

# 4. School choice

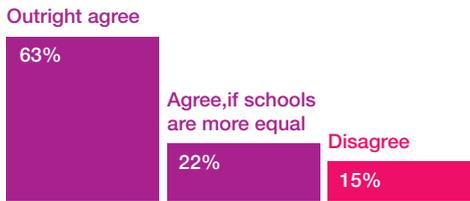
## Parental freedom to choose and educational equality

Two considerations influence policy and thinking around school choice – the importance of parents having the freedom to choose and the potential impact of this choice on educational equality. The government recently consulted on a new Schools Admissions Code which seeks to increase parental choice by allowing the most popular schools to expand. What does the public think about secondary school choice and how much parental freedom and educational equality matter?

**People generally believe parents have a right to choose their children’s schools – but in practice view children attending their local schools as important.**

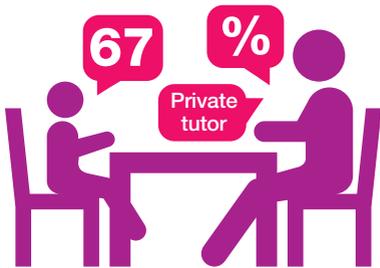
# 67%

Almost seven in ten (67%) agree parents should have a **basic right** to choose their children’s schools.



But an even larger proportion think parents in general should send their children to **the nearest state school**. 63% support this idea outright and a further 22%, who do not support this idea outright, would do so if schools were more equal in their quality and their mix of pupils.

**There is mixed public support for the different measures some parents take to improve their child’s chances of gaining places at particular schools.**



A majority approve of helping children to revise for tests (90%) or paying for a **private tutor** (67%), to improve their chances of gaining a place at a particular school. Far fewer – 36% – approve of moving house to be near a higher-performing school while just 6% in each case approve of renting a second address or using a relative’s address.



Six in ten (61%) think the **quality of education should be the same for all children** while four in ten (38%) think parents who can afford it should be able to pay for better education.

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For more than 20 years in Britain, the topic of secondary school choice has been an enduring focus of popular debate and policy making. There have been long-running debates about the extent to which parents have a ‘right’ to send their children to private schools or schools that select on ability, to avoid their local secondary schools and to move house to be nearer ‘better’ schools. Politicians such as Diane Abbott and Harriet Harman have been criticised for choosing private or selective schools for their children and pressure groups have been formed – both in defence of comprehensive education and to promote parental rights in this area. Parents’ ‘right to choose’ schools for their children has been enshrined in government policy since the 1988 Education Reform Act in England and Wales – and the 1981 Education (Scotland) Act. This right is reflected in Article 26 of the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which states that “parents have a prior right to choose the kind of education that shall be given to their children” (United Nations, 2011). However, more recent policies have sought to regulate and limit parental choice, including ‘banded’ school admissions systems and Brighton’s ‘lottery’ system for allocating school places,<sup>1</sup> both of which have caused considerable controversy (Lipsett, 2007; Stewart, 2005). The coalition government is currently consulting on a new Schools Admissions Code, which would allow popular schools to expand – facilitating greater choice for parents, but also potentially resulting in less popular schools losing out in terms of pupil numbers and funding (Department for Education, 2011).

These debates and developments reflect a tension regarding the values which should underpin school admissions systems. Two conflicting schools of thought exist. On the one hand, it is argued that priority should be given to parental freedom. Academics supporting this view (Tooley, 1996; Hargreaves, 1996; Chubb and Moe, 1992) believe parents should be able to choose which school to send their children to, the ‘best’ they can achieve within the means available to them. Government involvement, in terms of managing school admissions or banning certain types of school, is regarded as an unacceptable constraint on parents’ freedom and choice regarding their children’s upbringing. A second school of thought, however, views a focus on freedom of choice as at odds with principles of community and equality in education. Writers supporting this view refer to the notion of ‘the common school’ – underlying this concept is the assumption that schools should serve a mix of children across all social backgrounds and religions, urging against extensive parental choice (Pring, 2008; Levinson, 1999). Research involving interviews with families (Gewirtz *et al.*, 1995; Reay and Ball, 1997; Vincent, 2001; Ball, 2003) has highlighted varying experiences of school choice for parents from different social backgrounds. Middle-class families are more able to pay to send their children to exclusive private schools and more likely to secure places in high-performing selective (‘grammar’) schools and the best-performing non-selective state schools, relegating others to unpopular schools with the worst resources. Some feel that, with an increased emphasis on parental choice, the risks of increased polarisation between schools<sup>2</sup> in wealthy and disadvantaged neighbourhoods are significant. It is argued that “vilified” schools (Coldron *et al.*, 2001) suffering from an absence of middle-class parental input will lose pupils and funding, sinking into “spirals of decline”, with pupils suffering accordingly. Such polarisation between schools would be problematic,

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given quality of education has been shown to strongly influence life chances, with a poor education leading to poorer jobs, lower income and lower living standards. Many therefore believe school choice should not be promoted, as it would make an unequal society (where inequalities between schools and neighbourhoods already exist) even more unequal, and that parents should simply support their local school.

Academics have attempted to reconcile these two schools of thought. Adam Swift (2003) and Harry Brighouse (2000) discuss the idea of 'legitimate parental partiality' and consider which 'partial' actions it should be legitimate for parents to take in relation to their children's education, without upsetting the balance between freedom and equality. Swift argues that, while it might be fair for parents to make some choices about their children's education, sending them to private or selective schools, which significantly improve life chances relative to others, is very problematic. Brighouse argues that although the right for parents to choose schools could be defended in a society that was relatively equal, within Britain today, where there is not a 'level playing field', extensive parental choice in education conflicts with principles of social justice to an unacceptable degree.

