Policy briefing: Modifying school choice for more equitable access in England

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1. Education inequality

Education inequality is an important precursor to income inequality. Perhaps as much as a third of the differences in people's income comes from differences in their educational performance. Education plays a central role in affecting life chances, and this is why the school system is often described as "the great leveller", helping talented children from disadvantaged backgrounds to get on in life.

But this equalising action is blunted when access to the most effective schools is uneven – some pupils have much greater chances of being assigned there, while others have essentially no chance. In England, which pupil is assigned to which school is determined by a school

admissions process combining pupils' submitted preferences and schools' over-subscription criteria, governed by the statutory School Admissions Code.

Our research focusses on schools' admissions arrangements. In most schools, the key criterion is based on geography (for example, catchment areas) – where you live has a powerful effect on which schools you can get in to. We propose a modest, feasible, and inexpensive reform of the admissions system that will help to even out access to effective schools between disadvantaged pupils and their more affluent peers. This should resonate strongly with UK policymakers given the country's ongoing focus on levelling up and social mobility.

The policy reform we model expands opportunities by giving disadvantaged pupils sufficient priority to be able to secure, almost for certain, their first-choice school. This encourages disadvantaged pupils to apply to their 'true' first choice, typically a much more effective school. In fact, in our modelling, the median effectiveness of schools to which FSM-eligible pupils are assigned is 15.9% higher than the school assigned at baseline. The gap in median school effectiveness between disadvantaged and advantaged pupils falls by 17.0%. And yet, 94% of pupils overall are assigned to the same schools as baseline. This reform is very effective and very targeted.

2. School assignment: where you live matters ... a lot

The focus of our work is how the school admissions system allocates pupils to different schools. We find significant inequality in the effectiveness of schools attended by, respectively, advantaged and disadvantaged pupils. Furthermore, we show that this inequality is related to schools' admissions arrangements.

We create a measure of inequality of educational access at the Local Authority (LA) level that shows significant differences across England. We use a modified Gini coefficient to quantify educational access inequality: the extent to which non-disadvantaged pupils are disproportionately concentrated in better-performing schools. Student disadvantage is defined by eligibility for Free School Meals (FSM), and we measure school effectiveness using Progress 8 (P8) scores, an imperfect but useful metric, tracking the progress that pupils make in a school up to GCSEs.

To understand what drives this inequality, we correlate our access inequality Gini coefficients with summary measures of the over-subscription criteria used in schools in each LA, plus other LA-level controls that may influence inequality of access. The results show clearly that the widespread use of geographic over-subscription criteria in an LA is significantly associated with higher levels of inequality in educational access. To get a sense of scale, we can compare two otherwise identical LAs (based on the controls included in the regression) with the prevalence of geographic criteria at typical low values and typical high values. Our analysis

shows that the difference in the Gini is 0.036, corresponding to 45 percent of the Gini standard deviation, or 12 percent of the Gini mean.

These initial results highlight the importance of geographic over-subscription criteria for inequality in access to effective schools.

We can explore the mechanism underlying this by analysing the schools available to pupils. We can straightforwardly use the location of school and home to identify schools that are 'commutable' for a pupil - simply defined as those within roughly 10km of home. Using our unique data on each school's catchment area and 'de-facto' catchment area, we can go a step further and locate each pupil precisely relative to those catchment area boundaries: these are the schools a pupil could actually receive an offer from. We refer to the set of schools that a pupil is in catchment for as the 'geographic' choice set. There are fewer schools in the 'geographic' choice set, and the schools now unavailable are not random: pupils living in some places will not have access to the more effective schools. Because housing in the favoured areas attracts a price premium, geography-based criteria will tend to have different effects based on pupils' family income. The key comparison is between the school effectiveness available in commutable choice sets and geographic choice sets, and how this difference varies across relatively affluent and disadvantaged neighbourhoods.

Starting with one pupil, we calculate the average school effectiveness (Progress 8) in that pupil's commutable set and in their geographic choice set. The difference between the average value of school effectiveness in the two choice sets summarises the extent to which the geographic choice set restricts access to effective schools. We call this the 'effectiveness gap' and we analyse how it varies with neighbourhood poverty. We find a strong positive relationship throughout the range: higher poverty, higher effectiveness gap. This suggests that the presence of geographical criteria has a stronger negative effect on the access of disadvantaged pupils to effective schools than it does for better-off pupils. This further establishes the detrimental impact of geographic over-subscription criteria on educational equity.

