

# Choosing to succeed

Do parents pick the right schools?

Gabrielle Leroux

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Emran Mian, Nigel Keohane and the rest of the team at the Social Market Foundation for their valuable comments and input throughout the project. Special thanks go to Dr Aman Saggu for his assistance with the data analysis.

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Since the 1980s, the promotion of choice and competition has been a major strand of education reform in England.

The reforms are grounded in the idea that parents are looking for high-performing schools, therefore putting pressure on schools to raise standards. Drawing on new data from the Millennium Cohort Study, this paper provides evidence that academic quality is far from the main driver in parental choice of schools. More than four parents out of ten do not consider good results and academic reputation as an important factor in choosing a secondary school; and parents with lower levels of income and qualification are significantly less likely to give weight to academic performance than more affluent and educated parents. Such differences in parental preferences for academic quality undermine the incentives for *all* schools to raise academic standards and may further reinforce differences in the composition of the student population and performance between schools. We also speculate as to why less affluent and less educated parents make different choices; this may be to do with access to information, the time and opportunity to make use of it, or the idea that higher performing schools are for other peoples' children.

We argue that further steps are needed to focus parental choice on academic performance and reduce the gap in aspiration. This paper makes recommendations for improving access to high-quality information about schools; improving the design of admissions websites to urge parents to consider school quality; and giving priority to disadvantaged students in admission to high-performing schools.

## INTRODUCTION

Since the 1980s, the introduction of market mechanisms into public services has brought major changes in how education is delivered in England. The separation of funding and provision went together with the promotion of competition between schools and enhanced choice for parents. The development of these “quasi-markets” in education aimed to raise attainment. The argument was that not only would choice and competition offer parents the opportunity to select the school that best matches their child’s characteristics and interests; these market mechanisms would also create powerful incentives for schools to improve teaching quality and develop innovative approaches in order to attract pupils and funding.<sup>1</sup>

In practice however it is arguable whether market-based reforms have brought about the hoped-for better outcomes.<sup>2</sup> The results from PISA 2012 suggest that school competition *per se* is not associated with better mathematics performance at age 15.<sup>3</sup> In a review of empirical studies from four different countries including the UK, Allen and Burgess found very limited evidence, if any, supporting the use of market-based reforms to raise academic standards.<sup>4</sup> They argue that, in order for a quasi-market approach to improve school quality, four conditions must be met:

1. Parents must value and be able to correctly identify educational success as a school characteristic;
2. Parental choice must be meaningful and capable of affecting the allocation of pupils to schools;
3. Schools must find it beneficial to be popular and to grow;
4. The best way for schools to be popular must be to raise the quality of teaching and learning rather than engage in other activities.

Focusing on the first of these four conditions, this paper seeks to explore whether school quality is a major determinant in parental choice of secondary school, and the extent to which this varies across parents. The research is based on survey data from sweeps 3 and 5 of the Millennium Cohort Study (when the ‘millennials’ are aged 5 and 11) and draws specifically on the responses from more than 7,000 parents living in England to questions about their choice of school and their preferences. Our findings emphasise that a significant proportion of parents do not factor in academic performance when choosing a secondary school and suggest significant variations across socio-economic groups, thereby creating the potential for inefficient and inequitable educational outcomes. We argue that to enhance the systemic benefits of school choice and distribute these to all parents, further steps are needed to focus school choice on academic performance; the paper concludes with proposals to achieve that.

## BACKGROUND

Since the Education of Act of 1980 and the introduction of open-enrolment, parents in England have been given the right to express their preferences of schools by filling an application form that is then collected by local authorities. In order to help them to make an informed choice, schools are required to publish links to Ofsted reports and performance data on their website, together with detailed information about the curriculum and details of policies related to behaviour, disability, and special educational needs.<sup>5</sup>

Parents can apply for a minimum of three schools and some local authorities may allow up to six applications. A Department of Education survey, conducted in 2008, about secondary school admissions found that almost two thirds of respondents applied to one or two schools, one third applied to three and 5% applied to more.<sup>6</sup> Interestingly, of parents who applied to fewer than three schools, 45% said the reason was that they knew they would obtain a place at one of their preferred schools.

Given practical constraints on capacity, the allocation of places in oversubscribed schools requires the use of published criteria, which usually include attendance of siblings and distance to the school.<sup>7</sup> Nonetheless, most parents obtain a place in one of their chosen schools. In 2014, 85.2% of applicants were offered a place at their highest preference secondary school (87.7% at primary level) and 97.8% received an offer at one of their preferred secondary schools (96.4% at primary level).<sup>8</sup> Unsurprisingly polling evidence reveals high levels of parental satisfaction with application procedures and outcomes.<sup>9</sup>

However, the fact that parents seem satisfied overall with school choice does not necessarily mean that all children benefit from it or that academic standards are rising. Choice certainly has intrinsic benefits as it gives parents the opportunity to select a school that is the most suited to their child and family and this freedom of choice appears appreciated by parents. Yet making such judgements can prove difficult. It requires efforts to collect and process information about schools as well as tough trade-off between various attributes. To this extent, parents may differ in their aims and their engagement in the choosing process and it is not certain that all of them 'value and [are] able to correctly identify educational success as a school characteristic' – one of the four conditions for a high-performing education quasi-market according to Allen and Burgess.

A number of research studies on parental preferences in England have shed light on the differences between socio-economic groups, especially in terms of what parents are looking for in a school and how they engage in the school choice process. Drawing on interviews with parents, qualitative studies provided evidence that middle-class parents are particularly anxious about securing a place for their child in a 'good school' and, as a result, are very active in the school choice process.<sup>10</sup> In contrast working-class families are more concerned about finding a school where they feel at home, in order to avoid rejection and failure.<sup>11</sup>

A series of recent quantitative studies have also looked at choices parents make, given the constraints they face, to provide evidence about their true preferences for primary schools. Findings suggest academic quality, socio-economic composition of the school and distance to home are highly valued by all parents, but that there are differences between low- and high-socioeconomic groups in the quality of state schools they choose. Most of the variation is driven by inequalities in access to high-performing schools, though preferences still matter: 'comparing those with exactly the same set of schools that have a high probability of admission, those from lower socio-economic quintiles are more likely to choose a less academic school'.<sup>12</sup> A further study estimated that 'between 5% and 10% of both secondary school students and primary school students could have chosen to attend a higher-performing school with spare capacity' in their neighbourhood with students who are FSM-eligible and live in deprived neighbourhoods being much more likely to be in this situation.<sup>13</sup>

Thus there is evidence that parents choose schools for various reasons and that their socio-economic background influences the weight they place on different school attributes. Further to these studies, this paper focuses on parental preference for academic performance at secondary level. It draws on survey data from the Millennium Cohort Study to provide new evidence to assess whether *all* parents value educational success as a school characteristic.

Questions about school choice and preferences were asked to parents when the cohort member was 5 and when he or she was 11, so we compare preferences for secondary school with preferences for primary school, controlling for a wide range of individual and household characteristics. We then explore whether preferences for specific school characteristics seem associated with preferences for specific types of schools. We are aware that responses to the survey do not perfectly reflect true preferences: parents may respond in a way they think is more socially acceptable, or they may simply not remember precisely how they decided which schools to apply to, especially as school choice is a lot about feeling and trust in what they heard on the grapevine.<sup>14</sup> Keeping these limitations in mind, the MCS parent survey has also the advantage of providing detailed insights into parental preferences, by allowing parents to cite up to 13 factors they may have considered as important.

The next section presents the key findings about parental preferences for academic performance and the extent to which they differ across socio-economic or ethnic groups and between secondary and primary level.