This chapter examines, for the first time, the attitudes of the British public to school choice and the views and concerns which inform their thinking. We start by exploring public support for the different ways of thinking about school choice described previously and seek to identify where people draw the line in balancing parents' freedom to choose schools with ideas of equality and fairness. We then consider how far the public think it is acceptable for parents to prioritise, and undertake activities to improve, their own children's educational chances relative to others, in terms of the schools they attend. We next examine how attitudes vary across the public, focusing on whether certain sections of society have distinctive views about school choice. Finally, we consider what public attitudes suggest about current government policy, popular debates and academic thinking in the area of school choice and how these should be taken on board in the future.

### **Support for parental choice**

We begin by examining support for the right of parents to choose their children's schools. Respondents were asked whether they agreed or disagreed that:

#### *Parents should have a basic right to choose their child's school*

To further test commitment by highlighting a possible negative consequence of such an approach, respondents were also asked whether, in Britain today:

#### *Parents have a duty to choose the best possible school for their child, even if this means schools in the local area might suffer*

As shown in Table 4.1, there is considerable support for parents' right to choose their children's schools; more than two-thirds (68 per cent) agree parents should have this basic right. There is also support for the idea that parents have a duty to choose the best possible school for their child, even where other schools might suffer, with around half (50 per cent) agreeing, although a slightly higher proportion (21 per cent compared with 10 per cent) object to this than to the concept of choice, when a negative

consequence is not mentioned. Slightly more than two in ten neither agree nor disagree with each statement, suggesting a degree of uncertainty or ambivalence about this issue.

**Table 4.1 Support for parents' right to choose their children's school**

		Agree strongly	Agree	Neither agree nor dis- agree	Dis- agree	Dis- agree strongly	Can't choose	Base
Parents have basic right to choose their child's school	%	20	47	21	8	1	1	1870
Parents have a duty to choose the best possible school, even if schools in the local area might suffer	%	12	38	27	18	3	2	1870

What does this majority support for parents' right to choose their children's school mean in practice? Do people believe parental choice is fundamentally important or do they support the principle because they believe a parent should be able to avoid their local school in specific circumstances – for instance when they feel it is inadequate or would not meet their child's needs? Research by Adler *et al.*, (1989, p. 113) has concluded that parents tend to “satisfice” rather than “optimise” when it comes to school choice; it is “a matter of finding a satisfactory alternative to the district school rather than making an optimum choice from a large range of possible schools”. This might suggest that what is viewed as important is having a good local school, rather than a wide range of schools from which to choose. To explore public attitudes to this issue, we asked respondents if they agreed or disagreed that:

***In Britain today, parents in general should send their children to their nearest state school***

Those who did not agree were then asked:

***What if the quality of different schools and their social mix of pupils was more equal? Would you agree that parents in general should then send their children to their nearest state school?***

Responses to both questions are shown in Table 4.2. Despite broad support for the right of parents to choose schools, more than eight in ten (85 per cent) believe that parents should send their children to the nearest state school. More than six in ten support this view outright while, for more than two in ten, their agreement is tempered by a concern about unequal quality and social mixes of pupils between schools.

Fewer than one in ten disagree unconditionally with the sentiment that parents should send their children to the nearest state school.

**Table 4.2 Belief that parents should send their children to the nearest state school**

In Britain today, parents in general should send their children to the nearest state school	%
Agree	63
Agree, if quality and social mixes of pupils between schools was more equal	22
Neither agree nor disagree	9
Disagree	6
<i>Base</i>	2216

To understand which factors the public think are important in the allocation of school places, we also asked respondents:

*Now please think about a school where more parents have asked for a place for their children than there are places available.*

*Which of these options do you think would be the best way of deciding which children should go to that school?*

The options presented, and the proportions of respondents who selected each, are shown in Table 4.3. They lend further support to the idea that the public prioritises locality as a factor, when thinking about the allocation of school places. Nearly seven in ten think an oversubscribed school should prioritise those children who live closest, while around one in ten state the school should be allowed to decide which children to admit, or that places should be allocated using a ballot.

**Table 4.3 Views on best way of allocating places at an oversubscribed school**

	%
Give priority to those children who live closest to the school	67
Allow the school to choose which children to admit	14
Hold a ballot to select at random which children to admit	8
<i>Base</i>	2216

So, the public rank the location of a school as an important factor in determining which children should attend. But do they think school choice is a priority for schools? To explore this issue we asked respondents to choose from a list of priorities, presented in Table 4.4, the ones they thought it was most important for schools to achieve (although, it would be the government who would be likely to facilitate these in practice).

Parental freedom to choose does not rank highly in the public's priorities for schools. Fewer than one in twenty feel facilitating choice for parents should be schools' most important priority, compared with two-thirds who feel schools should prioritise all children, however able, doing the best they can. Four times as many as those prioritising choice for parents prioritise ensuring children from poor backgrounds do as well as children from better-off backgrounds. Thus, it is interesting to note stronger support for prioritising equality than for prioritising parental freedom. These findings show that people in Britain do support the idea of choice in relation to schools – but that this support is tempered and, in some instances, contradicted by a commitment to other ideas.

