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Scrapping admissions system would 'reduce inequality'

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Scrapping the school admissions system that allocates places by postcode would help reduce inequality in achievement between rich and poor pupils, according to research published today.

Targeting disadvantaged schools, families and areas for special assistance both in education and other social policy would also help bridge the divide, found the latest set of Primary Review reports from the independent inquiry into primary education.

But the report authors, Prof Stephen Machin and Dr Sandra McNally of London University, were sceptical about the benefits of measures to increase parental choice and make schools more competitive.

"Declining pupil rolls may aggravate this concern if this leads schools to become more competitive. However, policies to address the educational inequality between different socio-economic groups (including reform of admissions policies) would seem to be an important way forward in dealing with these concerns," they said.

The reports found that a huge divide exists between the educational achievements of poor pupils and their counterparts and stress that basic literacy and numeracy should be made universal to reduce social inequality.

"An important challenge for the primary education sector is to get more people to a level where they have the basic skills in literacy and numeracy, thus equipping them to learn when in secondary school and when they enter the labour market," they said.

Improvements in the quality of primary education would help to reduce future wage inequalities in the long-term.

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

The new statutory school admissions code, he said, would outlaw unfair and covert admission practices and no further reform was needed.

He added: "However, reducing inequalities between rich and poor children is about more than admissions and is a top priority for this government."

He said targets had reduced the attainment gap by four percentage points at key stage 2 for English and key stage 4 over the past four years. And a £21bn investment since 1997, planned personalised learning and raising the leaving age to 18 would help.

Shadow schools minister Nick Gibb accused the government of 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," he said.

The Conservatives would promote synthetic phonics and replace the current key stage 1 test with a standardised reading test after the second year in primary school, he added.

Liberal democrat shadow schools secretary David Laws said the reports highlight the vital importance of education in eradicating poverty.

"Improvements in primary education would have far-reaching effects by ensuring children from disadvantaged backgrounds aren't left behind," he said.

He added: "Choice must be a reality for all parents, and there must be a coherent programme for improving standards in every school."

His party's "pupil premium" would help target disadvantaged children and allow schools to introduce their own initiatives to drive up standards free from Whitehall interference, he said.

The National Union of Teachers' general secretary, Steve Sinnott, said the studies showed the "continuing and deep confusion" about what primary education is for, and the damage caused by policy obsessions with creating choice and a diversity of different types of schools.

He said: "The Primary Review finally puts the nail in the coffin of arguments for choice and competition. The aims of achieving equity outlined in the recent Children's Plan are fundamentally at odds with the principles of choice and competition set out in the recent education acts.

"They exacerbate educational segregation and inequality between children from disadvantaged and advantaged families."

The emphasis in the Children's Plan on enjoyment of learning and play should become the dominant approach to primary education, he said.

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