## ANALYSIS

This analysis draws on responses to the parent survey administered as part of sweeps 3 and 5 of the Millennium Cohort Study (MCS) and focuses on households living in England.<sup>15</sup> Questions about school choice and preferences were asked only to the main respondent who, in most cases, was the mother or the mother figure.<sup>16</sup>

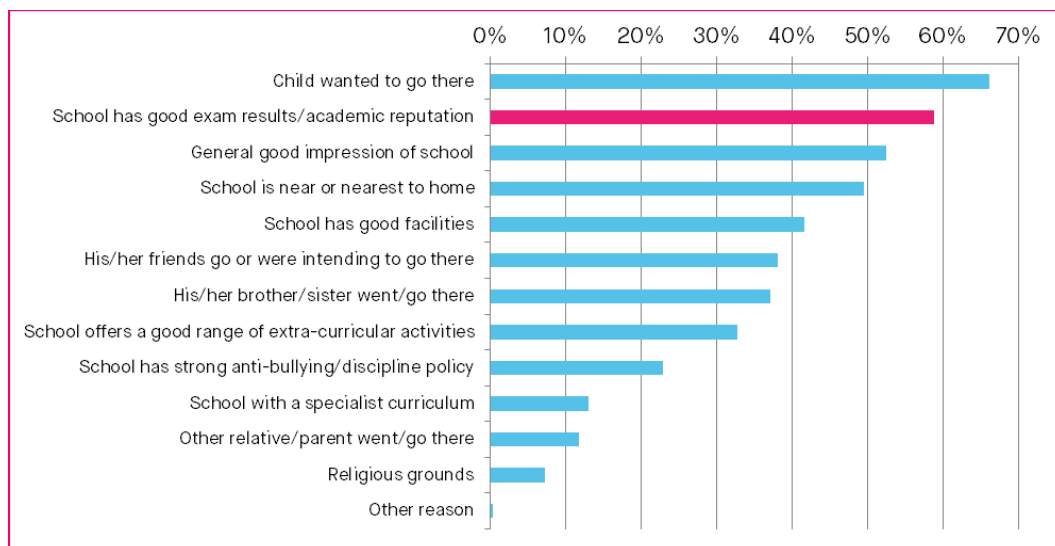
### HOW IMPORTANT IS ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE WHEN PARENTS CHOOSE A SCHOOL?

When the child was 11 years old, respondents were asked about the factors they considered as important when they had to choose a secondary school. They could cite as many factors as they wished from a given list of thirteen factors.

**Only 58.8% of parents considered good exam results and academic reputation as important in choosing a secondary school** (Figure 1).<sup>17</sup>

School performance was the second most cited factor, after the child’s wishes. Yet more than four parents out of 10 did not mention it as an important factor at all.

Figure 1: Percentage of parents who consider exam results and academic reputation as one of the important factors in choosing a secondary school



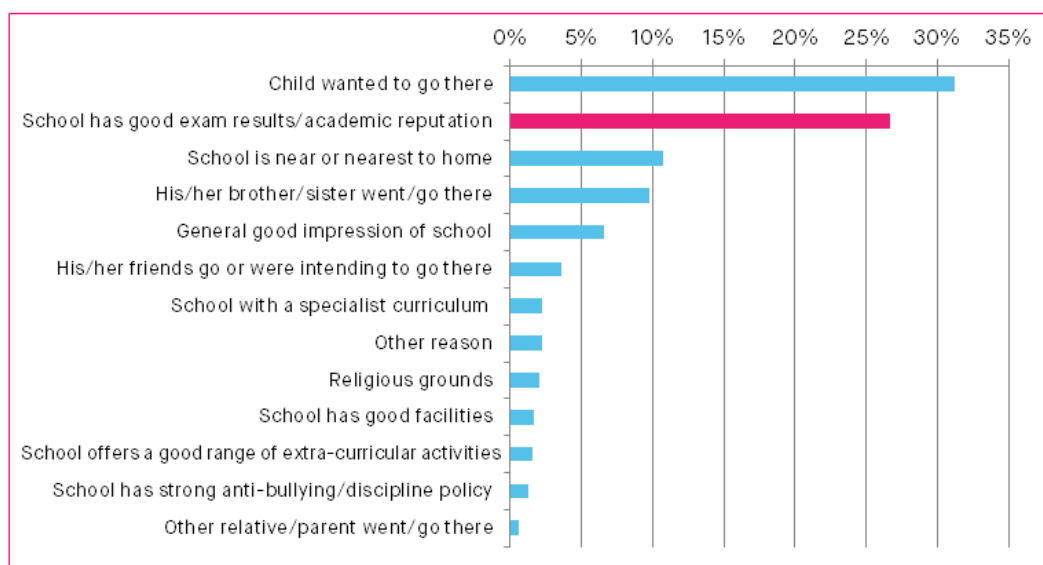
Base: Respondents whose child is at or going to secondary school (unweighted N = 8201).

Source: MCS Sweep 5.

Note: Percentages sum to more than 100 because multiple responses were allowed.

**Parents who reported more than one major factor were then asked about the most important: good exam results and academic reputation were cited by only 26.6%** (Figure 2). The wishes of the child came first and proximity to home was third.

Figure 2: Percentage of parents who consider exam results and academic reputation as the most important factor in choosing a secondary school



Base: Respondents whose child is at or going to secondary school and gave more than one reason (unweighted N = 7231). Source: MCS Sweep 5.

These results reveal that many factors can influence parental choice of a secondary school. Academic performance is just one of them and a significant share of parents do not even factor in academic quality when making a decision about secondary school.

Such findings raise some doubts over the potential for school choice to raise academic standards. While most parents do not choose *solely* on the basis of exam results and academic reputation, school choice was introduced to allow parents to send their child to the school that would best suit his or her interests and strengths. In this setting, diversity in parental tastes is desirable and is expected to be reflected in diversity in school provision. Exam results are not the whole story: other school attributes may equally benefit a child’s cognitive and non-cognitive development and therefore influence parents’ choice.

The problem is that some parents do not even consider academic quality *together with* other factors when they choose a school. School performance does not have to be the single reason determining choice, but it is crucial that it is in the balance when parents compare schools. Not only is a preference for academic performance decisive for the child’s educational opportunities but this also determines the strength of the incentives for schools to raise academic standards. Together with competition

**The scale of the problem may even be greater than this analysis suggests, as previous studies found that, in addition to academic performance, parents give significant weight to the socio-economic background of other pupils at the school (a decision factor not included in the list of options given to MCS respondents).**

For example,, Burgess et al. have argued that ‘parents’ choice of school is affected by the proportion of pupils at the school eligible for free school meals (positively for lower SES groups and negatively for higher SES groups)’.<sup>18</sup>



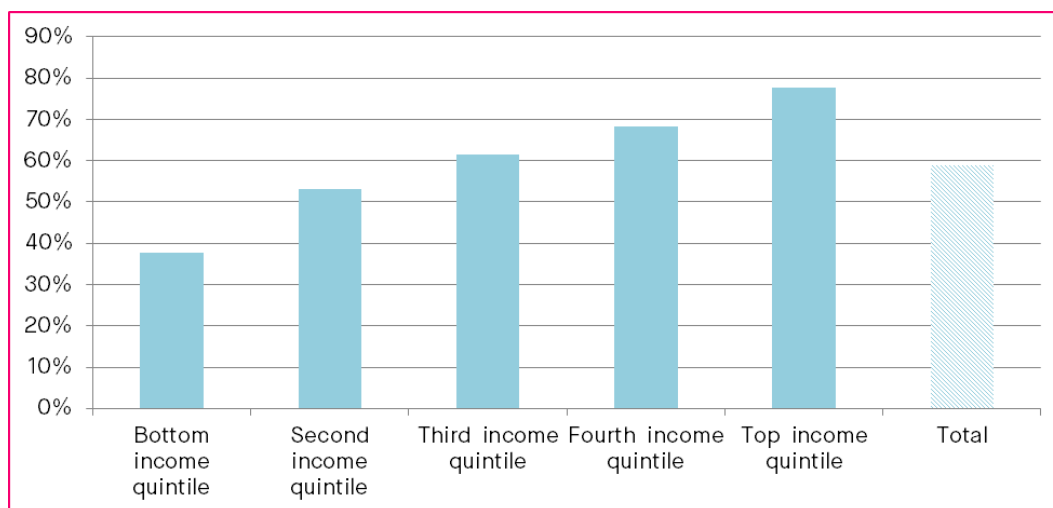
## TO WHAT EXTENT DO PARENTAL PREFERENCES FOR ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE VARY ACROSS SOCIO-ECONOMIC GROUPS?

This section investigates which parents consider academic performance when choosing a secondary school and highlights significant differences across parents from different backgrounds. This is especially worrying in terms of equity, for the negative consequences of not choosing a school on the basis of its academic performance may affect children unequally.

**We found especially stark variations across parents with different levels of income or level of qualification, consistent with findings from other countries.**

37.7% of parents in the bottom income quintile mentioned academic performance as an important factor, as opposed to 77.6% of those in the top income quintile (Figure 3).

