

A new conversation with parents:
how can schools inform and listen in a digital age?

A report by Fiona Millar and Gemma Wood

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Foreword

Rod Bristow, President, Pearson UK

What do we want our kids to be learning at school and why – and who is best-placed to judge? Is it the Government, is it the employers who will decide whether to give them a job one day, is it the teachers that see them day in day out, the universities and colleges where young people will continue their education, their parents – or children themselves?

It seems to me that without answering the first question, we can't properly consider how to measure how well our schools are doing. But the problem is that the answer is different depending on who you ask; everyone has an opinion, often based upon their own personal experience. That's because most of the debates about education fail to address the more fundamental question of what education itself is for. I'm delighted that this excellent report tackles that question first and am equally pleased that we've asked it of parents, a group whose views have not had the exposure they deserve.

Policy makers and practitioners alike will need to listen to parents because they will increasingly demand a voice. Parents value education more now, than at any time in our history; they will not tolerate schooling that lets their children down and they'll demand the information that helps them make good choices. So one of the motivations for Pearson in commissioning this report was to find out what they'd like to know.

What the parents contributing here have shown us is that they are highly sophisticated consumers. They understand that academic exam results are important, but are just one measure of success in a world where their children will thrive best if they leave school as rounded, confident citizens ready and able to operate in a world that rewards what people can contribute, not only what they know. Our accountability system needs to reflect that rounded approach. We must think beyond one-way transmission of information and more about a dialogue: a conversation between schools and parents. Whilst there's an important place for performance measures to ensure a common

standard, parents need a far richer sense of what attending a school could mean for their child. And once that crucial choice has been made, they want to be updated on how it is playing out in practice. The more schools and parents communicate, the more parents will feel able positively to contribute to their child's education.

And that is the other key trend that this report brings to the fore: the growing appetite from parents to play an active part in education. This is a trend we're witnessing right around the world as education becomes even more crucial to determining life chances. Parents aren't passive consumers – they want to play a role in the success of their child and their child's school in supporting them.

Fiona and Family Lives' recommendations pose some tough challenges both for Government and for schools. Given that "what parents want" is so complex, will a one size fits all set of accountability measures do the job? Parents are telling us it will not. On this basis, it's down to companies like Pearson to support schools to do as Fiona recommends - start and continue conversations with their parents, using the opportunities presented by technology. Even if we've not got a simple answer to the question of what gets taught in schools, we must work together to keep the conversation alive.

Foreword

Anastasia de Waal, Chair, Family Lives

Family Lives was delighted to be asked by Pearson to take part in this research, to find out from parents what they want and need in order to make informed choices about their child's education.

From previous research we conducted alongside the Teacher Support Network the evidence is clear that when a parent is engaged in supporting their child's schooling there is a strong positive impact on that child's attendance, behaviour and attainment. We know that the information flow between a school and its pupils' parents is essential to driving up standards.

As a national charity Family Lives worked with over a million families last year, supporting parents and carers to overcome a whole host of issues and challenges and enabling them to secure a better future for their children. Our trained family support workers offer all adult family members immediate help on the phone, online or in local communities. Our accrued knowledge is channelled into campaigning for policy that best supports family life.

We continually evolve our services to meet the growing and changing needs of families, particularly the most vulnerable or disadvantaged. We work in a variety of community settings including schools, Sure Start centres, GP surgeries and criminal justice settings, as well as carrying out outreach work with families sometimes considered "hard to reach" by statutory services. We are committed to providing evidence-based practice, adapted to the needs of local families and communities.

As a charity, we recognise the value of the information and data we collect from the families we work with. It is always exciting to work on projects like this one, which help to amplify the voices of families and feed their views and experiences into a policy debate which suffers without them.

We are very grateful to the parents and carers who took the time to attend the focus groups we held around the country, and to those who shared their views via the survey. We will be working alongside Fiona and Pearson over the coming months to share your stories with decision makers and encourage the take up and development of the recommendations in this report.

