

Secondary School Admissions

With September now upon us some few thousands of “new” Year 7 youngsters within the Borough are settling in to their “big” schools as they start their secondary education. This is the culmination of a process which began a year ago as they started their final year of primary education. That same process is about to commence for another three and a half thousand Year 6 students and it might be helpful for school governors to better appreciate some of the details of that process.

The parents of all Year 6 students will be receiving copies of “A Parents’ Guide to Secondary School Admissions 2007 – 2008” and will be asked to determine up to six secondary schools, in priority order, to which they would prefer their child to go in September 2007. These schools may be within Dudley or may be in one of the neighbouring Local Authorities, since in law any child may apply to any school, regardless of administrative boundaries. The “Greenwich Judgement” of 1989 and the “Rotherham Judgement” of 1997 established clearly the right of any child to apply for admission to any school; whether they succeed in that application or not, however, will depend upon the admissions criteria for that school but **not** upon whether that school is under the control of the Local Authority where the child happens to live. The form used for expressing these preferences is referred to as a Common Application Form (CAF) and parents complete only one such form encompassing schools both within and outside the Borough. Up to two years ago it was possible to apply separately to different Boroughs but this did create many problems – sometimes a student might have secured admission to each of a number of schools and it became impossible to determine who was actually going to go to which school – the revised system has dramatically reduced the extent of such administrative problems.

It follows that children who live outside Dudley, in Birmingham, Sandwell, Wolverhampton etc may also apply for places at Dudley schools, and many do. Many parents do get upset when they discover that, for example, their child fails to secure a place at a particular Dudley school and yet a child from Birmingham might be able to do so – this is not uncommon in cases of schools situated near to the border between Dudley and other surrounding Authorities. There is absolutely nothing that can be done about this and parents may need some reassurance that Dudley Council is completely innocent of the responsibility for what is a national situation. Currently Dudley is a net importer of children from neighbouring Authorities although as birth-rates shrink this pattern may conceivably change in the future.

The second myth to be destroyed is the one of “parental choice” – there is a misguided belief that parents can choose which school their child will attend. Common sense will quickly make clear that any given school has a finite capacity – the number and size of its facilities and the number of staff employed clearly limit the number of children it can accommodate and educate; if a school is a popular one it is almost inevitable that more students will seek to go there than there are places available. The correct concept is one of “parental preference” which is why the application form requires parents to put down up to six schools in order of preference, in an attempt to ensure that the *best possible* fit is established for *all* those who apply.

If a school is under-subscribed and receives fewer applications than it has places, then all those who have put it down as first choice will secure their places at that school. The fact that a school is under-subscribed does not make it a poor school – far from it; it simply means that its particular features, which might, for example, relate to its status as a faith school or to its geographical position, are such as to appeal to a smaller clientele – if nothing is done to change the current provision of Secondary Schools within the Borough, the falling birth-rate could ultimately lead to more schools being under-subscribed.

However if the school is over-subscribed there has to exist some means of determining which applicants will be successful. At this point the admissions criteria will ‘kick in’. Community(C) and Voluntary Controlled (VC) schools share a standard set of criteria which are laid down by the Local Authority whereas Voluntary Aided (VA) and Foundation (FD) schools are their own Admissions Authorities and have their own criteria. However there is a considerable degree of commonality about these criteria.

Children who are “in care” as well as those who have special educational needs and whose statement of SEN names a particular school as providing the facilities most suitable for that child will, most likely, be accepted by their school of choice. This is also true in cases where medical circumstances provide a reason for favouring one school over another. In general, these three factors will be at the top of the list of admissions criteria.

The next factor used by the majority of educational establishments is to favour applicants who have already got an elder brother or sister attending the school (and who will still be there when the applicant

starts). This “sibling” criterion is generally extended to cover half and step brothers and sisters and many definitions include adopted or foster children as well. Clearly the approach is intended to ensure that families are able to stay together and in special cases, such as those involving twins, the system does provide arrangements to ensure that they need not be separated.

The criterion applied to the majority of the remaining applicants is that of proximity – which favours those who live closest to their preferred school. Distance is measured “as the crow flies” between their home and the entrance to the school – of course, we are discussing children rather than crows but this approach relies on a computer-based measurement and the Local Authority computer does have sophisticated software which produces very accurate values. Naturally (and very reasonably) many people believe that distance should be measured along the shortest route actually taken by foot or by car to reach the school; such measurements may often be open to challenge and the straight-line distance is generally accepted as the fairer. This does not mean to say that it may not, from time to time, produce anomalies.