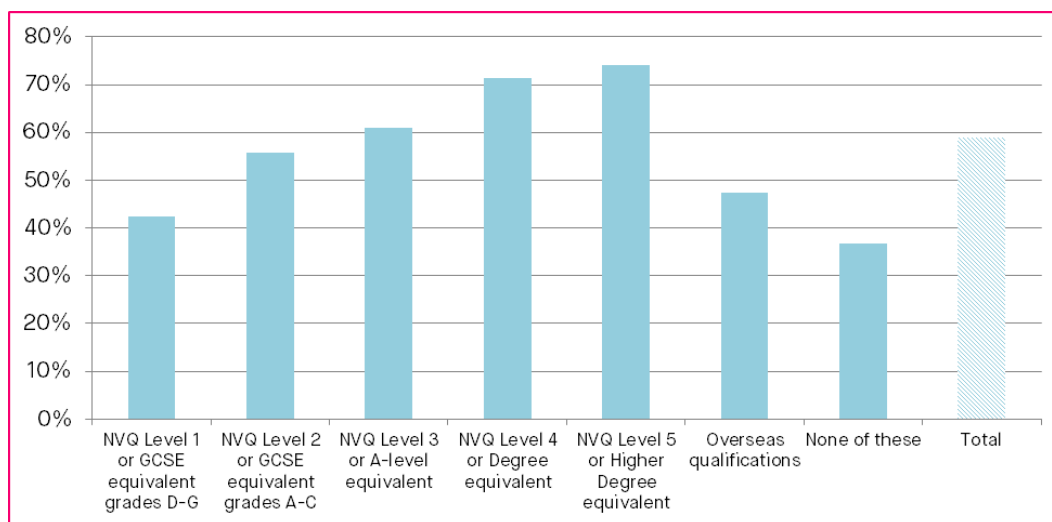
Figure 3: Percentage of parents who consider exam results and academic reputation as one of the important factors in choosing a secondary school (by income quintile)



Base: Respondents whose child is at or going to secondary school (unweighted N = 8201).  
Source: MCS Sweep 5.

Similarly, 42.4% of low-skilled parents (NVQ Level 1 or GCSE equivalent grades D-G) considered academic performance as important, against 74.1% of high-skilled parents (NVQ Level 5 or Higher Degree equivalent).

Figure 4: Percentage of parents who consider exam results and academic reputation as one of the important factors in choosing a secondary school (by level of qualification)



Base: Respondents whose child is at or going to secondary school (unweighted N = 8181).  
 Source: MCS Sweep 5.

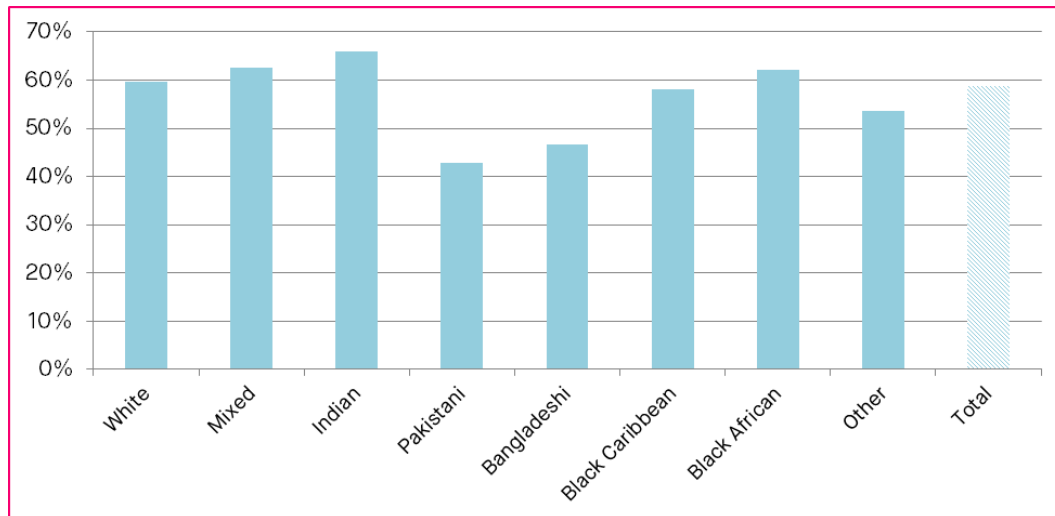
**Variations in parental preference for academic performance across socio-economic groups are not specific to England**, as revealed by a parent survey distributed in eleven countries as part of the latest PISA wave.<sup>19</sup> When asked about their criteria for choosing secondary schools, parents from low socio-economic backgrounds were much less likely to cite “the academic achievement of students in the school are high” as very important than their more advantaged peers in ten out of eleven countries.<sup>20</sup>

This international survey also suggests that, in the face of practical and economic constraints, parents may not consider academic performance as very important since other factors matter more. In these same countries, cost-related factors (distance to home; low school expenses; availability of financial aid) weigh less than academic quality for affluent parents. In contrast, parents from low socio-economic backgrounds tend to choose their children’s school as much on the basis of cost-related factors as on the quality of instruction.<sup>21</sup>

Unfortunately, with the exception of proximity, similar factors were not included in the list of factors suggested to parents in the MCS survey. Coming back to England therefore, it is possible that school costs, such as uniform or transportation expenses, and access to financial aid had led low-income parents to play down the importance of academic performance, though there is no empirical evidence available to confirm this hypothesis.

**Finally, the MCS survey results suggest substantial differences in preference for academic performance across ethnic groups.**<sup>22</sup>

Figure 5: Percentage of parents who consider exam results and academic reputation as one of the important factors in choosing a secondary school (by ethnicity of the child)



Base: Respondents whose child is at or going to secondary school (unweighted N = 8199).  
Source: MCS Sweep 5.

## WHAT ARE THE STRONGEST PREDICTORS OF PARENTAL PREFERENCES FOR ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE?

The graphs above show that different socio-economic and ethnic groups may have different attitudes to academic performance when they choose a secondary school. In order to better understand variations across parents, we conduct a linear regression analysis controlling for a wide range of individual and household characteristics. Details on the methodology and regression tables can be found in the Appendix.

This in-depth analysis corroborates some of the previous findings: the income of the household and the highest qualification of the mother are strongly associated with preference for academic performance. Once individual and household characteristics are controlled for however, differences across ethnic groups vanish.<sup>23</sup>

**The higher their income the more likely respondents are to consider academic performance as important in choosing a secondary school.**

For instance, households in the top income quintile are 25 percentage points more likely than their counterparts in the bottom income quintile to mention exam results and academic reputation, controlling for all other factors (Figure 6).

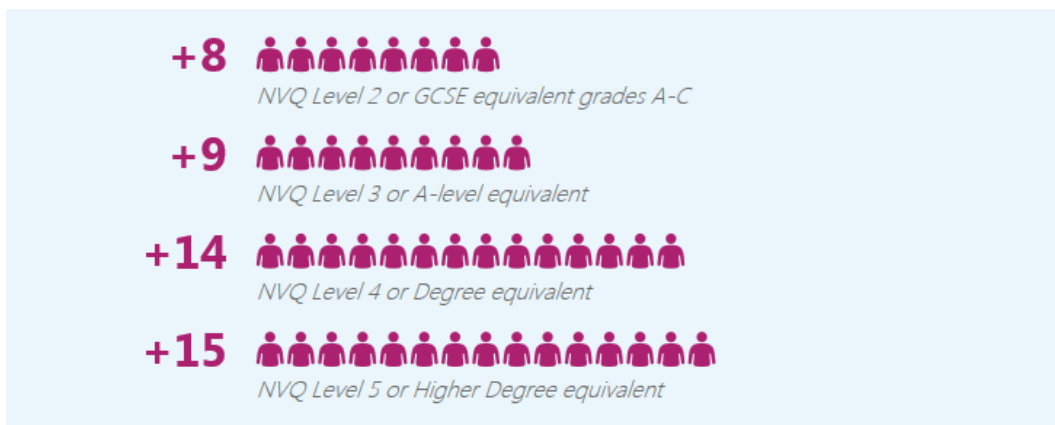
Figure 6: Differences across income groups in considering academic performance as an important factor at secondary level, controlling for all other variables (in percentage points) – compared to the bottom income quintile



Note: The numbers on the left-hand side of the graph are the regression coefficients. The reference group includes respondents in the bottom income quintile. All coefficients are statistically significant at the 99% confidence level.

