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Last Updated: Friday, 18 January 2008, 13:41 GMT

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Call for ban on catchment areas

School catchment areas should be banned to stop richer parents buying their way into good schools through the housing market, researchers have said.



House prices often rocket near a good school

Admissions policies favour parents who know how to use school information like league tables and those who can afford to pick where they live, they add.

The University of London team argued this was partly why the current system exacerbated existing inequalities.

Opportunities for those from poorer families remain limited, they added.

The report, which is part of the Cambridge Review of primary education, said although there were increasing opportunities for those with good qualifications, access to these was often linked to economic background.

“ There is good cause for concern that choice and competition does not work in favour of those from low socio-economic groups, ”

Report

Research shows children of parents who are in the poorest fifth of the population tend to do worse than those of the richest fifth of the population.

Catchment areas are particularly pertinent when a school is in high demand.

Once places reserved for those in local authority care and siblings of existing pupils have been allocated - the majority of schools allocate places on the basis of proximity to the school.

The study said: "In a climate where parents know a lot about schools (for example the Performance Tables), this encourages people to reside near what they perceive to be good schools.

"Such a policy discriminates in favour of those who can afford to choose exactly where to live.

"There is good cause for concern that choice and competition does not work in favour of those from low socio-economic groups," it added.

Market mechanism

This was because parents were not equal in their ability to

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exercise choice of use information.

"A fundamental reform of admissions policy (for example, prohibiting schools to discriminate on the basis of residence) would do much to level the playing field in terms of educational opportunities," the researchers concluded.

This could reduce the large inequalities that appear later in terms of wages and social mobility, they argued.

The report also argued that the application of choice and the market to the school system was also problematic.

"Schools are not like businesses; they do not close down when they no longer make a profit and hence there is no automatic market mechanism to trigger the exit of failing schools,"

This means that pupils at failing schools will remain there for a considerable period of time, the report argued.

Schools minister Jim Knight said all children should attend a good school and have the opportunity to secure the best jobs in later life - regardless of their background.

'Widening gap'

This was why the government had introduced a new admissions code to outlaw unfair and covert admissions practices.

"Catchment areas must reflect the broader local community and must not exclude particular areas to penalise low income families.

"A ban would undermine the right of schools and councils to decide their own admissions policies - and there is no way parents will support this.

"There is no need for further reform of the admissions system. However, reducing inequalities between rich and poor children is about more than admissions and is a top priority for this government."

Shadow schools minister Nick Gibb said the government was not doing enough to reverse the widening gap between poor pupils and the rest.

"The way to expand educational opportunity and close the gap is to focus on the basics, making sure every child can read after two years in primary school."

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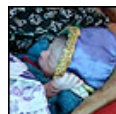
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