



# Matching Practices for Primary and Secondary Schools – England

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*“Matching in Practice” is a research network that brings together the growing community of researchers in Europe working on the various aspects of assignment and matching in education and related labour markets.*

*These country profiles are part of a collective effort by network members to map matching practices across Europe*

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## Relevant country background

**Primary and secondary schools in England.** The British education system is divided into primary education (from ages 5 to 11) and secondary education (from ages 11 to 16).<sup>4</sup> This note describes school choice for secondary schools in England. There are 152 Local Authorities (LAs) in England that are responsible for education policies within their jurisdiction, in particular for the assignment of students to one of the 4,100 secondary schools across the country.

Some schools in England are their own *admission authority* (for instance Free schools, Academies, Foundation schools, or Voluntary Aided (Faith) schools).<sup>5</sup> The admission authority has three main duties: (1) it determines and publishes the admission criteria, (2) it ranks applications under the chosen criteria, and (3) it is responsible for defending appeals against non-admission. In contrast, community and voluntary controlled schools are not their own admission authority: they follow the admission criteria decided by their LA. Private (independent fee paying) schools operate outside of the statutory admission process in the UK. They are not covered by this note.

**Pre-coordination market failures.** Prior to 2005, school choice was uncoordinated in England. Parents were applying directly to multiple admission authorities, and they could simultaneously get an offer from several schools, or none. This lack of coordination generated a number of concerns related to congestion (Coldron et al 2002, Education and Skills Committee) and workload for schools due to parents dropping out after offers are made. Families dissatisfaction also emerged as a key concern. Using appeals of admission decisions as an indicator of dissatisfaction, the House of Commons Education and Skills Committee reported that 14.3% of all admissions in London were appealed by parents in 2000-2001. The number of parents appealing against their allocated

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<sup>4</sup> Source: <https://www.gov.uk/national-curriculum>

<sup>5</sup> See <https://www.gov.uk/types-of-school> for an overview of the different school types in England and their specificities.

placement had risen significantly over the years (from 4.21% of admissions in 1993-1994 to 8.70% of admissions in 1998-1999; amounting to a total of 53,739 appeals that year across the country).<sup>6</sup>

**Introduction of a coordinated assignment system.** The 2003 School Admissions Code led to the introduction of a coordinated admission scheme for secondary schools (effectively introduced for admission in September 2005). The reform introduced a single application form – on which parents can rank a minimum of three schools – and most importantly, a unique offer from the highest preference of the schools for which the child was eligible. LAs are in charge of coordinating the applications and offers by running an algorithm, usually the student-proposing Deferred-Acceptance algorithm.

**Co-existence of the “Equal Preference” and “First Preference First” admission criteria.** Until 2008, some schools were using the “First Preference First” admission criteria (FPF) – which allowed them to give a higher priority to parents ranking the school as their first choice, while other schools were using the “Equal Preference” admission criteria (EP). These schools’ priorities did not account for the rank of the school in the list submitted by parents. The co-existence of FPF and EP schools means that most Local Authorities (LA) in England were using an assignment mechanism that was a hybrid between the Deferred-Acceptance algorithm (when all schools are using the Equal Preference admission criteria) and the Boston mechanism (when all schools in the LA are using the First Preference First admission criteria). The 2007 School Admissions Code prohibited the FPF criteria. From 2008 onward, all schools in England had to use the Equal Preference criteria.

**Coordination of admissions across local authorities.** When parents express preferences for schools in more than one LA, LAs are required to liaise before making the single offer. One of the challenges lies in the fact that each LA is running the assignment algorithm at the LA level, and gets a temporary assignment. Then, each of them has to check with other LAs if a student is simultaneously assigned a school in their area. In that case, the student is assigned his/her preferred school, other admissions are cancelled, and LAs have to run the admission algorithm again. This coordination can be relatively easy when cross-LA applications are rare. However, it requires much more organization when cross-LA applications are frequent.