**There is also a significant association between the level of qualification of the respondent and his or her preference for academic performance.** The gap reaches 15 percentage points between respondents with the lowest and those with the highest level of qualification (Figure 7).

Figure 7: Differences across qualification groups in considering academic performance as an important factor at secondary level, controlling for all other variables (in percentage points) – compared to respondents with NVQ Level 1 or GCSE D-G equivalent



Note: The numbers on the left-hand side of the graph are the regression coefficients. The reference group includes respondents with NVQ Level 1 or GCSE D-G equivalent. All coefficients are statistically significant at least at the 95% confidence level.

Other factors such as the level of cognitive development of the child also seem to play a role in parental preferences, although to a lesser extent than income or level of qualification. Drawing on scores obtained at the British Ability Scale Verbal similarities test, a measure of cognitive development, the regression analysis suggests that a child in the highest performing quartile is 9 percentage points more likely to have parents expressing a preference for school performance, than a child in the lowest performing quartile, controlling for all other variables. This is consistent with findings from the U.S. showing that a similar association between a child’s academic ability and the fact that

his or her parents put weight on the school's mean test score when choosing.<sup>24</sup> The causation here is however uncertain. Having a high-performing child may thus encourage parents to prioritise school quality; or, equally, it may be that parents who prioritise school quality also have specific aims, behaviours, or attitudes which are strongly correlated to their child's academic success.

Thus far this analysis has provided strong empirical evidence that the socio-economic background of parents significantly influences their *preference* for academic performance. However this does not tell us about the impact on the quality of schools actually chosen by parents from different backgrounds. The extent to which parents' preference for school performance is reflected in the choice of high performing schools depends on how they trade-off between all school attributes they consider to be important. Some parents may cite academic performance as an important factor but put less emphasis on it than on other school characteristics. For this reason we conduct a regression analysis of the responses to the question about the *most* important factor parents considered, controlling for the same variables as above.<sup>25</sup>

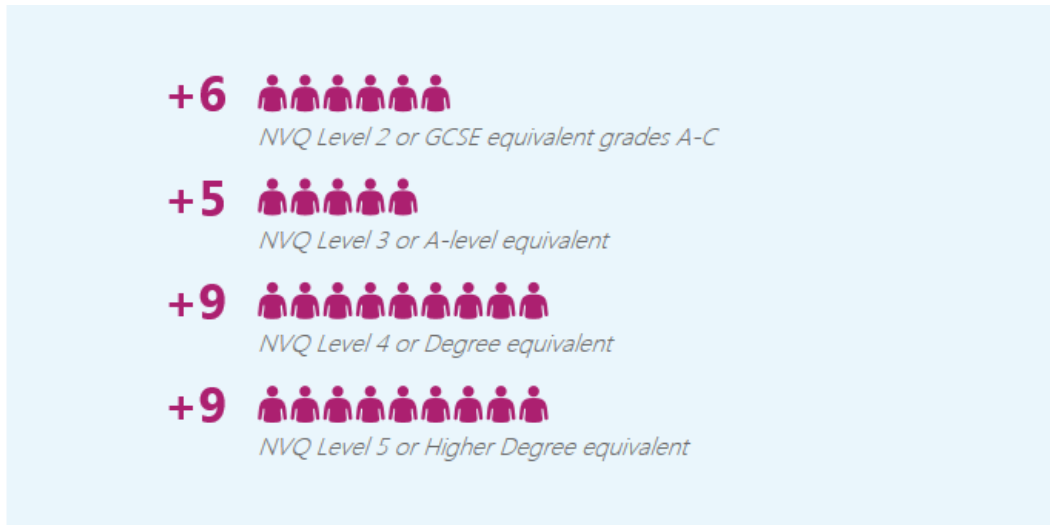
**Consistent with the previous analysis, we found that parents with higher levels of income and qualification are more likely to prioritise academic performance over any other school characteristics, although differences are smaller (Figures 8 and 9).**

Figure 8: Differences across income groups in considering academic performance as the most important factor at secondary level, controlling for all other variables (in percentage points) - compared to the bottom income quintile



Note: The numbers on the left-hand side of the graph are the regression coefficients. The reference group includes respondents in the bottom income quintile. Only the coefficients for the 4<sup>th</sup> income quintile and the top income quintile are statistically significant at the 95% confidence level.

Figure 9: Differences across qualification groups in considering academic performance as the most important factor at secondary level, controlling for all other variables (in percentage points) - compared to respondents with NVQ Level 1 or GCSE D-G equivalent



Note: The numbers on the left-hand side of the graph are the regression coefficients. The reference group includes respondents with NVQ Level 1 or GCSE D-G equivalent. The coefficients are statistically significant at least at the 95% confidence level, with the exception of “NVQ Level 3 or A-Level equivalent”.

**In contrast with findings about *all* important factors mentioned by parents, we found important variations across ethnic groups in responses about the *most* important factor.**

Children from all minority ethnic groups are significantly more likely than their White peers to have parents who prioritise academic performance. The difference is especially stark for children of Indian background compared to White children where the gap reaches 24 percentage points.

Figure 10: Differences across ethnic groups in considering academic performance as the most important factor at secondary level, controlling for all other variables (in percentage points) - compared to the White ethnic group



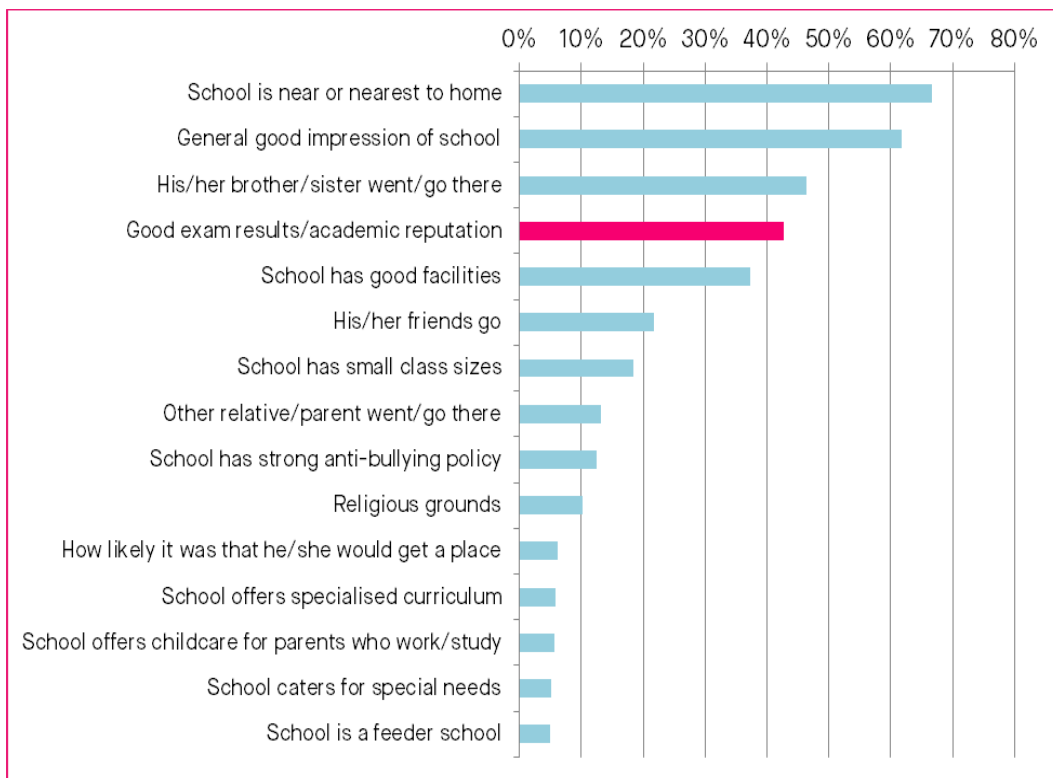
Note: the numbers on the left-hand side of the graph are the regression coefficients. The reference group includes respondents whose child is part of White ethnicity. The coefficients are statistically significant at least at the 95% confidence level.

IS THERE ANY CHANGE IN PARENTAL PREFERENCES BETWEEN PRIMARY SCHOOL AND SECONDARY SCHOOL?