The authority does not adopt either a system of “feeder schools” nor one of “catchment areas” as some people might believe. In consequence those who live near to the periphery of the borough but not near to any school outside it may in some cases find admission to their nearest Dudley school difficult if it proves to be a popular one yet they do not live particularly close to it. No system has yet been invented which satisfies all the vagaries of where schools are situated, their finite capacities and where applicants live.

It has not been unknown for some applicants to deliberately quote an address (typically of a grand-parent or other relative) which is closer to the preferred school in order to gain an advantage. Because of this the rules have been tightened so that proof of address may well be required and it is not unknown (unfortunately) for officers from the Authority to need to visit addresses to check up on the legitimacy or otherwise of some claims. In cases where the responsibility for a child is vested in two people (as sometimes happens in cases of separation etc) and the child lives at two different homes, then the one where they spend more of their school week is the one used for purposes of proximity.

Faith schools, understandably, place additional criteria appropriate to the relevant religion and these do have a high priority. Despite this it is sometimes possible for a child whose family would prefer him/her to

attend a school of a particular denomination to apply successfully even if they are not of that particular faith but they will be rated lower down the priority ratings.

It is important for parents to appreciate that their stated preferences on the CAF should only be made after they have carefully considered the admissions criteria for each school on their list. For instance it would be very unlikely that a child would be successful in getting into even one of their six schools if they lived a considerable distance from each of them, had no siblings at any and had otherwise no special circumstances which would mitigate to their advantage. Common-sense must be applied to ensure that a child has a good chance of securing a place at a school high on their preference list.

Following the return of all CAFs by a set date in the late Autumn the Admissions Office will process the requests and this will often involve having a dialogue with their “opposite numbers” in adjoining Boroughs. The result of this processing will be that each child will receive (in March) the single offer of a place at the school, highest in their order of preference, where that child can be admitted based upon the application of the admissions criteria for that particular school. In the unlikely event that places are not available at any of the stated preference schools, the Authority will guarantee a place at the nearest suitable and available school.

This process will, almost certainly, work well for the majority of applicants. There will be some however who are not satisfied by the outcome and they do have the right of Appeal against it. Appeals are heard throughout the period following the announcement of the results of the applications process and advice will be given to assist those who wish to lodge an appeal. However it is a matter of fact that the majority of appeals have been unsuccessful. This may give governors some cause for concern and there are some steps they can take, in conjunction with their school, in order to minimize disappointment.

Having a meeting with Year 6 parents to advise them of the best way to complete the CAF during the early part of the Autumn term is to be recommended. The Authority also offers a consultation evening to explain the process to parents. Fundamental to the process of achieving the best outcome for each child is to ensure that the CAF is completed appropriately and this means giving very careful consideration to the admissions criteria for schools on the “preferred” list. It is, of course, assumed that parents will wish to visit each of the schools with their child

to assess for themselves the suitability of each one to meet the specific needs of their child

However some families may still experience problems and may have to make difficult decisions, and no amount of advice can overcome these difficulties. A classic case involves expressing a preference between two schools where School A is a selective school in an adjoining Borough (and which therefore uses entrance exams to decide upon admissions) and School B which may be within the Borough but states that they will not (normally) consider applicants who do not make them their first preference. Both schools are legally allowed to impose such restrictions. If an applicant places them in the order A followed by B, and they pass the entrance exams then they will be able to go to School A which was what they sought to do. Result – satisfaction. If they fail the exams they will not get into A but nor will they get into B since they did not put it first. Result – disappointment.

If however the preference to be stated is B followed by A they may get into school B but even if they have passed the exams they will not secure a place at A since only one offer can be given to them and so the successful application to school B will rule out admission to A. At times like these it may require very careful guidance to ensure that the outcome is a satisfactory one. Do note however that there is currently nothing whatsoever that can be done by the Local Authority to improve upon the situation.

The new edition of “A Parents’ Guide to Secondary School Admissions 2007 – 2008” does include full details of the admissions criteria for all schools within the Borough. It also provides contact details for neighbouring authorities which may be useful for those parents who wish to consider schools outside our boundaries. In addition it includes some exemplars which illustrate the way the preference system operates.

Governors should think about the implications of the process and the practice of providing assistance to the parents of the new Year 6 children should be actively considered. It may be that the school adopts a practice of holding a special evening early in September to provide advice and support. Whatever is done it is important that governors should be aware of the processes involved.