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From The Times

January 18, 2008

Middle class 'monopolise' the best schools

A report is calling for the best-rated primary schools to hold lotteries for places to prevent eager parents from manipulating the system

Nicola Woolcock

Middle-class parents obsessed with Ofsted reports and league tables are colonising the best primary schools, forcing poorer children into failing schools and ruining their chances in life, researchers claim.

The Cambridge Primary Review – the biggest study of primary schools for decades – recommends that catchment areas should be scrapped because only wealthy parents can afford to buy houses next to the best primaries. Instead, oversubscribed schools would use a lottery system.

The research, by Stephen Machin and Sandra McNally, from the University of London, found that admissions procedures exacerbated inequalities.

Their report said: "Some aspects of primary education are geared in favour of helping higher income groups. Current admissions policies favour parents who not only know how to use published information about school standards such as Ofsted inspections and performance tables but can also afford to choose exactly where to live.

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"Prohibiting schools from discriminating on the basis of residence would do much to level the playing field in terms of educational opportunities. It would reduce the large inequalities that appear later in terms of wages and intergenerational mobility."

The report said that a person's success in the labour market was influenced by his or her primary education. It said: "Differences in educational progress start very early, widen as children age and lead to substantial differences in later attainment levels."

Dr McNally told The Times that schools should be banned from choosing pupils according to where they live.

"They could still give preferential treatment to siblings of pupils already at the school, but then there should be a lottery system," she said. "That was adopted in the whole of Brighton & Hove as a fairer system. Quite how far children could be bussed to other schools would need to be worked out, but the local authority could organise some help with that. It's a really vital area and an obvious way of making things fairer."

She admitted that scrapping catchment areas would upset a lot of people, "particularly those who had bought houses near schools".

The report also criticised the market-based approach to education, backed by successive governments, which encourages competition between schools. "Choice and competition may exacerbate educational inequalities," it said. "The inability to exercise choice can lead to educational segregation, with children from disadvantaged families having to make do with the schools that more advantaged parents do not want to send their children to.

"Schools are not like businesses: they do not close down when they no longer make a profit."

John Dunford, of the Association of School and College Leaders, said: "There's strong evidence that collaboration between schools raises standards, whereas excessive competition and market-based policies create polarisation, which makes the task of some schools particularly difficult."

Another report for the review studied the history of primary education. It found that 100 years ago schools "played down intellectual aims and put more stress on practical activities, particularly those required by an industrious and unselfish workforce".



"It looked as if Heat magazine had written the BBC and ITN headlines this week" Mick Hume

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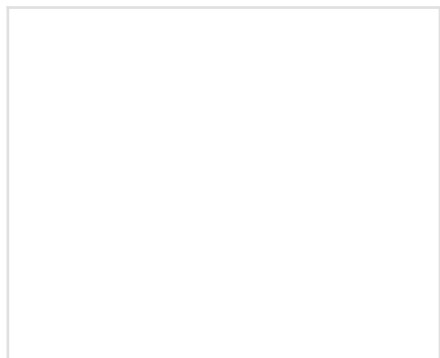
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