Parents are less concerned about academic performance when they choose a primary school compared to a secondary school. Only 42.8% of parents mentioned good exams results and academic reputation as an important factor in choosing a primary school, against 58.8% at secondary level (Figure 10).

Proximity to home, good impression of the school or the fact that siblings were going were more often cited than school performance.

Figure 11: Percentage of parents who consider exam results and academic reputation as one of the important factors in choosing a primary school



Note: This graph does not display the factors cited by less than 5% of the respondents. These include: Ethnic mix of the school; Easy to get to on public transport; School teaches in a language other than English; Other reasons relating to the other children who go to the school; Wanted them to go to a different school to friend(s); Wanted them to go to a different school to brothers/sisters; Wanted them to go to a different school to other relative/parents; Wanted him/her to go to single-sex only school.

Percentages sum to more than 100 because multiple responses were allowed.

Base: Respondents whose child has started reception class or Primary Year One; the same question was asked to parents who applied via LEA and those who did not. Both samples are included here (unweighted N = 9501).

Source: MCS Sweep 3.

There were also substantial differences at the primary level across parents with different levels of income and of qualification.

Consistent with findings about secondary school choice, results from a similar regression analysis suggest that the higher the income of the household and the higher the level of qualification of the mother the more likely parents are to mention academic performance as an important factor in choosing a primary school.

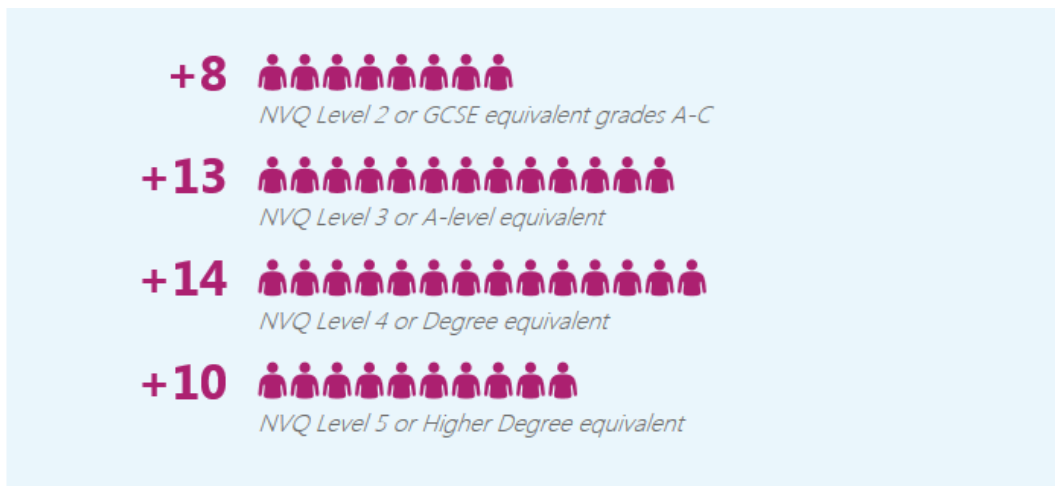
There does not appear to be much variation in terms of the magnitude of the differences across income and qualification groups between primary school and secondary school.

Figure 12: Differences in parental preference for school performance across income groups at primary level, controlling for all other variables (in percentage points) - compared to the bottom income quintile



Note: The numbers on the left-hand side of the graph are the regression coefficients. The reference group includes respondents in the bottom income quintile. All coefficients are statistically significant at least at the 95% confidence level.

Figure 13: Differences in parental preference for school performance across qualification groups at primary level, controlling for all other variables (in percentage points) - compared to respondents with NVQ Level 1 or GCSE D-G equivalent



Note: The numbers on the left-hand side of the graph are the regression coefficients. The reference group includes respondents with NVQ Level 1 or GCSE D-G equivalent. All coefficients are statistically significant at least at the 99% confidence level.

In the same way as for secondary school, parental preference for academic performance increases with the level of cognitive development of the child. Yet the magnitude of the coefficient is much smaller than for income (8 percentage points difference between children in the lowest and children in the highest performance quartile).



## DO PARENTS' PREFERENCES FOR SCHOOL ATTRIBUTES INFLUENCE THE TYPE OF SCHOOLS THEY APPLY TO?

For school choice to be real parents must have the opportunity to choose from a wide variety of schools. The creation of City Technology Colleges in the eighties and, later, the creation of academies and free schools aimed to increase school autonomy and thus allow for specialisation, as a means of raising education attainment.<sup>26</sup>

Following these reforms, we may assume that parents with different preferences have applied to different types of school. This final section of the analysis provides some insights on these supply-side reforms in relation to parental preferences. We aim to investigate whether the most important factor parents considered when choosing a secondary school was associated with an application to a specific type of school, controlling for individual and household characteristics. There is an obvious limitation to this analysis: the unequal geographical distribution of different types of schools and the fact that some are oversubscribed constrains parental choice. As a result, applications may be merely a reflection of the set of schools that parents can reasonably access, rather than of their true preferences. To this extent, this analysis is first and foremost exploratory and further work would be desirable.

**The results suggest that the application to specific types of schools is strongly associated with the background and the location of respondents, but only to a much a lesser extent, to their preferences.**

1. With regards to academies, there is not a substantial difference across parents with different priorities in terms of school characteristics. Compared with parents who stated that the most important decision factor was the child's wishes, parents who prioritise proximity to the school are 5 percentage points less likely to apply to an academy whereas those who prioritise academic performance are 5 percentage points more likely to do so, controlling for all other variables. The influence of school preferences on applications to academies remains quite modest in comparison to other factors such as the region where the family lives, which may determine the set of schools that families can practically choose from. For instance, respondents living in the North West were found to be 28 percentage points less likely than those living in London to apply to an academy, controlling for all other variables.
2. Surprisingly, parents who expressed a strong preference for academic performance are only 5 percentage points more likely to have applied to a grammar school than parents who gave priority to their child's wishes. In contrast, other individual and family characteristics seem to be much bigger predictors of application to a grammar school, especially region, income of the household, ethnicity of the child and level of cognitive development. For example, parents in the top income quintile are 11 percentage points more likely to have applied to a grammar school than those in the bottom income quintile, controlling for all other variables. Part of the reason may be higher house prices in catchment areas of grammar schools, which have the effect of pricing out low-income parents. For instance, research has found evidence of a house price premium of £184,058 (59%), compared to the average for the

county, for homes within the postal district of Sir William Borlase's Grammar School in Buckinghamshire.<sup>27</sup>

3. Findings are quite similar with regards to applications to independent schools. Respondents who stated that the most important factor they considered when choosing a secondary school was their general good impression of the school or the academic performance of the school are respectively 5 percentage points and 3 percentage points more likely than those who prioritise their child's wishes to apply to an independent school. Again other factors such as the region where the household lives, its income, the ethnicity of the child, and his/her level of cognitive development are also important predictors of parental applications to an independent school.

Overall, our findings suggest that variations in parental preferences are not clearly reflected in the types of schools they apply to. Geographical distribution of schools and individual admissions arrangements may interplay with parental preferences. Furthermore, as the argument for creating academies and free schools was to promote innovation and diversity at the local level, an explanation might be that there are more variations *within* the academy, the grammar or the independent school sector than *between* these sectors.

Despite the limitations, this exploratory analysis widens the debate on whether the opening of new types of schools allows a better responsiveness to parental preferences. Further analysis taking into account the unequal geographical distribution of different schools would be desirable to investigate the relationship between parental preferences and the increasing diversity in the types of schools offered to families.

## SUMMARY OF FINDINGS AND IMPLICATIONS

Parental preferences for academic performance have major implications for individual children's opportunities as for using choice to improve standards in the school system. The analysis of survey data from the Millennium Cohort Study has provided valuable insights into factors which influence parents' choice of schools, raising doubts about the assumption that all 'parents value educational success as a school characteristic'.

1. Four parents out of ten do not mention 'good exam results and academic reputation' as an important factor in choosing a secondary school. Other factors are important, not least proximity and, as other studies suggest, the social composition of the school.
2. Parents are even less likely to consider school performance when they choose a primary school. Around four in ten parents cite it as an important factor, far below home-school distance mentioned by 66% of respondents.
3. At both the primary and secondary level, parental preferences vary across socio-economic and ethnic groups. In particular, wealthier and more educated parents are more likely to consider academic performance when choosing a school.