Methodology

The research for this project was carried out by Fiona Millar, a journalist specialising in education and parenting issues, and Gemma Wood, the Policy and Parliamentary Manager at Family Lives.

A national opinion poll was undertaken by Vision Critical, an independent polling company that has been used by Family Lives in the past. Vision critical recruit to their panel from across the country and ask respondents to fill in the survey online. The survey was completed by the panel between 14 July and 19th July 2011 and was filled in by 1124 parents of 3-16 year olds across England from a representative mix of backgrounds. Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland have devolved education systems and different systems of school accountability.

Family Lives also organised a series of focus groups in North Tyneside, London, the South West and the East Midlands, – four of the areas in which the charity has regional offices. Fiona Millar and Gemma Wood attended all the discussions and the parents were selected in order to get a mix of rural, suburban and inner city parents via Family Lives contacts which included schools, children's centres and parents working with Family Lives. There were a mix of primary and secondary school pupils' parents at each group and there were parents from a number of different schools in each group. A total of 32 parents took part in the focus groups, of whom 12.5% had a disability and 21.9% had a child with a disability or special educational need. 37.5% of focus group participants were from BME communities and 37.5% were single parents.

There was a lengthy and rigorous drafting process before the final poll questions went to the panel.

Some of the ideas raised in the focus groups were included in the final questions. Vision critical then helped with phrasing and sequence.

The questions that prompted discussions in the focus groups can be found here ([link](#)). However in all the groups, the conversation became free flowing and allowed parents to tell their own personal stories at length wherever possible.

The names of focus group participants have been changed in this report.

All data compiled for this report is available through the Family Lives website (www.familylives.org.uk) and the Pearson Centre for Policy and Learning website (www.pearsoncpl.com).

A short history of school accountability

Making schools accountable to parents, and their local communities, has been a prominent strand in Government policy since the late 1980s when the Education Reform Act established a National Curriculum and tests for 7, 11 and 14 years olds to precede the existing GCSE and A level exams.

Since then the numbers of children reaching expected levels in primary school tests, and the numbers achieving five good (A*-C) GCSEs, have been published annually and then reported in 'league table' form in the national and local press.

Four years after the 1988 Act, the independent inspectorate Ofsted (Office for Standards in Education) was created and a system of school accountability that has dominated the thinking and actions of schools ever since was complete.

The intention of these changes was not only to allow government and local authorities to hold schools to account, but also to expose failure, put pressure on head teachers and governors to drive up standards, and to enable parents to exercise informed choice.

Performance tables, published by the Department for Education for the past 20 years, show that there has been a slow steady improvement in the results of most schools since the 1990s.

But over the years troubling aspects of the accountability regime have emerged. It is now widely acknowledged, not least by the Coalition Government in its recent Education White Paper¹, that 'borderline' pupils either on the cusp of Level 4 in primary schools or a C grade at GCSE may receive undue attention at the expense of very low or very high achievers.

Meanwhile the desire to maximise the numbers of pupils achieving five good GCSEs appears to have

driven some schools to steer pupils towards certain subjects and qualifications which may involve less teaching time and affect young people's progression to work and university. English school children are now the most examined in the world and both parents and teachers have expressed concern about children being taught 'to the test', possibly to the exclusion of a more creative and enjoyable curriculum.

The author and journalist Warwick Mansell, whose book "Education by Numbers"² is highly critical of what he calls a system of "hyperaccountability", argues that a combination of too much testing and data driven inspection may actually be damaging the quality of education our children receive. He has support in powerful quarters. Anthony Seldon, the headmaster of Wellington College, a leading public school, has described the current education system as 'factory schooling'.³

Yet whatever critics of the current system may say, school accountability is undoubtedly here to stay. Parents want, and have a right to know, how their schools are doing. In recent years governments have tinkered with both league tables and Ofsted to try and meet some of these concerns.

The importance of primary school tests at the end of Key Stage 1 were downgraded in 2005. In 2008 Key Stage 3 tests were abolished. Value added was introduced to address the different starting points of pupils, and to show progress from those starting

points. Value added was then contextualised to take account of pupils' backgrounds, the measurement of five 'good' GCSEs was changed to include passes in English and Maths, and more recently a new metric known as the English Baccalaureate has been added to the performance tables. The "EBacc" indicates how many secondary age pupils at each school have achieved five passes above a grade C in five prescribed academic subjects.

