward a system that enhances the current satisfactory level of service for the majority of parents and also makes clear and accessible the route through which the more active 'choice-makers' will pass.

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## **Allocating Secondary School Places**

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This research looked at how parents are involved in decisions about which secondary school their children will attend, and their levels of satisfaction both with the allocation of school places and (where appropriate) the appeals procedures. It also investigated how local education authorities (LEAs) provide information to parents and the procedures they have established to allocate places and deal with the subsequent appeals. The role of school staff at the time of transfer was also of interest.

The findings highlighted the various admission arrangements in use and the very different circumstances that pertain in different areas (sometimes within the same LEA). Most parents said that they were satisfied with the procedures and the outcome, although it was clear that there were no easy answers to some of the dilemmas raised by open enrolment policies. For many parents the allocation of secondary school places for their children was not an issue of sustained concern; for others it was a key determinant of their level of satisfaction with the education service they received. This report should be of interest to all those involved in the transfer to secondary school, including parents, teachers, LEA staff and governors.

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