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FEATURE FOCUS



Family Adventure

Selection by lottery could be just the ticket

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In little over a month's time, more than a million children will find out if they have been accepted by the state school of their choice.

So-called "Admissions Day" 2008 will represent the first significant test of the Government's much-hyped code of practice, which regulates the way primary, secondary and special schools allocate places. For the first time, they are officially banned from interviewing parents, asking for "supplementary" information or requiring children to buy expensive uniforms - essentially, putting all pupils on an equal footing, irrespective of social class or their parent's own education.

Controversially, it also gives local councils - and individual schools, such as the Government's city academies, which control their own admissions - the power to select pupils using "lotteries", intended to stop affluent parents moving next door to a popular school to make sure their children get a place.

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On March 3, particular attention will focus on Brighton, which has become the first local authority in England to move wholesale to a lottery-based admissions system.

The city has been divided into six school districts, with pupils expected to go to a secondary in their own area. If schools are over-subscribed, names will be picked using an electronic ballot rather than the conventional method of distance to the school gates.

Support for the system - giving rich and poor an equal chance of getting in - gathered pace this week.

In a report published today by Cambridge University, it is recommended that all catchment areas are scrapped to stop schools handing out desks "on the basis of residence"

and, earlier this week, Philip Hunter, the chief schools adjudicator, said the use of lotteries had considerable merits.

Jim Knight, the schools minister, said yesterday that too many schools are continuing to ignore the Government's new admissions code.

Ministers identified 79 schools which have been the subject of parental complaints in the past 12 months, and said there was anecdotal evidence that "non-compliance" with the Government's new code may be far wider.

Last night, a spokesman for the Department for Children, Schools and Families said it was "nonsense" to claim that ministers want to dictate the admissions policies of individual schools. "Councils and schools have the power to decide their own arrangements free from Whitehall interference - as long as it's within the law," said a spokesman.

But as concerns continue to grow over the inability of deprived pupils to get into the best schools - the gap between rich and poor in terms of GCSE results has barely narrowed under Labour, and today's Cambridge University study says admission "inequalities" are to blame - it may not be long before we find the Brighton experiment is replicated elsewhere.

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