**London specificities: A large number of cross-LA applications.** In that process, London emerged as an outlier due to the large volume of applications, and the large number of parents applying for a secondary school outside their ‘home’ LA. Around 45% of parents in London are applying for schools outside of their ‘home’ LA. This led London LAs – also referred to as London *boroughs* -- to create the Pan-London Admissions Scheme (PLAS) for co-ordinating admissions from September 2005, with the aims of simplifying both the application process, and the management of cross-LA offers for secondary school admissions. The scheme incorporates the 33 London boroughs, and 5 local authorities outside London.<sup>7</sup> One of the aims of the PLAS is to ease information sharing on cross-LA admissions. After each borough has run its admission algorithm and has obtained a temporary set of assignments, a formal process (described in the next paragraph) enables them to share lists of students admitted in one of their schools but living in a different borough.

The Pan-London admission scheme is a rare example of a large scale coordination of students’ admissions. In 2018, 90,000 parents of pupils applied for secondary school places through the Pan-London Admissions Scheme.

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<sup>6</sup> Source: Report (March 2001): “Market Frustration? Admission Appeals in the UK Education Market”

<sup>7</sup> Surrey, Essex, Hertfordshire, Kent, and Thurrock.

## Summary box

Organization of education	Coexistence of public (state) and private schools within the same Local Authority (LA) area. The coordinated assignment system assigns students to public (state) schools only.
Stated objectives of matching policy	Limiting multiple offers, both within and between LAs.
Who's in charge?	LAs are in charge of collecting applications (preference lists), running the algorithm and delivering outcomes. Admission Authorities (LAs and schools) are ranking the candidates. The Pan-London admission scheme facilitates eliminating multiple offers across participating LAs.
In place since	Admission in September 2005
Timing	Parents submit their application lists by 31 October. All outcomes are announced on "Offer Day", which is March 1 <sup>st</sup>
Information available to applicants	Each LA provides a web-based prospectus with information on the admission process and criteria used by each school in its area. In London, parents apply via a common website which has links to each LA's website, mapping and performance data: <a href="http://www.eadmissions.org.uk">www.eadmissions.org.uk</a>
Restrictions on preference expression	Parents can rank up to 6 schools in any area
Matching procedure	Local Authorities use the student-proposing Deferred-Acceptance algorithm.
Priorities and quotas	Admission criteria are regulated by the School Admissions Code. Within the permitted provisions, schools that are their own admission authority are free to choose their admission criteria. Community schools and voluntary controlled schools on the other hand have to use the admission criteria adopted by their Local Authority.
Tie-breaking	Most schools are using distance to school to break ties.

## Description of current practices

The Pan-London admission scheme coordinates admissions by using the following ten successive steps:

1. Local Authorities ("**home LAs**") ask parents living in their boundaries to rank up to 6 schools. The ranked schools might be outside a student's home LA. At that step, a LA does not know how many students living in other LAs are ranking schools in its boundaries.

2. The home LA sends these ranked lists to the Pan-London Admission Scheme (PLAS) which creates application lists by "**maintaining LA**". The maintaining LA is the LA in which the school is located. PLAS sends lists of applicants to the maintaining LAs.
3. The maintaining LA sends the list of applicants to the admission authority schools in its area that rank the applicants according to their priority criteria. The schools send the ranked list back to their maintaining LA.
4. Every maintaining LA runs the algorithm using as inputs students' ranked lists of schools in the LA, and schools' priorities over students. In each LA, the algorithm gives an assignment to students who ranked at least one school in the LA.
5. The import-export process starts. A student who ranked schools in different maintaining LAs may get assigned a school in more than one maintaining LA. After having run the algorithm once, each maintaining LA sends to PLAS the list of assigned students living in other LAs. The PLAS creates and sends student lists to each home LA.
6. The home LA runs the algorithm again. For every student who has been assigned a school in multiple LAs, the assigned school with the highest rank is identified, and all other assignments are declined.
7. The home LA sends to PLAS an updated list of students assigned to schools in maintaining LAs. The PLAS creates and sends student lists to each maintaining LA.
8. Each maintaining LA runs the algorithm again based on the updated ranked lists of students and exports the updated lists to PLAS for distribution to home LAs.
9. This process of import-export and re-running the algorithm (called iterations) is repeated 20 times over a ten day period.
10. Once the assignment process is complete, all outcomes are announced on "Offer Day", which is March 1<sup>st</sup> for secondary school admissions.