Next year the performance tables will change again⁴ with more information about the progress of pupils who are in public care and of those who are eligible for free school meals. They will also show the progress of low, middle and high attaining pupils and how many pupils are entered for and get above a C grade in the five EBacc subjects. A recent series of papers looking at the effectiveness of league tables, published by the Institute for Fiscal Studies⁵, suggests that further changes to league tables should be considered in the future.

The Ofsted framework has also changed several times. The original week long inspections, which involved detailed scrutiny of lessons and pupils' work, were preceded by a six week long notice period. Now most inspections are one or two days long. They come with virtually no warning and focus on judging how well schools are evaluating their performance in over twenty different areas including standards, quality of

education, leadership, pupil well-being, safeguarding and community cohesion. Each area is graded into one of four categories – outstanding, good, satisfactory or inadequate – as is the school overall. This framework will change again shortly and from 2012 school inspection is likely to focus more specifically on four key areas; achievement, quality of teaching, quality of leadership and management and the behaviour and safety of pupils.⁶

Meanwhile a new drive for more 'open government' has led to the current Conservative Liberal Democrat Coalition releasing raw data sets⁷ including information about the income and expenditure of all maintained schools and the performance of secondary schools in every subject. The reason for this, according to the Department for Education website, is so that 'people can analyse the data themselves'. In the near future there are plans to drill down more deeply into the progress of different groups of pupils, to publish anonymised data from the National Pupil Database and to bring school spending, performance and Ofsted judgements together in a parent friendly 'Go Compare!' type format searchable by post code. The Government says these commitments represent "the most ambitious open data agenda of any government in the world."

¹ The Importance of Teaching <http://www.education.gov.uk/b0068570/the-importance-of-teaching>

² Education by Numbers. The Tyranny of Testing. Warwick Mansell, Politico's 2007

³ An end to factory schools. Anthony Seldon, Centre for Policy Studies 2010 http://www.cps.org.uk/cps_catalog/an%20end%20to%20factory%20schools.pdf

⁴ <http://www.education.gov.uk/performance/Statement-of-Intent.pdf>

⁵ School League Tables. Do they make the grade? <http://www.ifs.org.uk/publications/5652>

⁶ Inspection 2012: proposals for inspection arrangements for maintained schools and academies

<http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/resources/inspection-2012-proposals-for-inspection-arrangements-for-maintained-schools-and-academies-january-2>

⁷ <http://data.gov.uk/>

Executive Summary

“We set out on this project to try and develop a greater understanding about what it is that parents want from their schools. There has never been a time when so much information is readily available, yet in all the recent announcements and academic research about school accountability, the parent voice appears conspicuously absent.” Fiona Millar

We wanted to find out what information parents need to help them form judgements about schools and about the progress of their own children and also how they want to receive that information. Our discussions ranged beyond the simple question of school choice into their wider hopes and aspirations for their children, their belief in what makes a good school and how they want to communicate their views in return. We started with an open mind and prepared to find a wide variety of opinions given the range of different parents we were surveying.

Possibly the most surprising conclusion was the clear unanimity across a wide range of issues. Parents are discerning, knowledgeable and realistic about what is best for their children. They exercise choice but within clearly understood limits, they have a strong preference for local schools and want those schools to offer good teaching, well managed behaviour and a broad curriculum which develops pupils intellectually, socially and emotionally.

Most parents are successful in getting their children into the first choice of schools, and broadly happy with those schools once their children are enrolled. Academic qualifications matter, and good levels of literacy and numeracy are particularly significant, but parents are keenly aware that if their children are not academic, they need to be offered other productive, engaging pathways, especially if these lead to fulfilling employment.

The parents we met and polled also attach great importance to other skills and qualities like confidence, self esteem, respect for others, manners, politeness and even an understanding of nutrition, cookery and managing a budget.