The fact that a significant share of parents, especially among groups with lower levels of income and qualification, do not factor in academic performance when choosing a school may produce worrying outcomes. First, strong variations in parental preferences across the socio-economic spectrum can limit schools' ability to recruit a socially diverse pupil intake. This is especially true if, as previous research has suggested, parents have in addition a strong preference for schools where pupils come from a similar social background as them. A review of evidence about competition and social inclusion by the OECD points out that 'competition among schools is related to greater socio-economic segregation among students'.<sup>28</sup> Second, competitive pressure to raise standards may be exerted for sub-set of schools only, as argued by Greaves. More academically demanding parents will be concentrated in high performing schools that will be under pressure to raise standards even higher, while other schools will lack incentives to improve teaching quality and will rather concentrate their efforts on other attributes deemed more important to parents.<sup>29</sup>

These findings raise doubts over the fulfilment of the first condition identified by Allen and Burgess (2010) as key in a well-functioning quasi-market: "Parents must value and be able to correctly identify educational success as a school characteristic". So far, this paper has focused on the value parents place on academic performance. The ability of parents to assess school performance is also important. The next section targets three policy areas and formulates five recommendations to address current issues related to parental preferences and engagement in the school choice process, in order to ensure that the first condition of a well-functioning quasi-market is fulfilled.

## POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Drawing on previous research about school choice together with new findings discussed above, this paper makes five recommendations in order to encourage all parents to put sufficient weight on academic quality when they choose a school. This is crucial as much for each pupil to have the opportunity to achieve his or her potential, as for the system to raise standards. For example, a study for the Department for Education found that, if students who were not attending the highest-performing local school with spare places had chosen to do so their results would have improved by 2 GCSE grades for FSM-eligible students and 1.6 GCSE grades for non-eligible children.<sup>30</sup>

Our recommendations cover three areas:

- ⇒ **INFORMATION:** The first policy recommendation is concerned with the provision of accessible and clear information about school performance to parents. Despite reforms over the last decade, many parents still do not use attainment data when choosing a school, and those who do tend to focus on raw test scores. Recently, the Coalition government of 2010-2015 has engaged in promising policy changes that have the potential to improve the way parents choose a school.
- ⇒ **BIAS TOWARD SCHOOL QUALITY:** Even as information provision improves, a significant number of parents still do not consider academic quality as an important factor when choosing a school - better design of the application system should nudge them in this direction.

**EQUAL ACCESS:** Better information and nudges will help but they do not tackle the constraints on parental choice – and the unequal outcomes – that arise from the use of proximity as a tie-breaker to allocate students to over-subscribed schools. The creation of a quota system targeting FSM-eligible students will increase the prospects of admission to outstanding schools for families who may not be able to afford living close by.

### PROVIDING TO PARENTS THE BEST INFORMATION ON THE EDUCATIONAL PERFORMANCE OF SCHOOLS

That parents put sufficient weight on academic quality when they choose a school does not mean much if they are not able to compare schools in this regard. Like any other, an effective education quasi-market would require equal access to perfect information. Yet evidence suggests that even parents who may value academic performance do not look at attainment data.

A lot has been done in recent years to improve the quality of information about school performance and to make it more accessible to all parents. The publication of Ofsted reports and value-added scores for each school has made it easier for parents to compare schools' performance. Choice advice services were introduced following the 2005 schools White Paper to help poor parents think through the different school options available to them.<sup>31</sup>

In spite of these reforms, a report published by the Sutton Trust last year found that a significant proportion of parents used no or just one source of information in choosing a school, with substantial variations across social groups (10% of middle class parents and 42% of those at the lowest level of ‘subsistence’). Even more worrying is evidence that only 47% of parents in the highest social group and 27% of those in the lowest social group used attainment data or league tables.<sup>32 33</sup> The explanations for these figures probably lie in both low levels of parental preference for academic performance in general, as shown by our research, and difficulties in accessing and understanding information about school performance.

Adding to these concerns, polling evidence has shown that even parents who pay attention to academic performance often refer to raw test scores when making their decision whereas value-added measures are much better indicators of teacher quality as they take into account prior attainment: of parents who used school and attainment data to help them find out about school, 80% looked for GCSE results/A-level results/SATS results but only 36% paid attention to value-added scores.<sup>34</sup>

In response to these concerns, the 2010–2015 Coalition government has made two reforms to help parents make a better use of information about schools. First, the Data Portal will be introduced by March 2015: this ‘easily accessible website’ will ‘provide a single point of access to include almost all of the information [the Department for Education] holds on schools and pupils’.<sup>35</sup> Second, in line with a recommendation from the think tank CentreForum,<sup>36</sup> greater prominence will be given from 2016 to value-added scores, by using a measure of the progress pupils achieved across eight subjects in league tables.<sup>37</sup> As access to high-quality information is the major pre-condition for parents to make wise choices about schools, these policy changes are promising.

- ⇒ **Proposal 1:** The Government is making important and useful interventions to improve the provision of information. Our findings emphasise the need to ensure delivery of these. Communication and outreach activities will also be necessary to encourage parents to engage with these new information tools when choosing a school.

#### FRAMING INFORMATION AND THE CHOICES IN SUCH A WAY SO AS TO ENCOURAGE PARENTS TO EXPRESS A BIAS FOR HIGHER EDUCATIONAL PERFORMANCE

Our research suggests that a significant share of parents do not consider performance as an important factor in choosing a secondary school, and that this is especially the case among parents with low levels of income or qualification. In other words, as Burgess and Briggs put it, even when we compare “children living as neighbours . . . the poorer neighbour is less likely to go to a good school”.<sup>38</sup>

That all parents consider school quality is of foremost importance for each child to have the opportunity to benefit from high-quality schooling. A simulation by Allen, Burgess and McKenna estimated substantial gains in attainment, especially for FSM-eligible pupils, if all families chose the highest performing school they could reasonably access in the area.<sup>39</sup>

This echoes findings from an American study of a lottery system offering the winners access to their preferred school: only the winners whose parents had a strong preference for academic quality experienced significant achievement gains from the introduction of the lottery system. Lottery winners whose parents did not prioritise academic performance had lower academic outcomes than similar children who stayed in the local school.<sup>40</sup>

The system by which parents make school choices should therefore be designed in a way that nudges parents to factor in academic performance when choosing a school.

- ⇒ **Proposal 2:** Parents should have access online to a list of schools in the area automatically ranked from the highest to the lowest performing. This ranking should be based on value-added scores. We suggest testing this nudging mechanism first in a few regions via a randomized control trial in order to find out about how it could be most effectively designed to steer parents to consider academic performance when choosing a school.

## ENCOURAGING ALL PARENTS TO MAKE AMBITIOUS CHOICES BY MAKING SUCH CHOICES REALISTIC

Finally, there is little point in encouraging parents to put more weight on academic quality if they have no chance of obtaining a place in a high-performing school.

Today limits to school capacity require the use of oversubscription criteria to allocate pupils to sought-after schools. Proximity to the school is often used as a tie-breaker, resulting in higher house prices in desirable catchment areas.<sup>41</sup> In this context ‘backdoor selection by income’ may limit access to sought-after schools for low-income parents who cannot afford to live near such schools. A recent study found that ‘in a typical LEA in England a child from a poor family is half as likely to attend a good secondary school as a non-poor child’ and ‘much of this is due to where they live within the LEA’.<sup>42</sup>

Even for parents who live close to these schools, those who are less well informed may be put off by the impression that they are oversubscribed and end up making choices they consider as more ‘reasonable’. A study about Choice Advisers pointed to the structural contradictions of this support scheme, expected to help parents think their choice of schools through and develop strategies to satisfy their preferences, but necessarily limited by constraints on feasible schools. One of the Choice Advisers interviewed for instance described her role as to ‘bring expectations down’ so that parents can ‘get what they want within the structure’.<sup>43</sup> Although it is hard to estimate how many parents do not express their true preferences but rather make choices they think are ‘reasonable’, it is clear that there are constraints on parental choice, not least the use of proximity as a tie-breaker, and that these constraints disproportionately affect low socio-economic groups.<sup>44</sup>

Aware of these limitations, the Coalition government launched a consultation in July 2014 about possible changes to make the Schools Admissions Code fairer. Henceforth all schools will be allowed to give priority in admissions to children attracting the pupil premium, the early years pupil premium, or the service premium.<sup>45</sup> Previously only academies and free schools could adopt such a priority. This follows the announcement by Barry Sindall, chief executive of the Grammar Schools Heads Association (GSHA), that

more than half of these selective schools were also planning to revise their admissions criteria to give priority to children eligible for free school meals or the pupil premium<sup>46</sup> (research from the Sutton Trust has found that only 2.7% of entrants to grammar schools in England were entitled to free school meals).<sup>47</sup>

These are undoubtedly important steps toward improving the access of disadvantaged pupils to the best schools and the introduction of the Pupil Premium may create additional incentives for schools to admit more pupils from poorer backgrounds.<sup>48</sup> However it is unsure how many and which schools will take up this opportunity. After all the policy change is that schools have permission to give priority in admissions to pupils attracting the pupil premium, there is no obligation on them to do so; and there may be a high level of pressure from parents who live close to the school for this equity-based criterion not to be adopted. It is especially important that high-quality schools admit a higher proportion of children eligible for free school meals and yet those are precisely the schools where the parents with the ‘sharpest elbows’ may be most resistant to changes in admission policy. For this reason, we argue that only a quota system can ensure that disadvantaged children have priority access to high-performing schools. The design of such a system could be informed by lessons drawn from a similar initiative introduced in the French Community of Belgium.