*Note: LAs are in charge of running the algorithm because the admission code from the Department of Education requires that Local Authorities are responsible for ensuring that all residents are assigned a single school place and that multiple offers are eliminated across all schools in their area.*

## Performance

**Performance the year PLAS was introduced.** In the first year of the scheme being operational (2005), 40% fewer children were without an initial offer of a school place than before Pan-London co-ordination. In 2006, this figure had increased further to 64% fewer pupils being without an initial offer of a school place. 72,379 (93%) applicants were offered a place in a school of their preference.<sup>8</sup> The almost complete elimination of multiple offers, enabled parents and schools to have earlier confirmation of school places.

**Performance in subsequent years.** Every year, the key outcome considered to evaluate students' admissions to schools is the percentage of parents who secure one of their first preferences. In 2016, 88.6% of pupils in London received an offer from one of their top three schools. London experiences differences across its boroughs. Hammersmith & Fulham (52.0%), Westminster (53.4%) and Lambeth (57.9%) achieved the lowest first preference rates in 2016, while Waltham Forest, Sutton or Haringey all satisfied more than 75% of first preferences.

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<sup>8</sup> Source: Pan-London admission scheme, Report of First and Second Year of Operation. Available upon request.

## Recent policy change

A nationwide reform of students' assignment to schools came with the 2007 School Admissions Code which prohibited Local Authorities from using "first preference first" admission criteria, in favour of "equal preferences" criteria.

The 2007 School Admissions Code also required Local Authorities to co-ordinate applications for admission to Primary schools (at age 5) for admission in September 2010 onwards. The Pan London system was therefore expanded to facilitate this.

The 2010 School Admissions Code heralded the expansion of the Academies programs and as a result, the number of schools which are their own admission authority has continued to rise year on year.

## Perceived issues

The import-export process between LAs takes time. The 2015-2016 annual report of the Office of the Schools Adjudicator reports that "local authorities would still welcome additional statutory requirements in the process of administering applications. An agreed national deadline for completing the exchange of application data between admission authorities, especially where an authority is part of a grouping such as the Pan London Admissions Board but also has to deal separately with other neighboring authorities, would expedite allocations in the view of many. A substantial minority of reports again refers to delays caused by awaiting data from other local authorities".

## Existing data

### Data on parents' preferences.

Data on parents' preferences from 2014 onward are available from the Department for Education (DfE). The datasets contain information on every preference expressed (the rank, the school ID, the LA of the school), and whether a student has been offered one of his six choices.

### Data on appeals.

Data on school level appeals are available from the Department for Education (DfE).

## Legal texts

"Secondary Education: School Admissions Fourth Report of Session 2003–04", House of Commons Education and Skills Committee. <http://dera.ioe.ac.uk/id/eprint/4890>

"School admissions code", 2014, Department for Education, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/school-admissions-code--2>

## Other resources and references

[School Admissions Reform in Chicago and England: Comparing Mechanisms by their Vulnerability to Manipulation](#), Parag Pathak and Tayfun Sönmez, *American Economic Review*, 103(1): 80-106, February 2013

The government schools choice portal: <https://www.gov.uk/schools-admissions/applying>

In England, The Office of the Schools Adjudicator (OSA) helps to clarify the legal position on admissions policies in schools. The schools adjudicator gathers information on parents' and schools complaints. Link to the school adjudicator website: <https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/office-of-the-schools-adjudicator/about>

## MiP Country Profiles downloadable from [matching-in-practice.eu](http://matching-in-practice.eu)

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