**Table 4.4 Priorities which it is most important for schools to achieve**

Most important priority for schools to achieve	%
Make sure all children, however able they are, do the best they can	67
Make sure that parents have a lot of choice about the kind of school their child goes to	4
Get the number of children who leave school with no qualifications down as low as possible	7
Make sure that children from poor backgrounds do as well as those from better off backgrounds	16
<i>Base</i>	1870

In practice, facilitating school choice requires measures to help parents have a choice in reality, as well as in theory. For many families, the area in which they live and their income level compromise choice – travelling to desirable schools further away is impractical and parents are unlikely to secure places in those schools because most are required to prioritise those who live closest. One measure introduced by the Labour government in England in 2006 was the payment of school travel expenses for low-income families to help their children attend schools further away. To ascertain public support for such initiatives to facilitate parental choice, respondents were asked about the following situation:

**There is stronger support for prioritising equality than for prioritising parental freedom**

*Say a parent on a low income wanted to send a child of theirs to a school some distance from their home, because they thought that school was better than the local school. But they cannot afford to pay the bus fare every day. What do you think should happen?*

As shown in Table 4.5, when this question was first asked in 2007, respondents were evenly split over whether the child should go to a local school or the government should pay travel expenses. Since then, support for the latter option has declined, with more than six in ten now saying the child should go to his or her local school. One explanation for this change might be that, while people think facilitating choice in this way is desirable during times of economic prosperity, they see it as a luxury and do not think it should be a priority during times of economic downturn, where cuts to public services are being made elsewhere.

**Table 4.5 Views on what should happen when a parent cannot afford bus fare for far-away school, 2007 and 2010**

	2007	2010
	%	%
The child should go to a local school	47	63
The government should pay the bus fare	49	33
<i>Base</i>	2022	2216

So far, we have seen that the public does believe parents have a right to make choices about schools – but that support for parental freedom to choose is also qualified, conditional and contradicted by support for other ideals. Given these views, we now turn to examine what actions the public think are legitimate for parents to take in relation to their own children, to influence and maximise the school choices available to them. How does the public balance the freedom of parents to act partially with the inevitable effects of such an approach on educational equality? Do people believe parents should only be concerned with their own children, or the needs and interests of all children?

### **Should parents prioritise their children over others?**

To explore the extent to which the public thinks parents should prioritise their own children over others, we asked respondents the following question:

**1 in 3**

**think government should pay bus fare to far-away school, down from 1 in 2 in 2007**

*Some people think it is important to put your child first when choosing a secondary school whilst other people think it is also important to consider all children's needs equally, including your own child's. Which of the statements on this card comes closest to your view?*

*Put your child first and leave other parents to do the same*

*Put your child first but also consider other children's needs and interests*

*Consider all children's needs and interests equally, including your own child's*

As shown in Table 4.6, most people (69 per cent) believe their own child should be prioritised over other children when it comes to choosing secondary schools. However, more than six in ten (61 per cent) believe the needs and interests of others should be considered to some degree, with almost three in ten believing parents should consider all children equally when choosing a secondary school. These findings suggest strong support for the idea that freedom and equality should be balanced with parental choice when parents are choosing schools – that there should be freedoms for parents to put their child first, but also that these should be kept within reasonable bounds.

**Table 4.6 How children's needs should be considered when choosing a secondary school**

	%
Put your child first and leave other parents to do the same	37
Put your child first but also consider other children's needs and interests	32
Consider all children's needs and interests equally, including your own child's	29
<i>Base</i>	<i>2216</i>

We have seen that a majority of the public thinks other children's needs and interests should be considered to some extent by a parent when choosing a secondary school for their child. Is this also the case for the various actions which parents might take to improve the school choices available for their own children? What actions are deemed acceptable and unacceptable, given their potential impact on the educational opportunities of those whose parents have not undertaken or could not undertake such actions?

**There should be freedoms for parents to put their child first, but these should be kept within reasonable bounds**

We asked about six different actions that parents might undertake to improve their children's chances of gaining a place at a particular school. These questions sought to test attitudes towards using different sorts of 'capital' to gain advantage for children. Helping children to revise for tests that will secure them places in selective schools can be considered an example of using 'cultural capital', while paying a private tutor is a use of 'economic capital', as is moving house to a 'better area'. Questions also tested attitudes towards less honest means of getting children into desirable schools. We explained to respondents:

*When selecting pupils, schools take account of different factors such as the pupil's ability, their religion, or where they live. There are sometimes things parents can do to improve their child's chances of gaining a place at a particular school. For each one, please say how much you approve or disapprove...*

- ...Helping children revise for exams or tests*
- ...Paying for a private tutor*
- ...Starting to get involved in local religious activities to help get their children into a high-performing faith school*
- ...Moving house to be nearer a higher-performing secondary school*
- ...Using a relative's address in order to be nearer a higher-performing secondary school*
- ...Renting a second home in order to be nearer a higher-performing secondary school but not generally living there*

As shown in Table 4.7, while nine in ten approve of helping children to revise for tests, a slightly lower proportion, almost seven in ten, approve of employing private tutors. Approval levels are much lower when it comes to other means by which parents might try to access schools. Less than four in ten approve of moving house to be nearer a higher-performing school and fewer than two in ten approve of becoming involved in religious activities to access faith schools. Very small proportions approve – and more than eight in ten disapprove – of parents using an address which is not their main one (or even their own) in order to access certain schools.

