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IMMEDIATE RELEASE

GOVERNMENT PLANS FOR SCHOOL ADMISSIONS OUT OF SYNC WITH PUBLIC OPINION

The views of the public on school admissions are often at odds with government proposals, according to latest findings from the National Centre for Social Research (NatCen). These findings have been submitted to the Government in response to its consultation on proposals for a new Admissions Code.

As part of the annual British Social Attitudes survey, around 2,000 members of the public in England were asked for their views about school choice in the summer of 2010.

The draft School Admissions Code proposes allowing popular schools to expand at the expense of weaker ones, to facilitate parental choice by making more places available at popular schools. This proposal assumes that more parents, as a result, will not send their child to the nearest state school – an assumption which sits at odds with public opinion:

- Six in ten (60%) agree that parents in general should send their children to the nearest state school.
- A further 22% indicated they would agree with this idea if the “quality and social mix of pupils were more equal” across all schools.

Government plans to abolish area-wide lottery systems for allocating school places do seem to be in keeping with public opinion:

- When asked about the best way to allocate places in an over-subscribed school, fewer than one in ten (8%) supported using ballots to select pupils.
- However, the majority preference was for giving priority to those who lived closest to the school; two in three (66%) thought this was the best option. Just 14% support the idea that an over-subscribed school should be able to decide for itself which children to admit.

Overall, a majority of the English public supports the government having a role in relation to school admissions and the allocation of secondary school places, though views on what the extent of this role should be are mixed:

- Just one third (33%) feel that the government should not have any role – and that individual parents and schools should make decisions.
- 35% think the government’s role should be to make certain actions, which parents might undertake to secure school places, illegal – but it should have

Press Release

no role beyond this.

- Three in ten (28%) think that the government's role should be to create detailed policies and monitor the allocation of school places, to ensure a good social mix is achieved in all schools.

Dr Sonia Exley of the London School of Economics and Political Science, who led the Economic and Social Research Council-funded study, said:

“These findings imply support for the principle of ‘the nearest school’ among more than four-fifths of the public, albeit qualified with concerns about the extent to which current inequalities between state schools compromise educational standards. Education Secretary Michael Gove has suggested that the Government’s revisions to the Admissions Code would ensure weaker schools in England feel the squeeze in terms of numbers and funding. However, this raises concerns that existing neighbourhood inequalities between schools would be exacerbated, rather than reduced – making it more difficult for parents to feel they can send their child to the nearest school.

“In addition, the finding that only 14% believe over-subscribed schools should be able to decide for themselves which children to admit suggests limited public support for government plans to increase numbers of schools with enhanced autonomy over their own admissions”

ENDS

Notes to the Editors

1. NatCen, Britain’s largest independent social research organisation, aims to promote a better-informed society through high quality social research (www.natcen.ac.uk).
2. These findings form part of an Economic and Social Research Council-funded study on school choice (RES-000-22-3989), undertaken by Dr Sonia Exley at the London School of Economics and Political Science, in collaboration with the National Centre for Social Research (NatCen).
3. Full findings from this project will appear in the 28th British Social Attitudes survey report, to be published in the autumn of 2011.
4. For more information on the ESRC-funded project on school choice, contact Sonia Exley, s.exley@lse.ac.uk, 020 7955 7348. For more information on the British Social Attitudes Survey, contact Liz Clery, liz.clery@natcen.ac.uk, 0207 549 7071.

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Press Release

Appendix

Agreement with view that, in Britain, parents in general should send their children to their nearest state school, 2010

	%
Agree	60
Agree, but only if the quality of schools and their social mix of pupils was more equal	22
Neither agree nor disagree	9
Disagree	6
<i>Base</i>	<i>1882</i>

Base: respondents living in England

Views about the best way to decide how places at an over-subscribed school should be allocated, 2010

	%
Give priority to those children who live closest to the school	66
Allow the school to choose which children to admit	14
Hold a ballot to select at random which children to admit	8
Can't choose	11
<i>Base</i>	<i>1587</i>

Base: respondents living in England

Press Release

What role the government should have in the allocation of secondary school places, 2010

The government should ...	%
... not have any role – it should be up to individual parents and schools to determine which secondary schools children attend.	33
... make certain actions which parents might undertake to secure places at particular secondary schools illegal (such as deliberately providing inaccurate information about their main address) but should play no further role .	35
... create detailed policies and monitor the allocation of secondary school places to ensure that a good social mix of children is achieved in all schools.	28
Don't know	4
<i>Base</i>	1882

Base: respondents living in England