

Parental choice in secondary education

Christine Gillie

Why is school choice a major area of political debate?

Parents have a right to express a preference for a particular state school, and all schools (except grammar schools) must offer a place to every child who has applied if they have enough places. But where schools are oversubscribed, the school admission authority (the local authority or the school governing body, depending on the type of school) must use oversubscription criteria to determine admissions in accordance with the recently strengthened *School Admissions Code*.

In March 2010 almost 530,000 families in England received an offer of a state secondary school place; 83% got their first preference, and almost 95% were offered a place from one of their three preferred schools. However, the proportion of pupils getting places at their preferred secondary school varies nationally. Disappointed parents may appeal.

Parents sometimes go to great lengths to get their child a place at a very popular school. Some may move home to secure a place at a favoured school where admission is based on catchment area or distance from home. There have been reports of parents obtaining places fraudulently.

MORE DIVERSITY IN SCHOOL PROVISION

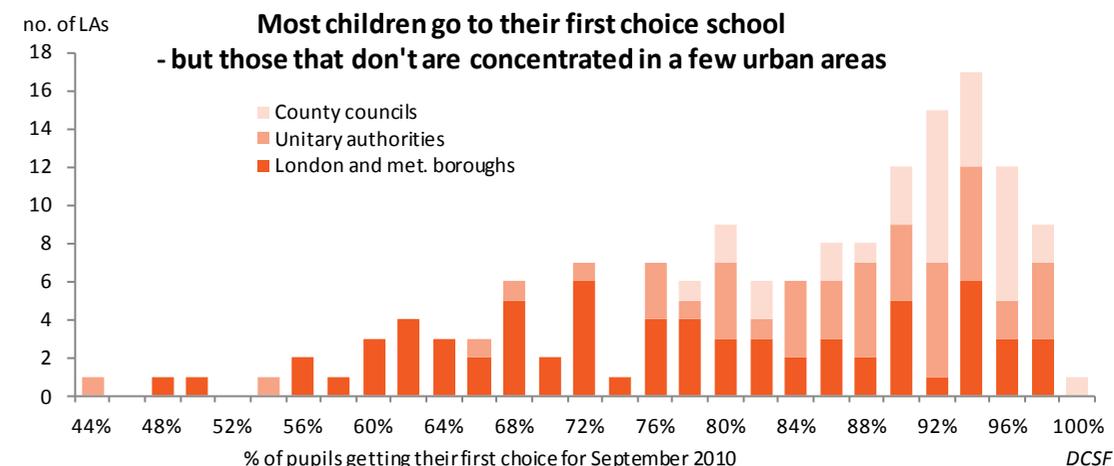
Would parents go to such lengths if more schools were attractive to them? Successive governments have aimed to promote greater diversity of school provision to improve school standards. The academies programme, a major part of Labour and Conservative policy, was developed out of the previous City

Technology Colleges (established in the 1980s) and City Academy programmes. Academies are independent publicly-funded schools, established and managed by sponsors, and mostly funded by central government. Individual academies must be run according to their funding agreement with central government. They are not allowed to make a profit; no fees are paid by parents, and the *School Admissions Code* applies.

The main parties all favour providing greater autonomy and variety – but differ on how to do it

All three major parties support greater variety and autonomy in school provision but they differ about how this should be done. The Liberal Democrats say all schools should be free to innovate, and favour replacing academies with 'sponsor managed schools', commissioned by and accountable to local authorities, with educational charities and private providers involved.

Both Labour and Conservatives support the academies programme but differ about how it should be developed, and about parental involvement. Labour favour creating another 200 academies and improving weak schools through federations and the use of not-for-profit accredited school groups to help run schools. Labour want to enable parents dissatisfied with schools in their area to trigger ballots to require local authorities to act, by securing take-overs of poor schools, expanding good schools or new provision.



Drawing on the Swedish 'free schools' model and the 'charter school' movement in the US, the Conservatives propose a 'schools revolution' by allowing parents, charities, teachers and others to set up new small academy schools. All existing schools would have the chance to acquire academy status, with 'outstanding' schools pre-approved, and the academy programme would be extended to primary schools.

As it is already possible, albeit difficult, under the existing academies programme for parents to set up schools, what additional benefit would the free/charter school model offer? Academies usually replace existing secondary schools whereas free/charter schools are usually a new addition to the supply of schools. Research published by Policy Exchange and the New Schools Network argues that the current system for academies is bureaucratic and expensive. Sweden has a relatively simple authorisation process based on demand, with state funding reflecting pupil

numbers. There are no limits on the number of schools a particular provider can run, and they are allowed to make a profit. In the US, charter school arrangements vary from state to state.

It is not clear how such models would operate in the UK. Would smaller schools be financially viable? Would the change improve school standards? The evidence relating to the educational performance of free and charter schools is mixed, and some argue that free schools increase social segregation, with pupils attending such schools coming from better-off, more educated families.

Any structural change in school provision raises questions about funding, the effect on existing schools and surplus places, and admission arrangements. The crucial question is: do any of these changes make it more likely that more parents will be offered the school of their first choice?