**Table 4.7 Approval of actions by parents to improve child's chances of accessing certain schools**

<b>% approve of...</b>	<b>%</b>
...helping children revise for exams or tests	90
...paying for a private tutor	67
...starting to get involved in local religious activities to help get their children into a high-performing faith school	16
...moving house to be nearer a higher-performing secondary school	36
...using a relative's address in order to be nearer a higher-performing secondary school	6
...renting a second home in order to be nearer a higher-performing secondary school but not generally living there	6

Base

2216

What do these responses tell us about the public's attitudes to the broader types of actions that parents might undertake to improve the school choices available to their children? These questions were analysed using a statistical technique called factor analysis (see Model 1 in the appendix to this chapter), which identified key underlying or latent attitudes towards different types of parental intervention. Helping children to revise for exams or tests and paying a private tutor were viewed as being similar to each other, but markedly different from other actions, which seem to be viewed collectively as manipulating the school choice system. With regard to helping children at home (the first two items), it is notable that people did not distinguish between the use of cultural and economic capital, but they did draw a distinction between one use of economic capital (paying a private tutor) and another (moving house). Moving house tended to be viewed as more in line with dishonest actions parents might undertake.

Broadly then, while some actions by parents are widely viewed as legitimate, others are not. Noden and West (2009) have highlighted a distinction between "procedural" and "substantive" fairness when it comes to school choice. While procedural fairness refers to rules ensuring no-one 'cheats the system', substantive fairness is concerned with equity. Given the extent to which inequalities may be exacerbated by parents employing private tutors to help their children access certain schools, patterns may be more influenced by procedural fairness than they are by substantive fairness. However, low approval of parents moving house to be nearer 'better' schools also suggests a concern with substantive fairness.

We asked an additional question to further explore public attitudes to parents' use of economic capital to improve the school choices available to their children. Respondents were asked:

***Should the quality of education be the same for all children, or should parents who can afford it be able to pay for better education?***

As demonstrated in Table 4.8, more than six in ten agree the quality of education children receive should be the same for everyone, with fewer than four in ten believing parents should be able to pay for better education for their own children.

**Table 4.8 Views about whether the quality of education should be the same for all**

	%
The quality of education should be the same for all children	61
Parents who can afford it should be able to pay for better education	38
<i>Base</i>	2216

We have seen so far that there is not a consensus among the public on the subject of school choice. To understand the reasons for the differences in opinion discussed previously, we now turn to consider whether attitudes to school choice vary across the population as a whole, and whether certain attitudes are more or less concentrated in particular sections of society.

### Explaining attitudes to school choice

Attitudes to school choice could vary across the population in a number of ways. Given that experiences of school choice have been shown to vary substantially by social class (Gewirtz *et al.*, 1995; Reay and Ball, 1997; Vincent, 2001; Ball, 2003), it may be that middle-class ‘winners’ in the school choice market are more likely than others to support choice. On the other hand, we might expect older groups to prioritise equality and fairness over choice compared to their younger counterparts, given the rise of consumerism in public services over the last three decades in Britain, replacing a post-war ‘social democratic consensus’. We might also expect to see differences in attitudes between parents and non-parents. Where people are faced with school choice decisions personally, as parents, might they think more individualistically about choice? Research has highlighted the way in which mothers tend to undertake the greatest degree of “emotional labour” when it comes to school choice (David *et al.*, 1994), so we might expect to see more pro-choice attitudes among women. Anxiety about choice might also arise among families seeking religious schools. Most such families are unlikely to have an ideal faith-based institution as their nearest school, so might be more likely to support choice. We might also expect to see greater support for parental choice in urban areas like London, where competition for school places is at its most intense. Experiences of education might also matter. Where parents hold specific views about an education they themselves have received, they may pass these views on to their children. Decisions made about schooling could also influence attitudes; if people have decided to send their children to private schools, it could mean they subsequently hold more individualist views. Finally, attitudes to choice could be explained by wider political attitudes. Showing concern for educational equality might be a proxy for left-wing values, so we might expect to see left-wing views among those rejecting school choice. Policies for choice are historically the realm of the Conservative Party, so, conversely, there may be greater support for these among Conservative supporters.

Identifying the characteristics which influence attitudes to school choice is a complex process. While people in London might be pro-choice, this may simply be because they share the characteristics of those who live in big cities. Similarly, while political identity might appear to explain attitudes, differences could result from the tendency for supporters of different parties to have certain socio-economic backgrounds. Multivariate analysis in the form of multiple and logistic regression was carried out; the results are presented in the appendix to this chapter (Tables A.1–A.6). Multivariate analysis allows us to account simultaneously for many possible factors that might explain attitudes to school choice, identifying which predict attitudes when their relationships with other factors are controlled for.

# 38%

believe parents should be able to pay for better education for their own children

Analysis was undertaken for support for the basic right of a parent to choose their children's school (Model 2), belief in putting one's child first (Model 3), agreement with choosing the best possible school even if this means others in the area might suffer (Model 4) and the view that parents in general should send children to the nearest state school (Model 5). We also explore attitudes towards parents 'working the school choice system' (Model 6), building on earlier factor analysis.<sup>3</sup> Levels of agreement with the idea that parents have a basic right to choose their children's school, by the characteristics found to independently predict attitudes to school choice, are presented in Tables 4.9–4.12 below.