#### Box 1: The French Community of Belgium enrolment system

In the French Community of Belgium, parents apply to lower-secondary schools by filling a unique form where they can express up to 10 preferences. This form is given to first preference schools, which then allocate 80% of their school places. If a school is oversubscribed, applications are ranked on the basis of objective criteria such as siblings going to the school, children with special needs, or pupils coming from a feeder primary school. Up to 20.4% of school places are allocated in priority to disadvantaged students.

Unsuccessful applications during this first phase, i.e. parents who did not get their first preference, are then centralised by the Inter-Network Enrolment Commission (CIRI). The Commission allocates the remaining places on the basis of the same criteria, plus an additional criterion reflecting the ranking of preferences.

A recent piece of research drew attention to the weaknesses of this system in improving equity. Two points are especially relevant to the case of England.

1. There is a single quota that is defined regardless of the socio-economic composition of the area. Furthermore, places to meet the quota are allocated at the very beginning of the admissions process: some children are therefore admitted on the basis of their socio-economic background whereas they could have met other admissions criteria. If those had been admitted first, then there would potentially be more places available for other disadvantaged children.
2. Children are deemed eligible to be admitted under the quota if they come from disadvantaged primary schools. The latter are defined by the mean of indicators relative to their own socio-economic composition as well as the socio-economic composition of the neighbourhood. As a consequence, it is not necessarily the most disadvantaged children who benefit from the quota.

- ⇒ **Proposal 3:** A quota system should be used to award a significant number of the places in oversubscribed schools that are rated outstanding<sup>49</sup> by Ofsted to students who receive the Pupil Premium.<sup>50</sup> The use of this criterion for eligibility as a proxy for low income allows a better targeting of children than criteria related to the school or the neighbourhood the child comes from. There are other details to work through to ensure that the policy meets its objectives.
- The desirable level for a quota should be set at the national level with some scope for local variation. What this means is that the national quota will be a lower bound with schools who have a higher than average proportion of Pupil Premium eligible children in the local authority area required to meet a quota that is commensurately higher..
  - In any case, the quota should be marginally higher than the proportion of children eligible for the Pupil Premium in England (i.e. 17% in primary and 14.6% in secondary state-funded schools in 2014), in order to allow proportionally more disadvantaged students to gain access to the best schools.
  - The application of the quota should be restricted to oversubscribed schools that are rated 'outstanding'. This is where the role of admissions policy is likely to be the most important.
  - The quota places should be reserved from the outset but not allocated until after other admissions criteria have already been used to admit those Pupil Premium eligible children who would be admitted under them. For example, if the quota is set at 25%, then the remaining 75% of the places in the eligible schools will first be allocated on the basis of existing oversubscription criteria (usually proximity or siblings attending the school). FSM-eligible children may be admitted through this first phase as any other child if they meet these criteria. Then, the remaining 25% of places will be awarded in priority to remaining FSM-eligible applicants who did not meet the initial criteria.
- ⇒ **Proposal 4:** This quota system should be clearly advertised on admissions websites for all eligible families. It is important that parents are aware of this quota as soon as they start thinking about school choice.

While a quota system ought to have a powerful impact in shaping school choice and raising aspiration, parents may be discouraged to make ambitious choices by the costs associated with their child attending a school which is far from home or which requires a uniform. Evidence from OECD countries, albeit not including the UK, suggests parents from lower socio-economic groups weigh up cost-related factors as much as academic performance, contrary to more advantaged parents. These factors included: the school is a short distance from home; expenses are low; the school has financial aid available. School costs seem to be an issue in the UK as well, with 69% of parents saying they struggled at least 'to a small extent' with the cost of school (95% of parents in families where the children say they are 'not well off at all').<sup>51</sup> It is thus important that low-income parents are aware of their rights to free transportation and of other types of financial support to cope with school costs.<sup>52</sup>

- ⇒ **Proposal 5:** A targeted message on admission websites should bring information about financial support to the attention of parents. Equally schools should be encouraged to provide detailed information about schemes they



offer to help poorer parents cope with the costs of clothing, trips, or specific activities. Ideally, the admissions websites should tell eligible parents which are the schools for which they can benefit from free transportation.

## CONCLUSION

Our proposals begin by attempting to ensure that all parents are able to access and easily identify educational success as a school characteristic, one of the key conditions for a well-functioning quasi-market in education, and one that, as our analysis of the MCS suggests, is not met at the moment. While enabling choice and raising aspiration is at the heart of our approach to thinking about public service markets in general, we recognise that in education a quota system may now be necessary in order to ensure the benefits of choice are better available to everyone. The scheme we propose has limited application, only to outstanding schools that are over-subscribed, but those are the priority for improving access. We think that a quota in favour of those eligible for the Pupil Premium is workable and it would encourage schools to reach out to students and families from disadvantaged backgrounds. School improvement is hard to achieve; and its dividend should be better distributed in our society than it is at the moment.

## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Sam Sims, *The development of quasi-markets in secondary education* (London: Institute for Government, 2012), <http://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/sites/default/files/publications/The%20Development%20of%20Quasi-Markets%20in%20Education%20final.pdf>
- <sup>2</sup> Sietske Waslander, Cissy Pater and Maartje van der Weide, *Markets in education: an analytical review of empirical research on market mechanisms in education* (Paris: OECD, 2010), [http://www.oecd.org/officialdocuments/publicdisplaydocumentpdf/?cote=EDU/WKP\(2010\)15&docLanguage=En](http://www.oecd.org/officialdocuments/publicdisplaydocumentpdf/?cote=EDU/WKP(2010)15&docLanguage=En)
- <sup>3</sup> *PISA in Focus 42: When is competition between schools beneficial?* (Paris: OECD, 2014), [http://www.oecd.org/pisa/pisaproducts/pisainfocus/PISA-in-Focus-N42-\(eng\)-FINAL.pdf](http://www.oecd.org/pisa/pisaproducts/pisainfocus/PISA-in-Focus-N42-(eng)-FINAL.pdf)
- <sup>4</sup> Rebecca Allen and Simon Burgess, *The future of competition and accountability in education* (London: 2020 Public Services Trust at the RSA, 2010), <http://www.bristol.ac.uk/cmpo/publications/other/competition.pdf>
- <sup>5</sup> See for more information: <https://www.gov.uk/schools-admissions/choosing-schools>
- <sup>6</sup> John Coldron et al., *Secondary school admissions* (London: Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2008), [shura.shu.ac.uk/183/1/Sec\\_School\\_Adms\\_DCSFRR020.pdf](http://shura.shu.ac.uk/183/1/Sec_School_Adms_DCSFRR020.pdf)
- <sup>7</sup> See for more information: <https://www.gov.uk/schools-admissions/admissions-criteria>; ; Philip Noden, Anne West and Audrey Hind, *Banding and ballots: secondary school admissions in England: admissions in 2012/13 and the impact of growth of academies* (London: The Sutton Trust, 2013), <http://www.suttontrust.com/researcharchive/ballots-banding/>
- <sup>8</sup> *SFR 17/2014: Secondary and primary school applications and offers: March to April 2014* (London: Department for Education, 2014), <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/secondary-and-primary-school-applications-and-offers-2014>
- <sup>9</sup> John Coldron et al., *Secondary school admissions*
- <sup>10</sup> Stephen J. Ball, *Class Strategies and the Education Market: The Middle Classes and Social Advantage* (London: RoutledgeFalmer, 2002)
- <sup>11</sup> Diane Reay and Stephen J. Ball, 'Spoilt for Choice: The Working Classes and Educational Markets', *Oxford Review of Education* 23-1 (1997)
- <sup>12</sup> Simon Burgess, Ellen Greaves, Anna Vignoles and Deborah Wilson, 'What parents want: school preferences and school choice', *The Economic Journal* (2014), p. 26
- <sup>13</sup> Rebecca Allen, Simon Burgess, and Leigh McKenna, *School performance and parental choice of school: secondary data analysis* (Department for Education, 2014), p. 7, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/school-performance-and-parental-choice-of-school>
- <sup>14</sup> Stephen Ball and Carol Vincent, "'I heard it on the grapevine": "hot knowledge" and school choice', *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 19-3 (1998)
- <sup>15</sup> See the Appendix for more information
- <sup>16</sup> See for more information the MCS Guide to the datasets published in February 2014, available here: <http://www.cls.ioe.ac.uk/page.aspx?&siteid=1266&siteSectionTitle=User+Guides>
- <sup>17</sup> In this paper, the term 'parent' is used synonymously with 'respondent'. In most cases, the respondent was actually the mother or the mother figure, as she is likely to be the most involved in choosing a school. However, we assume that partners may also have had their say and therefore use the term 'parents'.
- <sup>18</sup> Simon Burgess, Ellen Greaves, Anna Vignoles and Deborah Wilson, 'What parents want: school preferences and school choice'