The tools of the ‘schools market’ that have been adhered to by successive governments and all major political parties, namely Ofsted reports and data about test and exam results, are highly valued. However the new data sets about school performance and budgets barely seem to have registered with parents. Regardless of how much information central government provides parents still tend to look to trusted local sources for ‘softer’ information, and then make what are often subjective judgements after trading exam results and inspection grades against vaguer, more impressionistic but equally important local knowledge and opinion.

One mother of two primary age boys told us she considered the business of educating her children to be a ‘puzzle’. Ofsted, test and exam results were important, but just one small part of the picture. She summed up the views of many more parents when she said she wanted to be able to see ‘the whole picture’.

This presents policy makers with a challenge. Local and national government may be able to judge the success of their policies, and value for money from public spending, using benchmark data about results

and by grading schools as good and outstanding. But parents appear to have grown more sophisticated and want information about everything from behaviour management, bullying and exclusions, their children’s progress and how the school supports children with different and special educational needs.

They also want to know about whether their children are happy at school, whether they are developing into well rounded, polite, confident, respectful young people, about what other parents think. Some are even interested in knowing the CVs and qualifications of their children’s teachers and the head teacher. The most intrepid parents are developing their own ways of uncovering information.

In spite of concerns about the discriminatory effect of the ‘digital divide’ – the most recent information suggests that 83% of the population of England is using the internet⁸ – the majority of parents are comfortable with and keen to find and receive more information electronically preferably via school websites which appear to be a popular source of information, but often underused, especially when it comes to online reporting to parents. We found that the way schools communicate the progress of pupils appears to be of variable quality and too infrequent in some cases. Most parents would like termly reports either by post, e-mail or via a website.

Suggested next steps


Our overall conclusion was that the system of school accountability needs further change if it is to give parents what they want. In particular:

- Parents need more information than they are currently being offered about teaching quality, behaviour, bullying, exclusions, the progress of particular groups of pupils, their well-being and their social and emotional development. Much of this information is currently held by schools, local

authorities, Ofsted and central government but should be shared more readily in a standardised, accessible way, possibly via school websites, especially if some schools are to be exempt from Ofsted inspections.

- Schools should also be obliged to provide more than an annual report of pupil progress (the current legal requirement). Termly reports, either by post, e-mail or via a secure page on the school website, would help parents support their children’s progress and allow them to hold their schools to account more effectively.
- Schools should also consider ‘safe’ ways of sharing the views of existing parents and pupils on a wide range of issues within the school community. They should find ways of making this sort of local knowledge accessible to the wider community, especially other parents choosing schools.
- More information about how schools support children with special educational needs should be available to the parents of those children.
- Ofsted should continue to judge schools on how well they nurture pupils’ social and emotional development, their effectiveness in working and communicating with parents and the options they make available to young people who want a more practical, vocational curriculum.

⁸ Office of National Statistics <http://www.statistics.gov.uk/articles/nojournal/internet-access-q1-2011.pdf>



A-levels skills ability able academic basic career
communicate communication skills computer confidence education english
experience gcse grade general job knowledge language level
life skills literacy literate manners maths money numeracy
people qualifications read reading respect school science
skills social skills spelling standard subjects think understanding university
vocational work world writing

This word cloud was generated from the free text answers that the 1112 survey participants gave to the question: *What skills, qualities and qualifications do you think an educated 19 year old should have?* The word cloud shows the most common words that appeared in parents' answers, with the different sizes representing the frequency with the most commonly used words appearing bigger.

What skills, qualities and qualifications do you think an educated 19 year old should have?

At the moment, the school accountability system tells parents how well their schools perform in national tests and exams and according to national inspection standards. The presumption is that academic success trumps all else.

We wanted to find out if parents had other hopes and aspirations for their children, beyond their academic qualifications, as those young people emerge into young adulthood.