### **Parents and their values**

Parents are significantly more likely than those without children to support a 'right to choose' (Model 2). As shown in Table 4.9, this is the case for around seven in ten parents and six in ten of those who do not have children. Parents with children under 16 – those who are arguably closest to school choice – are more likely to support this notion even where other schools might suffer (Model 4). In a similar vein, it is notable that women are confirmed as being more likely to support school choice (Model 2), and less likely to agree parents should stay local (Model 5). Models 2–6 all confirm a strong link between sending one's child to private school and holding more individualist views about choice, with stronger support for parental freedoms and extensive parental partiality among those who have 'gone private'; in Model 2, this is also the case for parents who have sent children to a selective school. As shown below, almost eight in ten of those who have sent a child to a private school agree that a parent has a right to choose their child's school, compared with less than seven in ten overall. These findings are unsurprising; parents may hold certain views as part of justifying decisions they have made or may have made these decisions because they hold such views.

Models 2–6 all indicate significant effects of age on attitudes towards school choice, irrespective of whether or not someone is a parent. Older respondents are more likely, across a range of questions, to take a more collectivist and less consumerist or individualist stance, providing some evidence to suggest that living through an earlier social democratic period for public services in Britain may contribute to explaining attitudes. However, beyond this, there also remain the effects on respondents of their parents' educational experiences. Those whose parents attended grammar schools and private schools are more likely than others to reject school choice, parental partiality or the notion that one's own child should come first. As discussed above, findings here may reflect 'middle-class guilt' among families regarding their own educational privilege. People who benefited most within a divisive educational system of grammar schools and secondary moderns in England and Wales (or senior and junior secondaries in Scotland) may also be those with the strongest sense among their cohort of the importance of educational equality, passing these values onto their children.



**Parents are significantly more likely than those without children to support a 'right to choose'**



**Table 4.9 Agreement parents should have a basic right to choose their child's school, by demographic characteristics and educational experience**

Demographic characteristic or educational experience	% agree parents have a basic right to choose their child's school	Base
All	68	1870
<b>Sex</b>		
Men	65	811
Women	70	1059
<b>Age</b>		
18–24	72	129
25–34	75	243
35–44	70	356
45–54	63	333
55–64	61	347
65+	68	460
<b>Parental status</b>		
Children under 16 living at home	72	663
Children over 16	68	716
No children	62	491
<b>Educational experience of respondent and family</b>		
Respondent went to private school	73	161
Sibling went to private school	76	115
Sent child to private school	78	133
Respondent went to selective school	66	309
Sibling went to selective school	62	197
Sent child to selective school	78	105
Parent went to selective/private school	60	275

**A question of ideology?**

Given earlier discussion about differing social class experiences of school choice, we might expect class to contribute heavily in explaining attitudes. While class does feature to some degree (see for example Model 6), attitudes towards choice are much more obviously driven by politics. Analysis using two scales included on the *British Social Attitudes* survey to measure 'left–right' and 'libertarian–authoritarian' attitudes shows that those who are more 'left-wing' disapprove more of 'working the school choice system' or of considering one's own child to the exclusion of others. Support for a right to choose and for manipulating the school choice system is higher among those with authoritarian views – with their emphasis on respect for family values and tough law and order. Associations here might be explained by a focus on family values among respondents, fitting with an idea of individual families making their own decisions.

Beyond this, Labour supporters are significantly less likely than Conservatives to support parental choice, when other factors are controlled for. Seven in ten Conservative supporters support the right of parents to choose their child's school, compared with slightly more than six in ten Labour supporters. This makes sense given that markets in public services are traditionally the realm of the Conservative Party. Still, moves towards choice under Labour governments from 1997 onwards make this a noteworthy finding. Labour supporters and Liberal Democrats are also less likely than others to say one should put their own child first without considering the needs of others.

**Table 4.10 Agreement that parents should have a basic right to choose their child's school, by party identification**

	% agree parents have a basic right to choose their child's school	<i>Base</i>
All	68	1870
<b>Party identification</b>		
Conservative	70	569
Labour	64	583
Liberal Democrat	68	241
Other	58	100
None	73	263

### Geographical effects

As shown in Table 4.11, people who live in cities or the suburbs of cities do tend more than others towards supporting parental choice and rejecting a duty to send children to the nearest school. Patterns here are likely to relate to the fact that within cities there are larger numbers of schools in close proximity, so competition between schools and between parents for school places is more intense. However, regional differences also prevail, with those in London holding the most pro-choice and pro-partiality views (see Models 4, 5 and 6). This may be indicative of particularly intense competition for school places and high social inequalities between areas in London. Respondents in Scotland are significantly less likely than those in England or Wales to support a parental right to choose. This reflects the work of academics such as Paterson (2003) and Humes and Bryce (2003), who have drawn attention to a distinctive left-wing commitment to local comprehensive education in Scotland.

# 7 in 10

**Conservative supporters support the right of parents to choose their child's school, compared with 6 in 10 Labour supporters**

**Table 4.11 Agreement parents should have a basic right to choose their child's school, by geographic characteristics**

	% agree parents have a basic right to choose their child's school	<i>Base</i>
All	68	1870
<b>Type of area</b>		
A big city	74	139
The suburbs/outskirts of a big city	72	474
A small city or town	65	850
Rural	64	405
<b>Region</b>		
North East	68	91
North West	76	230
Yorkshire and Humber	66	157
East Midlands	70	154
West Midlands	66	160
South West	73	176
Eastern	63	184
London	82	183
South East	64	252
Wales	58	94
Scotland	49	189

### Religion

Finally, regression analyses confirm the effects of religion on attitudes. Catholic respondents are less likely to agree children should go to their nearest school, and people with non-Christian religious beliefs are more likely to support 'working the school choice system' and a parental right to choose as shown in Table 4.12 below, although the small sample size available means we should treat this finding with caution. Nevertheless, they may reflect a preference among religious groups for faith-based educational provision, not necessarily provided by the nearest schools. Non-Christian faith schools are few in number across Britain – and parents may feel compelled to exercise extra parental assertiveness – which could explain stronger support for 'working the system'.

