

Top British state schools exclude working-class children

By Alice Summers
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Two recently released studies have shed further light on the extent to which social inequality impacts upon a child's educational achievement.

According to the report by the educational charity Teach First, children from the richest families dominate the UK's top state-run schools. Fully 43 percent of pupils at these schools, rated as "outstanding" by Ofsted (Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills), the regulatory government body, come from the wealthiest 20 percent of families.

Poor pupils are less than half as likely to go to an outstanding school as their richer peers, with only 18 percent of children from the most deprived 20 percent of families attending these institutions.

Much of this difference is due to the lack of availability of outstanding or "good" schools in deprived areas. While 93 percent of secondary schools in the wealthiest areas are outstanding or good, only two-thirds of schools in poor areas attain this Ofsted ranking.

Low-income areas are five times as likely to be served by a secondary school that is rated less than good. While only one in 14, or 7 percent, of secondary schools in the most affluent areas are ranked as "requires improvement" or "inadequate," the figure is as high as 36 percent in the poorest communities.

A similar study released by educational charity, the Sutton Trust, revealed that children eligible for Free School Meals (FSM)—an indicator of poverty-level family income—are roughly half as likely to attend one of the top 500 state schools in England. 17.2 percent of secondary school pupils received FSM in the average state school, compared to only 9.4 percent at the top 500 schools.

Roughly half of this discrepancy is due to the fact that high performing schools are usually concentrated

in affluent areas where few pupils from poor families can afford to live. However, even within these neighbourhoods, disproportionately few pupils on FSM are admitted, due to social selection, the report stated. Eighty-five percent of the schools ranking among the top 500 accept a smaller proportion of FSM pupils than they should in comparison to the number living in their catchment area. A quarter of these schools have a gap of five percentage points or more between the number of FSM pupils living in the area and the number they admit.

The social selectivity of a school is based on a combination of several main factors, including geographical proximity to a school, as well as schools giving priority to incoming students based on the primary school they attended, their previous academic attainment or their religious faith.

Among the top 500 schools, faith schools, which make up around a third of the list, have been shown to be the most socially selective. The proportion of FSM pupils at these schools—which are permitted to select up to 50 percent of their pupils based on religious faith—is 6 percent lower than the proportion living in the school's catchment area compared with an average of 2 percent fewer among the top non-faith schools.

As candidate pupils are assigned priority based on their proximity to nearby schools, many wealthy parents buy or rent a property based on a school's catchment area. House prices in desirable catchment areas have acquired eye-watering premiums. According to the Sutton Trust, the catchment area of a top 500 school attracts a premium of around £45,700, or 20 percent more than house prices elsewhere in the same local authority.

Research released in September by Savills estate agent revealed that the effective wealth qualification

for admission into a top state school has reached extraordinary and prohibitive heights: six of the country's top 30 schools now have catchment areas in which house prices are more than £100,000 above the regional average. The overwhelming majority of the population are priced out of these areas. A child's educational chances are therefore largely decided even before they enter school by being intimately linked with their family's wealth.

The Sutton Trust noted that getting admitted "into a high attaining school can be the key to getting on in life." The pupils that enter high performing schools are "more likely to go to a top university and succeed in getting into the best jobs. Yet the bottom line remains, your chances of gaining a place in those schools depends on your parents' income."

The study by Teach First further reveals that the social class is the defining factor in a child's educational chances no matter where they attend school. School quality, in fact, accounted for only one fifth of the variation in a pupil's achievement. "[The] remaining fourth-fifths is attributable to pupil-level factors, such as family background and the area in which they live—and family income makes a bigger difference than either the ethnicity gap or the gender gap."

The report noted that even if every child went to a secondary school ranked as outstanding, the achievement gap between the poorest and wealthiest pupils would only be cut by a fifth.

The immense educational barriers facing poor children continue past secondary school and into further and higher education. Only 24 percent of children eligible for FSM go on to attend higher education, in comparison to 42 percent of non-free school meals pupils. The odds of a child who receives FSM at secondary school being admitted to one of the UK's two most elite universities, Oxford and Cambridge, is only one in 1,500.

In response to the damning evidence of the social segregation of secondary school students, a Department of Education spokesperson released a statement announcing a set of reactionary proposals that will only further cement inequality.

The Conservative government is considering proposals to allow faith schools to admit a higher proportion of their students based on religion—further

increasing social selection—and to hasten the privatisation of schools by further outsourcing to independent institutions. "We plan to create more good school places in more parts of the country by scrapping the ban on new grammar schools," declared the spokesperson, "as well as harnessing the expertise and resources of our universities, and our independent and faith schools."

In the government's recent budget, Chancellor Philip Hammond announced plans to invest £320 million on "the creation of new academically selective free schools"—grammar schools in all but name.

There is overwhelming evidence that grammar schools do nothing to promote social mobility and primarily benefit the most privileged layers in society. Most recently, researchers at University College London and the Universities of Warwick and Bristol found that the most deprived 10 percent of families have only a 6 percent chance of attending a grammar school, compared to odds of 50 percent or more for those children coming from the wealthiest 10 percent. Children from the tiny elite of wealthy families in the top 1 percent have an 80 percent chance of going to a grammar.

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