- <sup>19</sup> The questionnaire was distributed to parents in Belgium, Chili, Croatia, Germany, Hong Kong-China, Hungary, Italy, Korea, Macao-China, Mexico, and Portugal
- <sup>20</sup> The exception is Germany where 31.4% of parents from the bottom socio-economic quartile cited this criterion against 21.3% of parents in the top socio-economic quartile
- <sup>21</sup> *PISA in Focus 42: When is competition between schools beneficial?*, p. 3
- <sup>22</sup> We consider here the ethnicity of the child rather than the ethnicity of the main respondent, for school preferences may differ when the two parents are from different ethnic groups
- <sup>23</sup> The only statistically significant difference is between the White group and the Indian group, with the latter more likely than the former to mention academic performance (significant at the 99% confidence level)
- <sup>24</sup> Justine S. Hastings, Thomas J. Kane, and Douglas O. Staiger, *Parental Preferences and School Competition: Evidence from a Public School Choice Program* (NBER Working Paper, 2005)
- <sup>25</sup> This question was asked only to parents who gave more than one important reason for choosing a school at the previous question. For this reason, results must be treated with caution as it does not include parents who may have initially cited only academic performance as an important factor.
- <sup>26</sup> Anne West and Elizabeth Bailey, 'The Development of the Academies Programme: "Privatising" School-Based Education in England 1986–2013', *British Journal of Educational Studies* 61-2 (2013)
- <sup>27</sup> Lloyds Bank House Prices and Schools Review: Pay an extra £483,000 to live near one of England's top state schools (Lloyds Bank, 2014), <http://www.lloydsbankinggroup.com/globalassets/documents/media/press-releases/lloyds-bank/2014/140826-house-prices-near-schools-web.pdf>
- <sup>28</sup> *PISA in Focus 42: When is competition between schools beneficial?*
- <sup>29</sup> Ellen Greaves, 'Parents' preferences for school attributes: A discrete choice model incorporating unobserved heterogeneity'
- <sup>30</sup> Rebecca Allen, Simon Burgess and Leigh McKenna, *School performance and parental choice of school: secondary data analysis*
- <sup>31</sup> Sam Sims, *The development of quasi-markets in secondary education*
- <sup>32</sup> A higher number of parents said they used Ofsted reports (60.2% of social group A and 44.6% for social group E), though these numbers remain quite low.
- <sup>33</sup> Becky Francis and Merryn Hutchings, *Parent Power?* (London: Sutton Trust, 2013), <http://www.suttontrust.com/researcharchive/parent-power/>
- <sup>34</sup> John Coldron et al., *Secondary school admissions*
- <sup>35</sup> See for more information: <https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/secondary-school-accountability-consultation>
- <sup>36</sup> Chris Paterson, *Measuring what matters: school accountability indicators that benefit all* (Centre Forum, 2013), <http://www.centreforum.org/index.php/mainpublications/512-measuring-what-matters>
- <sup>37</sup> *Factsheet: Progress 8 measure* (London: Department for Education, 2014), [https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/285990/P8\\_factsheet.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/285990/P8_factsheet.pdf)
- <sup>38</sup> Simon Burgess and Adam Briggs, 'School assignment, school choice and social mobility'
- <sup>39</sup> Rebecca Allen, Simon Burgess and Leigh McKenna, *School performance and parental choice of school: secondary data analysis*
- <sup>40</sup> Justine S. Hastings, Thomas J. Kane, Douglas O. Staiger, *Preferences and Heterogeneous Treatment Effects in a Public School Choice Lottery* (Cambridge: NBER Working Paper, 2006)

<sup>41</sup> Stephen Gibbons and Stephen Machin, 'Paying for primary schools: admission constraints, school popularity or congestion?', *The Economic Journal* 116 (2006)

<sup>42</sup> Simon Burgess and Adam Briggs, 'School assignment, school choice and social mobility', *Economics of Education Review* 29 (2010), p. 647

<sup>43</sup> Sonia Exley, 'Making working-class parents think more like middle-class parents: Choice Advisers in English education', *Journal of Education Policy* 28-1 (2013)

<sup>44</sup> In the MCS Sweep 3, 7% of respondents said they did not apply to their preferred primary school and only a very few said it was because they thought they would not get in. The question was not asked in Sweep 5 so there is no similar information about secondary school. In any case finding out about parents' true preferences is particularly complex, given the influence of context, and thus constraints, on how parents think about schools.

<sup>45</sup> *Changes to the School Admissions Code: Government consultation response* (Department for Education, 2014), [https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/368917/Revised\\_Admissions\\_Code\\_consultation\\_government\\_response.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/368917/Revised_Admissions_Code_consultation_government_response.pdf)

<sup>46</sup> 'Grammar schools opt to give priority to poor children' (TES News, May 1<sup>st</sup> 2014), <https://news.tes.co.uk/b/news/2014/05/01/half-of-grammar-schools-will-give-priority-to-poor-children.aspx>

<sup>47</sup> Jonathan Cribb, Professor David Jesson, Luke Sibieta, Amy Skipp, Professor Anna Vignoles, *Poor Grammar: Entry into Grammar Schools for disadvantaged pupils in England* (Sutton Trust, 2013), <http://www.suttontrust.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/11/poorgrammarreport-2.pdf>

<sup>48</sup> With the introduction of a Pupil Premium, schools receive additional funding for admitting poorer and harder to educate pupils.

<sup>49</sup> The number of schools rated Outstanding by Ofsted between 2009 and 2014 has varied from 9% to 13%. See for more information: <http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/resources/latest-official-statistics-maintained-school-inspections-and-outcomes>

<sup>50</sup> 'In the 2015 to 2016 financial year, schools will receive the following funding for each child registered as eligible for free school meals at any point in the last 6 years: £1,320 for primary-aged pupils, £935 for secondary-aged pupils. Schools will continue to receive £1,900 for each child who: has been looked after for 1 day or more; has been adopted from care; has left care under a special guardianship order, or a residence order, or a child arrangement order'. See for more information: <https://www.gov.uk/pupil-premium-information-for-schools-and-alternative-provision-settings>

<sup>51</sup> The Children's Commission on Poverty, *At what cost? Exposing the impact of poverty on school life* (London: The Children's Society, 2014), <http://www.childrenssociety.org.uk/what-we-do/resources-and-publications/publications-library/at-what-cost-exposing-the-impact-of-poverty-on-school-life-full-report>

<sup>52</sup> The 2006 Education and Inspection Act extended rights to free home to school transport for low income families to one of their three nearest schools, where they are between 2 and 6 miles away, to remove the lack of affordable transport as a barrier to choice for these families (see the 2006 School Admissions Code)