**Catholic respondents are less likely to agree children should go to their nearest school**

**Table 4.12 Agreement that parents should have a basic right to choose their child's school, by religion**

	% agree parents have a basic right to choose their child's school	<i>Base</i>
All	68	1870
<b>Religion</b>		
Church of England	70	407
Roman Catholic	75	166
Other Christian	68	278
Other non-Christian	88	76
No religion	64	939

Clearly public attitudes to school choice are not developed in a theoretical vacuum but vary substantially – not only in response to individuals' own and their families' experiences of school choice, but in relation to a range of wider systems of beliefs and values.

### Conclusions

Government education policy since the 1980s in Britain has involved a growing focus on parents' right to choose schools for their children, tempered by qualifying concerns about community and equality. In 2010 a majority of the public shows support for the notion of school choice. However, this support is conditional and problematic when examined in depth. Large proportions support the idea that parents should send their children to the nearest state school – and when they do not support this idea, it is largely because they feel the quality and social mixes of pupils between schools are too uneven, not because they have a fundamental conviction that people should always be able to choose from a range of schools. Choice is not viewed as a priority and in some instances there is ambivalence towards it.

Attitudes to the interventions parents might undertake to improve the choices available to their own children are often contradictory. While some parental uses of resources are viewed as fair, support does not extend as far as moving house to an area with 'better' schools or paying for private education. Complex patterns explaining differences in attitudes can be seen, ranging from parents justifying decisions to 'go private', through political attitudes or their local area, to the possible effects of living

**Choice is not viewed as a priority and in some instances there is ambivalence towards it**

through a more social democratic age in Britain. Overall, while most believe parents should put their own children first when choosing schools, most also believe parents should consider the impact their actions may have on others.

The fact that majorities in Britain support both a parental right to choose and greater educational equality sit in obvious contrast with the literature on school choice discussed at the beginning of this chapter. Such literature presents parental choice in the current British context as being in clear tension with educational equality, but this tension appears to go unrecognised by many, and there seems to be some disconnect in the public mind between inequality in the school system overall and an exercising of extensive parental partiality. Perhaps a greater role for academics, then, in drawing attention to the contradictions between school choice and social justice, is needed.

The public prioritises supporting local schools and attaches value to considering the needs and interests of all children. This should serve as an important caution to the coalition government in England as it moves towards ever more extensive policies for school choice, allowing popular schools to flourish while others “feel the squeeze” (Vasagar, 2011). If such policies lead to a situation where more parents feel unable to send their children to their nearest state school, or some become stuck in schools which have been pushed into “spirals of decline”, then these policies could be highly unpopular. Overall, they may ultimately damage public confidence in the likelihood that government will deliver on “giving all children the chance of world-class schools” (Department for Education, 2011).

### Notes

1. Banding is a system for allocating school places, which ensures that schools take in proportionate spreads of pupils across the whole ability range. Lottery allocations of school places ensure that, where a school is oversubscribed, places are allocated randomly, rather than giving priority to those who, for example, live closest (see West *et al.*, 2011, for more information on both banding and lotteries).
2. There are empirical debates about whether this has already happened. Gorard and Fitz (2000) argue it has not, but Goldstein and Noden (2003) argue that it has.
3. A scale has been created combining attitudes towards: getting involved in religious activities to access high-performing faith schools; moving house to be nearer higher-performing schools; using relatives' addresses; and renting second homes to be nearer higher-performing schools. Low scores on the scale signify approval of these actions, whereas high scores signify disapproval. Cronbach's Alpha for this scale is 0.70.

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## Appendix

**Table A.1: Factor analysis of views about parent ‘partiality’ towards their own children: scores for principal axis factoring with varimax factor rotation**

	‘Working the school choice system’	‘Helping children at home’
Helping children revise for exams or tests		0.48
Paying for a private tutor		0.75
Starting to get involved in local religious activities to help get their children into a high-performing faith school	0.40	
Moving house to be nearer a higher-performing secondary school	0.41	
Using a relative’s address in order to be nearer a higher-performing secondary school	0.74	
Renting a second home in order to be nearer a higher-performing secondary school but not generally living there	0.80	

Base: 1717

### Model 2: Agreement “parents should have a basic right to choose their child’s school”

The multivariate analysis technique used is logistic regression, about which more details can be found in Appendix I of the report. The dependent variable is agreement that “parents should have a basic right to choose their child’s school”. A positive coefficient indicates that the group is more likely than the reference group (shown in brackets) to support this idea while a negative coefficient indicates the group is less likely to support it. Independent variables: age, household income, highest educational qualification, party identification, sex, marital status, children under 16 living in household, region, type of area, newspaper readership, respondent/family members at private/selective school, social class, religion, left–right attitudes, libertarian–authoritarian attitudes, welfarist attitudes.

