



Minister warns schools accused of breaking law on admissions

- Attempts to assess parents reported to watchdog
- Unfair and covert practices 'must be stamped out'

Polly Curtis and **James Meikle**
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Ministers have warned schools they will crack down on any breaches of a new admissions code after it emerged that nearly 80 schools have been reported to the admissions watchdog and accused of covertly selecting more able students.

The schools minister, Jim Knight, has told local authorities to follow the code after reports that some schools are ignoring or circumventing the new rules, which aim to prevent schools from interviewing parents or adopting prohibitively expensive school uniforms.

Knight said that the vast majority of schools had followed the new code on admissions. But he added: "I am very concerned that formal complaints and other anecdotal evidence suggest that some local authorities and schools are not complying with the law.

"No ifs or buts - there is absolutely no excuse not to comply with the law to stamp out unfair and covert admission practices which penalise low-income families and increase social segregation."

Complaints received by the schools adjudicator include parents being asked to supply marriage or birth certificates as part of supplementary forms which are being seen as an attempt by schools to assess parents and how supportive they will be of their child's education. Children in care are not always being given the highest priority - as required by law - and some schools have attempted to find out which order parents put their schools in so they can select only those who made the school their number one preference.

Academics today report that using postcodes to pick children is still giving middle class children an unfair advantage in the state system because their parents can afford to move closer to the school.

A paper commissioned by the independent Alexander inquiry into primary education in England says that scrapping the system would do much "to level the playing field". Stephen Machin and Sandra McNally of London University argue that the home advantage "discriminates in favour of those who can afford to choose exactly where they live".

A handful of local authorities, most notably Brighton, have recently introduced a lottery system to allocate places instead, and the schools

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adjudicator this week backed it as a fairer alternative.

Knight admitted at a select committee of MPs this week that parents in some rural areas would not be able to have their choice of school and the schools commissioner said there were problems for oversubscribed inner-city schools too.

The shadow children's secretary, Michael Gove, said: "Instead of rationing access to a few good schools we need to create more good school places. The current system restricts excellence to a few. We would allow every parent the right to have their children educated in a good new school, by creating at least 200,000 new school places."

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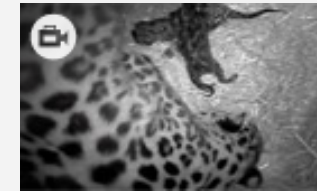
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