Finally, we explore whether geographic criteria increase the number residential moves (although we can only observe this from when pupils are 5 years old). We find that pupils are significantly more likely to move into the catchment areas of more effective schools, and that this is driven by pupils not eligible for FSM. This corroborates the argument that geographic criteria systematically block access for lower-income households to more effective schools.

In summary, geographic over-subscription criteria disproportionally negatively affect access to effective schools for less advantaged pupils. This is the first such systematic evidence using rich and complete data on the over-subscription criteria of some 3,200 secondary schools with a full cohort of over 550,000 pupils across the jurisdiction.

Of course, geographic criteria bring benefits too. Having most of the pupils in a school living nearby helps to generate a sense of community among staff, pupils and families. This is

valuable. But our point is that there is a trade-off between that sense of community and the inequity of access that geographic criteria inherently bring. Government should aim for the best point on that trade-off, but the present situation cannot be it – a high value on community and little consideration for equity. Our proposal would shift us some way in the direction of improved equity.

3. Modelling policy change

We study three different policies: making the FSM criterion mandatory for schools, up to a quota of 15% of places (FSM quota); reserving places up to a 15% quota for open admission, using a ballot to resolve over-subscription (marginal ballots); and requiring all schools to use banding, a test-based criterion, so that each school's ability distribution matches the local area (banding). In the full report we provide equal coverage for all these policy ideas and report equivalent statistics for each. But in this policy briefing, we focus on the policy that was clearly the most effective, namely FSM quota.

This reform brings many benefits: it achieves the greatest reduction in the gap in school effectiveness between FSM and non-FSM pupils, while limiting the number of pupils assigned to a different school than at baseline (5.6%), the percentage of pupils reallocated to a less preferred school (0.85% for the median school) and the extra distance travelled (24m at the median).

A 15% quota ensures that virtually all FSM-eligible pupils get one of their top 2 choices, typically a much more effective school. This means the observed reduction in school effectiveness between FSM and non-FSM is more or less the maximum one can achieve policy by changing school over-subscription criteria. Remaining differences in access to an effective school must be driven by families' preferences, for example a preference for closer schools or schools with a certain pupil demographic.

4. Practicalities of reforms

The 2014 revision of the School Admissions Code gave admissions authorities for the first time the "option to give priority to disadvantaged children in their admissions arrangements" (Department for Education, 2014). This remains the case in the 2021 Admissions Code (Department for Education, 2021). This was a major reform - explicitly giving schools the option to give priority to disadvantaged pupils in admissions. But our data show that over ten years after the reform, almost no schools chose to meaningfully introduce this criterion.

Our policy proposal is the introduction of a <u>mandatory</u> quota of seats where pupils eligible for FSM have priority. Our results include different values for the fraction of seats with FSM priority, but our main case is a quota of 15% of places. There is no change to the criteria that apply to the remaining ('status quo') seats. If not enough pupils apply to a school to fill their FSM quota, the remaining seats are allocated using the criteria that prevail for the 'status quo' seats.

Why make mandatory something that schools themselves seemed reluctant to adopt? First, the optional nature of the 2014 change brought a first-mover problem: while schools might have been happy to adopt the policy if all other schools did, it seems plausible that no school would want to go first. Making this a required criterion solves that coordination problem. Second, under our proposal, the fraction of seats that the priority applies to is limited. So our proposal here is stronger than the current situation (because it is mandatory) and weaker (because it only applies up to a quota).

We have modelled each reform as affecting all schools at the same time, for example, being imposed by a revised School Admissions Code. Piecemeal implementation at a local level, with some schools adopting the proposal and others not, might lead to significant changes pupil composition. For these reasons, we suggest that any reform of over-subscription criteria be implemented nationally via revising the statutory School Admissions Code, or by groups of neighbouring schools. This is a cleaner, clearer, more certain and quicker way forward.

This policy is very low cost to the Exchequer. The infrastructure of running admissions algorithms is in place, and there are no new data requirements – all that changes is the ordering of pupils.

5. Counterarguments and responses

"Why not just make all schools great?" Of course, that would be the best thing to do. But decades of effort have shown that systemic, universal school improvement is extraordinarily difficult to achieve, and we have not yet managed it. In the meantime, while we work on that longer-term goal, we can try to make access to effective schools fairer.

"Home background matters far more than schools." It is indisputable that within-school variation in outcomes exceeds between-school variation – home circumstances matter hugely. But that point answers the wrong question, it's too abstract. We also know that trying to equalise home circumstances, specifically household income, has proven politically intractable. The immediate practical question is: what policies can make the most difference to pupil outcomes? The policy we propose is administratively straightforward and very effective.