**Table A.2: Agreement “parents should have a basic right to choose their child’s school”**

Category	Coefficient	Standard error	Odds ratio	p value
<b>Baseline odds</b>	-0.33	0.60	0.72	0.579
<b>Age</b>	-0.02**	0.01	0.98	0.001
<b>Sex (men)</b>				
Women	0.27*	0.12	1.31	0.024
<b>Political party (no party)</b>				
Conservative	-0.08	0.17	0.92	0.922
Labour	-0.33*	0.16	0.72	0.722
Liberal Democrat	-0.09	0.20	0.91	0.914
Other party	-0.21	0.26	0.81	0.809
Parents went to private school	-0.54*	0.27	0.58	0.041
Parents went to selective school	-0.62**	0.17	0.54	0.000
Sibling went to private school	0.74*	0.30	2.10	0.012
Sent child to private school	0.62*	0.26	1.87	0.016
Sent child to selective school	0.73*	0.29	2.07	0.012
<b>Children (no children)</b>				
Children under 16 living at home	0.46**	0.17	1.59	0.005
Children over 16	0.50**	0.19	1.65	0.008
<b>Region (North East)</b>				
North West	0.43	0.32	1.53	0.176
Yorkshire and Humber	-0.23	0.32	0.80	0.479
East Midlands	0.18	0.34	1.20	0.591
West Midlands	-0.13	0.32	0.88	0.681
South West	0.16	0.33	1.17	0.634
Eastern	-0.42	0.31	0.66	0.179
Inner London	0.69	0.45	2.00	0.128
Outer London	0.28	0.35	1.32	0.432
South East	-0.16	0.30	0.58	0.583
Wales	-0.40	0.37	0.28	0.277
Scotland	-0.91**	0.32	0.40	0.004
<b>Religion (no religion)</b>				
Church of England	0.18	0.16	1.19	0.257
Roman Catholic	0.39	0.23	1.48	0.083
Other Christian	0.23	0.17	1.26	0.172
Other non-Christian	1.05**	0.36	2.85	0.003
<b>Type of area (rural)</b>				
A big city	0.23	0.28	1.26	0.415
The suburbs/outskirts of a big city	0.35*	0.17	1.42	0.043
A small city or town	0.04	0.15	1.04	0.777
Libertarian–authoritarian attitudes	0.50**	0.10	1.65	0.000

Base: 1717

\* significant at 95% level \*\* significant at 99% level

**Model 3: Belief in “putting your child first and leaving others to do the same”**

Logistic regression (see Model 2 for details) with independent variables: age, household income, highest educational qualification, party identification, sex, marital status, children under 16 living in household, region, newspaper readership, respondent/family members at private/selective school, social class, religion, left–right attitudes, libertarian–authoritarian attitudes, welfarist attitudes.

**Table A.3: Belief in “putting your child first and leaving others to do the same”**

Category	Coefficient	Standard error	Odds ratio	p value
<b>Baseline odds</b>	-1.71**	0.54	0.18	0.002
<b>Age</b>	-0.01*	0.01	0.99	0.032
<b>Political party (no party)</b>				
Conservative	-0.09	0.16	0.91	0.560
Labour	-0.35*	0.15	0.70	0.021
Liberal Democrat	-0.40*	0.19	0.67	0.036
Other party	0.60*	0.25	1.82	0.015
<b>Parents went to private school</b>	-0.54*	0.27	0.58	0.041
<b>Sent child to selective school</b>	0.73*	0.29	2.07	0.012
<b>Left–right attitudes</b>	0.19*	0.08	1.21	0.013

Base: 1770

\* significant at 95% level \*\* significant at 99% level

**Model 4: Agreement that “parents have a duty to choose the best possible school for their child, even if this means schools in the local area might suffer”**

Logistic regression (see Model 2 for details) with independent variables: age, household income, highest educational qualification, party identification, sex, marital status, children under 16 living in household, region, newspaper readership, respondent/family members at private/selective school, social class, religion, left–right attitudes, libertarian–authoritarian attitudes, welfarist attitudes.

**Table A.4: Agreement that “parents have a duty to choose the best possible school for their child, even if this means schools in the local area might suffer”**

Category	Coefficient	Standard error	Odds ratio	p value
<b>Baseline odds</b>	-1.11*	0.56	0.33	0.046
<b>Age</b>	-0.01*	0.01	0.99	0.012
Parents went to selective school	-0.41*	0.17	0.66	0.013
Respondent went to selective school	0.35*	0.16	1.41	0.027
Sibling went to selective school	-0.44*	0.18	0.64	0.012
Sent child to selective school	0.65**	0.23	1.91	0.004
<b>Children (no children)</b>				
Children under 16 living at home	0.42**	0.16	1.52	0.007
Children over 16	0.28	0.18	1.33	0.115
<b>Region (North East)</b>				
North West	0.61*	0.28	1.84	0.031
Yorkshire and Humber	-0.03	0.30	0.98	0.932
East Midlands	0.37	0.30	1.45	0.223
West Midlands	0.40	0.30	1.49	0.178
South West	0.41	0.30	1.51	0.166
Eastern	-0.19	0.29	0.83	0.519
Inner London	1.41**	0.41	4.11	0.001
Outer London	0.50	0.31	1.65	0.110
South East	-0.01	0.28	1.00	0.986
Wales	0.16	0.35	1.17	0.643
Scotland	-0.29	0.30	0.75	0.346
<b>Religion (no religion)</b>				
Church of England	0.13	0.14	1.14	0.366
Roman Catholic	0.08	0.19	1.09	0.668
Other Christian	0.15	0.16	1.17	0.328
Other non-Christian	0.53*	0.26	1.71	0.041
<b>Income (less than £1,000 per month)</b>				
£1,001–£2,200 per month	-0.39**	0.14	0.67	0.004
£2,201–£3,700 per month	-0.11	0.15	0.90	0.488
£3,701 or more per month	0.07	0.16	0.94	0.674
<b>Libertarian–authoritarian attitudes</b>	0.36**	0.09	1.43	0.000

