

PTA Admissions Sub-Committee
St Benedicts Catholic High School
Kinwarton Road
Alcester

3-11-06

Dear Sir

Dfes Response

Under 2.5(b) of the proposed changes to the Admissions Code you effectively outlaw first preference arrangements, subject to 2.6, which says that such a policy may be permitted, if all schools agree, and the area is not selective. It is precisely in areas of selection that first preference can be most helpful to those non-selective schools (who you ought to be supporting) in their attempts not to accept the rejects from the 11+.

We formed as a group of parents who wish to campaign against attempts to take away our school's "first preference" policy, which we feel will result in our school being reduced to the status of a 'secondary modern'.

We feel the department has not grasped the impact that the removal of 'first preference' will have in areas of 'selective education'. The banning of first preference will only help grammar schools (and their aspirant pupils), so disapproved of by this Labour government. First preference persuades many able pupils to come to non-selective schools, and so help raise standards there.

We come at this issue from a common standpoint to that of the government, that selection based on ability at the age of 11 is wrong. Indeed the government stated in its Response to the Education and Skills Committee: School Admissions: "we do not support academic selection at age eleven and we do not wish to see it extended". It seems incomprehensible that the department have pointed in particular to selective areas as being those which must not have first preference. This would mean, in effect, allowing every child the 'right' to sit the 11+, and then, on failure, to come to the 'bog standard' secondary modern. Does the department not see that this would give the grammars an even wider pool to make their selection from?

The school at which we all have children attending is a case in point where the exercise of 'first preference' allows a school in a 'selective' area to operate more as a 'comprehensive school' rather than as a 'secondary modern'. We are not arguing against grammar schools or their existence.

Our example is somewhat complicated by it being a Catholic school and operating within the Diocese of Birmingham where first preference is disapproved of because it may mean that a Catholic child putting the school second (by electing to sit the 11+) and who then fails the 11+ may miss out on a place at St Benedicts because a child of another, or no faith, has put St Benedict's first. In this instance the Diocese wishes for Catholic children sitting the 11+ effectively to have two first choices. In selective areas the government proposals would also allow children sitting the 11+ two first choices. It is

precisely because of selection that first preference is one of the few tools we had to draw in able students – in other words to have a balanced intake.

The DfES stated last year that “first preference does not work well in areas of selection”. The only sense that can be made of this is that first preference does not work well for the aspirant (but unsuccessful) grammar school child. But that is due to the effect of selection, and not of first preference. We feel that what the Department has not grasped is the effect on successful **schools** such a move away from first preference would have.

We would contend that first preference in a selective area should be viewed differently from elsewhere. Of course this anomalous treatment is brought about by the government’s failure to ‘deal’ with selective schools. If the government is to maintain them as anomalies it must accept the need for anomalous treatment of other schools in such an area.

The arguments we see as supporting first preference run as follows:

1. Two first choices.
 - a. Parents opting for their children to sit the 11+ and whose children fail that test would be exercising a second first preference if they were then viewed in the same light as all other children applying to local schools. In our case, Catholics would be able to sit the 11+, and then, if they fail, suddenly find their faith, and exercise their ‘right’ to come to our school. We feel the recent Adjudication on this very point to be simply wrong.
2. Standards
 - a. The declared aim of the government is to improve school standards, as measured by exam results. In selective areas, if a child that has failed the 11+ is then treated in an equivalent way with all other children in that area then the other schools in that area have become, by default, Secondary Moderns. It seems hard to believe that a government committed to eradicating ‘bog standard comprehensives’ intends to achieve this laudable aim by the re-introduction of Secondary Moderns.
 - b. It seems difficult to believe that standards in a schools are likely to rise if the brightest children have already been creamed off. Professor David Jesson has written of the effect that a few able children can have on standards throughout an entire school, and has expressed sympathy for our situation.
 - c. By disallowing first preference in a selective area the government would be denying a non-selective school the right to create its own admissions policy. It would always be forced to operate as some kind of second class secondary modern. The grammar school, however, with the governments help, **is** free to select its own pupils. You state at 2.4 that the selection of children by schools is unfair, yet you, a supposed Labour government, are proposing to extend the traditional cherry-picking of grammars by allowing them to do exactly this, and at the same time, deny other schools (who you ought to be ideologically supportive of) the right to ask its applicants to show commitment to the school by putting it first.

3. Timing

- a. It seems that the government is proposing that in selective areas the operation of admissions selection will take place after the 11+ passes have been decided on and the passes taken out of the equation, thus, again, reinforcing the status of Secondary Modern on all other local schools.

In the example of St Benedict's the existence of first preference being operated by a non-selective school within a selective area has enabled the school to excel. St Benedict's was a 'beacon' school, consistently coming near the top of national league tables in terms of exam results and is arguably the Diocese of Birmingham's most successful school. The school has achieved this by using the operation of first preference to crystallize the risk to local Catholic children who might consider opting to sit for one of the local grammar schools. If the child then fails the 11+ they would also run the risk of missing out on a place at St Benedict's. This may seem unduly tough on the children considering to try for a place at one of the selective schools but in reality it is not. St Benedict's does not want its selection criteria dictated by the local selective schools, being forced to accept the children they reject. Neither does it want 'flag of convenience' Catholics who discover their Catholicism only when it allows them to exercise a middle ground option between the local selective and secondary modern schools.

We would like more details of the "experience" mentioned in last year's proposed code where it was stated that first preference does not "work well". In our area, it works perfectly well, and we point to the results at St Benedicts as shining testament to the successful effect of a first preference policy in a selective area.

The result has been that many of the brighter children have opted for St Benedicts, resulting in improved standards. Children attending St Benedicts are no longer branded as 11+ failures, a tag that has, and continues in our area, to blight the educational career of many children at secondary moderns.

We would be grateful if in considering the responses to the consultation that you give due weight to the impact of denying the right of schools in selective areas to operate a 'first preference' policy.

Yours faithfully

St Benedicts PTA Sub-Committee