“Schools are more than just places to get academic qualifications. Schools are places where they learn manners, learn skills, how to make relationships as well as getting academic qualifications. I don’t just want to know a piece of the story, I want the whole story.” Yvette, mother of two, London

Academic achievement is hugely important to parents, with literacy and numeracy prized above all else. Yet it was clear throughout our discussions, and in response to our poll questions, that parents want and hope their children will emerge into young adulthood with a range of other skills and qualities to complement good qualifications.

“Beyond exam results, I would like them to be able to manage their finances, cook for themselves, build good relationships and make good choices.” Lorraine, mother of two, South West

There was a remarkable degree of unanimity in all the focus groups and the poll responses when we asked what skills, qualities and qualifications they would like to find in a well educated 19 year old⁹. There

was a clear consensus that academic success should be accompanied by a range of other skills; life skills, practical and social skills, communication skills, ICT and problem solving skills were valued alongside academic qualifications. Many parents talked about the need for young people entering adulthood to be polite, well mannered, have confidence, self esteem, common sense and respect for others.

“GCSEs in the main stream subjects: English, maths & science, but also to be a well turned out member of society - polite, well mannered, self-confident, respectful. They should be focused on what they want to do and where they want to be in life in the next 5 years, and have a positive attitude towards themselves and others.” Poll respondent

One London mother of two primary age sons told us: *“What I want for my kids is that they go a route they are passionate about even if it is selling paper cups. I want them to come out with confidence and self esteem because if you have no confidence and self esteem you can have all the qualifications in the world but you won’t be able to do anything with them.”*

“You can have all the qualifications in the world but they are meaningless unless you can put them into practice with creativity and empathy.” Yvette, mother of two, London

“They should be able to speak and write in good English, but the rest depends on the type of child and their abilities. Some children are academic and some are not, and I think the school should play to the child’s strengths.”

Poll respondent

The ability to cook, understanding how to manage a budget, plan finances and look after personal health and hygiene, came up repeatedly. The word cloud on the previous page depicts the most common ideas.

“Where to start! Young people need the ability to communicate in a professional manner; manners in general; the ability to spell properly and have correct use of grammar; knowledge of when to use a capital letter and when ‘text speak’ is appropriate; respect in the work place and to authority figures. They need to know when to dress smartly, how to present a good professional C.V. They need common sense!” Poll respondent

Parents’ hopes and aspirations for their children go beyond simple academic success. While they want their children to be highly literate and numerate, possessing qualifications that will offer progression to work and university, parents also appear more conscious than ever that their off spring need to be well rounded individuals whose success in later life may depend on how confident they are, their social skills, ability to communicate, how they relate to others and take care of their own personal well being.

School are rightly scrutinised about their ability to raise standards in academic subjects. However the development of social, personal and practical skills should not be downgraded in the rush to focus a narrow range of qualifications.

Ofsted should continue to judge how effectively schools develop pupils’ social and emotional development, the opportunities they offer pupils who want a more practical and vocational education. Their pupils’ well-being and personal development should be regularly communicated to parents.

⁹ This question was adapted from one of the themes of the independent Nuffield Review into 14-19 Education <http://www.nuffieldfoundation.org/14-19review>

How parents really choose a school

Since the 1988 Education Reform Act introduced the idea of “open enrolment”, parents have had the right to choose any school for their child and are assumed to do this using test and exam results, local league tables and inspection reports. But is that really how most parents choose schools?

We wanted to find out what other factors parents considered when choosing a school and how they ranked those factors by importance.

“You need to go and look. All the stats in the world don’t make up for going to have a look. You do tend to take a consensus. Don’t just listen to one person’s opinion. You get a feel for the school from talking to many different people.” Sam, father of two

The official tools of the schools “market” – performance tables of test and exam results and Ofsted reports – have become a fact of life for parents. More than twenty years after the introduction of “parent choice”, it would appear that most parents have, as it was hoped, become knowledgeable and discerning. In all our questioning and conversations, we found that parents were informed, pragmatic, on the whole satisfied with their schools but also slightly cynical about the limitations of “choice”, moderating what they felt was best for their children with the practical realities of their lives and the nature of education provision in their local areas.