Base: 1775

\* significant at 95% level \*\* significant at 99% level

**Model 5: Agreement that “parents in general should send their children to their nearest state school”**

Logistic regression (see Model 2 for details) with independent variables: age, household income, highest educational qualification, party identification, sex, marital status, children under 16 living in household, region, newspaper readership, respondent/family members at private/selective school, social class, religion, left–right attitudes, libertarian–authoritarian attitudes, welfarist attitudes.

**Table A.5: Agreement that “parents in general should send their children to their nearest state school”**

Category	Coefficient	Standard error	Odds ratio	p value
<b>Baseline odds</b>	0.71	0.59	2.03	0.230
<b>Age</b>	0.02**	0.01	1.02	0.000
<b>Sex (men)</b>				
Women	-0.28*	0.11	0.75	0.013
<b>Highest educational qualification (lower than GCSE level)</b>				
Degree or other higher education	-0.41*	0.18	0.66	0.021
A level or equivalent	-0.23	0.19	0.79	0.219
GCSE level or equivalent	-0.11	0.18	0.90	0.551
Parents went to selective school	0.37*	0.17	1.45	0.031
Sibling went to selective school	-0.60*	0.26	0.55	0.019
Sent child to selective school	-0.51*	0.22	0.60	0.019
<b>Region (North East)</b>				
North West	-0.88**	0.32	0.41	0.006
Yorkshire and Humber	-0.39	0.34	0.68	0.249
East Midlands	-0.83*	0.34	0.44	0.015
West Midlands	-0.60	0.34	0.55	0.076
South West	-0.69*	0.34	0.50	0.039
Eastern	-0.96**	0.33	0.38	0.003
Inner London	-0.53	0.41	0.59	0.198
Outer London	-0.79*	0.35	0.45	0.022
South East	-0.99**	0.31	0.37	0.002
Wales	-0.38	0.40	0.69	0.343
Scotland	0.50	0.36	1.65	0.162
<b>Religion (no religion)</b>				
Church of England	0.05	0.15	1.05	0.745
Roman Catholic	-0.39*	0.20	0.67	0.046
Other Christian	-0.04	0.17	0.97	0.827
Other non-Christian	-0.07	0.24	0.93	0.773
<b>Type of area (rural)</b>				
A big city	-0.73**	0.27	0.48	0.006
The suburbs/outskirts of a big city	0.00	0.17	1.00	0.981
A small city or town	-0.02	0.15	0.98	0.872

Base: 1788

\* significant at 95% level \*\* significant at 99% level

**Model 6: Correlates for ‘working the school choice system’ scale**

The multivariate analysis technique used is OLS regression, about which more details can be found in Appendix I of the report. The dependent variable is an attitude scale combining answers to several questions, as indicated in the main chapter text. A positive coefficient indicates stronger disapproval of ‘working the system’ and a negative coefficient means stronger approval.

For categorical variables, the reference category is shown in brackets after the category heading. Independent variables included in the model: age, household income, highest educational qualification, party identification, sex, marital status, children under 16 living in household, region, newspaper readership, respondent/family members at private/selective school, social class, religion, left–right attitudes, libertarian–authoritarian attitudes, welfarist attitudes.

**Table A.6: Correlates for ‘working the school choice system’ scale**

Individual characteristics (comparison group in brackets)	Coefficient	Standard error	Odds ratio
<b>Age</b>	0.24**	0.00	0.000
<b>Region (North East)</b>			
North West	-0.07	0.09	0.100
Yorkshire and Humber	-0.05	0.09	0.175
East Midlands	-0.07	0.09	0.055
West Midlands	-0.04	0.09	0.269
South West	-0.03	0.09	0.479
Eastern	-0.07	0.10	0.083
Inner London	-0.20**	0.09	0.000
Outer London	-0.13**	0.08	0.001
South East	-0.06	0.10	0.203
Wales	-0.05	0.09	0.123
Scotland	-0.03	0.09	0.511
<b>Religion (no religion)</b>			
Church of England	-0.03	0.04	0.311
Roman Catholic	-0.01	0.06	0.790
Other Christian	-0.02	0.05	0.330
Other non-Christian	-0.07**	0.07	0.005
<b>Social class (Semi-routine/Routine)</b>			
Managerial/Professional	-0.05	0.04	0.121
Intermediate	-0.05*	0.06	0.040
Small employer/Own account worker	-0.04	0.06	0.159
Lower supervisory/Technical	-0.03	0.06	0.234
<b>Child went to private school</b>	-0.08**	0.06	0.001
<b>Parent went to selective school</b>	0.05*	0.05	0.049
Left–right attitudes	-0.08**	0.02	0.001
Libertarian–authoritarian attitudes	-0.09**	0.03	0.002

Base: 1791

\* significant at 95% level \*\* significant at 99% level