"Most FSM pupils get their first-choice school anyway, so very little will change." This misunderstands the constraints on families' submitted school choices. When families know they have no realistic chance of admission to better schools, they don't waste their limited choices applying there; typically, people apply to where they can get into. Our reform considerably expands the feasible set of schools for FSM-eligible pupils, meaning disadvantaged families can aim higher. When accounting for true preferences, we find that our reform increases the fraction of FSM pupils getting their first-choice school from 91% to 98.6%.

"What about school community?" Geographic criteria undoubtedly foster community ties. Children can both learn and play together, homework clubs and so on are much easier. But this cohesion comes at the cost of excluding other families from the school. There's a trade-off between community and equity. Current policy sits at one extreme, heavily favouring community while ignoring equity. Our proposal shifts the balance modestly towards equity while preserving most of the community benefits: 85% of places would still be allocated by the existing admissions system.

"Won't this bring school run traffic chaos?" Analysis of baseline travel patterns demonstrates that proximity to home is already imperfectly correlated with school attendance – many pupils travel past their nearest school. Our modelling indicates minimal increases in average journey distance under the reform, with the change in the median distance of just 24 metres.

"Won't house prices fall?" Some house price falls in premium catchment areas are plausible, given that current premiums partially reflect enhanced school access. However, because geographic criteria would continue to allocate most places, households in immediate proximity to desirable schools would retain very high admission probabilities. Any price effects would therefore be small and localised rather than systemic.

"Loss of access for some to high-performing schools will lead to a mass exodus to private schools". We believe that this is very unlikely: most schools will remain similar in terms of demographic composition or mean KS2 test-score: in the typical school, over 95% of pupils are the same in baseline and in our core policy simulations. This seems unlikely to prompt many families into paying heavy prices for private schools. Even at the extremes, at the 90th percentile, under the proposed policy 8.7% of pupils would be different from baseline.

6. Data and methods

We combine different data sources together to address this key social problem. Most schools in England define their own admissions arrangements within the regulations set by the national School Admissions Code. There is no central record in England of all these individual arrangements, so we spent 18 months collecting these data school-by-school. We reported

our analysis of this in 2023. For the next stage of our project, we combined these school priorities with submitted student choices in the form of Rank-Ordered-Lists (ROLs), and with characteristics of pupils and of schools. These school and pupil data come from the Department of Education's National Pupil Database (NPD). Overall, our central analysis contained data on over 550,000 pupils and 3,248 secondary schools.

We used a range of different statistical methods. Using pupil and schools' data we measured the inequality of assignment to high-performing schools in each Local Authority (LA); using our over-subscription criteria data we characterised the typical admissions rules in each LA. Putting these together, we showed that the use of geographic criteria was strongly associated with higher access inequality.

We also combined all the data to estimate pupils' preferences for different schools. Of course, pupils might not always list the schools they like the most: they might also think strategically about where they're most likely to get a place. This makes it extremely challenging to identify underlying preferences separately from beliefs about the likelihood of admission. We used a particular set of statistical methods to estimate pupils' 'true' preferences as if they were unconstrained by access chances. In common with other studies, we find that pupils value higher school effectiveness, value short home-school commutes, and value school demographic composition. We also find differences in preferences between disadvantaged pupils and more affluent households.

Finally, our key policy results derive from simulating different admissions reforms: introducing a quota for disadvantaged pupils, using random ballots, or adopting 'banding' to balance intakes based on students' ability.

With the estimated preferences in hand, we can simulate how families would respond to these different admissions reforms. We first replicate the school assignment process under the current assignment algorithm, then modify the admission criteria to reflect the three admissions reform proposals. This allows us to compare how each reform changes which pupils get into which schools, and whether this promotes greater fairness.

7. Finishing up

We are committed to evidence-based policy. While the evidence we have presented in our report is robust, and supports a change in policy, we would prefer further investigation of the likely outcomes before full implementation. Ideally, this would be via a field experiment, a "gold standard" randomised controlled trial (RCT) across several LAs. However, we would strongly prefer a one-year RCT evaluating changes in admissions to allow a quick decision, rather than postponing policy change for several years.

For years, incoming Secretaries of State for Education and Prime Ministers have said that pupils' chances of success should not depend on their postcode, seemingly without realising that their own regulatory framework allows exactly this. Whilst retaining the valued role of a sense of community around a school, our proposed reform significantly reduces the gap in school effectiveness enjoyed by disadvantaged pupils relative to their richer peers. The reform produces a substantial effect on school effectiveness for FSM-eligible pupils for limited disruption to pupils' allocation to schools.

The full report can be found here: https://www.bristol.ac.uk/economics/research/school-admissions-report