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Catchment areas should be abolished in an attempt to stop middle class parents buying their way into the most popular schools, a major report has said.

Government policies to promote choice for parents by encouraging schools to compete with each other for pupils threaten to make social divisions worse, the study warned.

Research published as part of the Cambridge University-based Primary Review called for a radical overhaul of school admissions to give working class families more choice.

Professor Stephen Machin and Dr Sandra McNally, from the University of London, warned that divisions between rich and poor have been increasing in recent decades.

"It is possible that some aspects of primary education discriminate in favour of higher income groups and thereby exacerbate existing inequalities," the report said.

"For example, current admissions policies favour parents who not only know how to use published information about school standards - for example from Ofsted inspections and performance tables - but can also afford to choose exactly where to live.

"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 warned that the policies of governments since the 1980s to turn school services into a "market" could make social divisions worse. Politicians have promised more choice for parents and want to encourage competition between schools.

The study said: "The belief governing such initiatives is that they lead to improved productivity in the education system. However, the UK evidence shows mixed results. Choice and competition may exacerbate educational inequalities. Parents are not equal in the extent to which they can exercise choice."

Schools Minister Jim Knight said: "There is no need for a ban on catchment areas. The tough new law is already crystal clear: catchment areas must reflect the broader local community and must not exclude particular areas to penalise low-income families. There is no need for further reform of the admissions system."

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