

challenging religious privilege

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national
secular
society

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Dear Mr Balls

Abuse of Admissions Codes

We are pleased that you have taken the initiative to investigate the operation of admissions code in schools at local authority level. It has however been an open secret for some years that faith schools in particular have abused their admission procedures to gain academically more promising children and those from more affluent families. There is persuasive independent evidence, for example from Rebecca Allen and Prof Anne West of the LSE, that faith schools pupils are considerably more affluent than those in their catchment areas.

We show below an extract of a Paper we have recently prepared on faith schools in which we draw particular attention to the abuses by schools that are their own admissions authorities.

The recently introduced code has clearly failed to stem such abuses which have grown in recent years. Given the implicitly large scale of abuse, we hope you will act decisively.

We are calling on you to:

1. End the privileged status of those schools – often faith schools – which are their own admission authority, given that this is where many of the abuses have been concentrated. Instead their admissions authority should be the local LEA.
2. Strengthen the code to make sure the abuses found are specifically proscribed. In particular, it must be made clear that no financial commitments must be required of parents at any stage, or even sought pre-admission.
3. Require a statutory declaration of every head teacher for each admissions round that the (hopefully revised) code has been followed, with breaches being a punishable by hefty fines on the school and the individual.

With best wishes
Yours sincerely

Keith Porteous Wood
Executive Director

An extract from our recently-completed NSS schools paper:

A new study from Sheffield Hallam University (2008) for the Education Department notes that:

Faith related criteria do not of themselves affect the social characteristics of the intake beyond the practice of a particular faith. However, in so far as there are correlations between membership of religious communities and socio-economic status then this criterion could affect the social characteristics of the intake. For example, if it were the case that families who were part of the Anglican community also tended to be more affluent and more educationally qualified, then a Church of England school with an over subscription criterion to be active in the faith would be likely to have a more advantaged intake.

And further:

Voluntary Aided schools are associated with compositional diversity by religion but also by social composition with voluntary aided schools having fewer children on free school meals than other schools in the area. Research conducted for the Sutton Trust (Sutton Trust 2006), found that in voluntary aided (faith) schools, the average proportion of pupils on free school meals was 5.6% compared with 14.6% for the surrounding areas.

The report's writers were concerned about the fact that faith schools were their own admissions authority: The Sutton Trust (Sutton Trust 2006) implicated admissions in the greater segregation of the 200 top performing comprehensive schools that are their own admission authorities. They found that there was a difference between schools that were their own admission authority (Voluntary Aided and Foundation schools) and those that were Community schools. The autonomous schools were highly unrepresentative of the geographical community within which they were located with 5.8 per cent of their pupils eligible for free school meals compared to 13.7 per cent of the pupils in their local area. By contrast, the Community schools in the top 200 were roughly representative of their area. The recent IPPR report (Tough and Brooks 2007) cited [Rebecca] Allen as finding that more generally, schools that are their own admission authorities are much more likely to have 'high ability' children and in this sense to be more highly unrepresentative of their local areas than Community Schools. The same finding is reported by Webber and Butler (2007).

We found in this current study that schools that are their own admission authority, particularly Voluntary Aided schools, used more than other schools, aspects of admission arrangements that lend themselves to covert social selection.

They more often:

- request supplementary information beyond the need to apply published criteria
- use oversubscription criteria that have the potential to socially discriminate
- select by aptitude
- use face to face meetings as part of the selection process
- have relatively complex arrangements
- have special application requirements about which parents had to be proactive

They less often:

- prioritised children in care or who had special educational needs.