Sally, a mother of two from London, summed up the views of many when she explained the first step in choosing a school for her elder son, which was to explore whether he could get into her old school, even though it was further away from where she lived than the others.

“It is an outstanding school and at the open day I asked the Headteacher whether I would get the chance to apply for my son. She asked me my postcode and as soon as I said it she said ‘No, you haven’t got a chance of getting in a place’ so I didn’t put it down.”

A combination of school size, catchment areas, admissions practices and proximity meant the majority of parents felt they had between one and three schools from which they could realistically choose, most (95%) were confident about making the right decision, 90% were confident that they would get their first preference (although slightly more were very confident of getting into their preferred secondary school) and most were proved right. Ninety one percent of the parents we polled across the country were offered places in their first choice of school although in London that figure dropped to 83%.

“We did get a lot of information through other friends with older kids who have already been. That’s very important. That’s how you find out faster than anything else.”

Mark, father of 3

Those that didn’t feel confident about choosing the right school cited not enough information, the fact that they were new to the area or didn’t know many local parents. Primary school parents were more likely to say that they didn’t feel confident as they did not have enough information (29% compared to 16% of parents of secondary school pupils).

“One of the things (I did) with my children was to take them to the school and see how they react. To see if they like it or not. I looked at 3 schools – the one I chose was the easiest to access by walking.” Abasi, father of two

Secondary school parents were more likely to say that they didn’t have much of a choice because of other factors (53% of secondary parents compared to 29% of primary parents). Anne, a disabled mother of five in the North East, had other personal reasons which dictated her family’s choices.

“My daughter is a child carer so I wanted someone who could support her. She also has special needs. I was very lucky because a nurse did the major assessment and found the school that came out on top for her needs. I went to see the head before she even went there to discuss her needs. We chose that school and they have been absolutely brilliant at meeting those needs.”

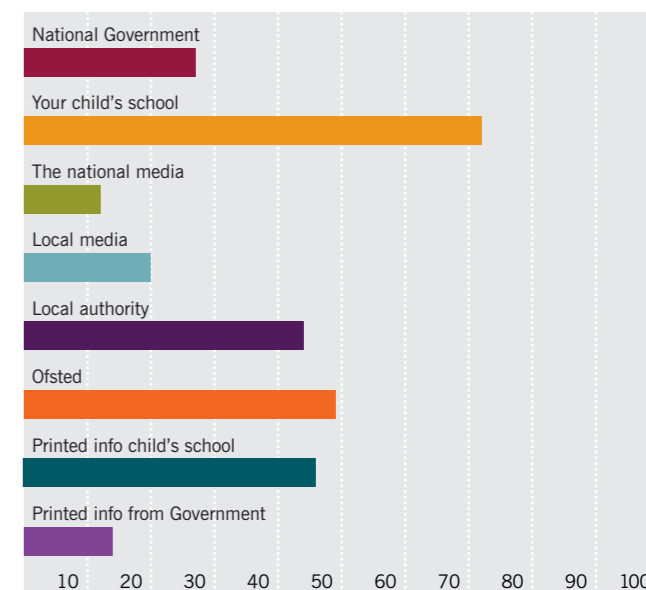
It was clear from all our conversations and from the polling that parents, regardless of where they live, their social class and the age of their children, are gleaning hard data and soft information to make judgements about the schools they are choosing from a wide range of sources.

“Its word of mouth...you don’t want to speak to other parents and they say “where does your son go” and you say x school and they say “oh.” Sally, mother of two

Asked where they would like to look for data about a school’s performance the most popular source was the individual school’s website, followed by the Ofsted site, then national and local government sites, then national and local media. School websites were mentioned frequently, and to a lesser extent local council websites, the BBC, Directgov, and Ofsted.

“What matters GCSE results and Ofsted result, especially in secondary.” Elaine, mother of six, North East

Where would parents prefer to go for data on a school’s performance?



■ National Government	27%
■ Your child's school	72%
■ The national media	12%
■ Local media	20%
■ Local authority	44%
■ Ofsted	49%
■ Printed info from child's school	46%
■ Printed info from Government	14%

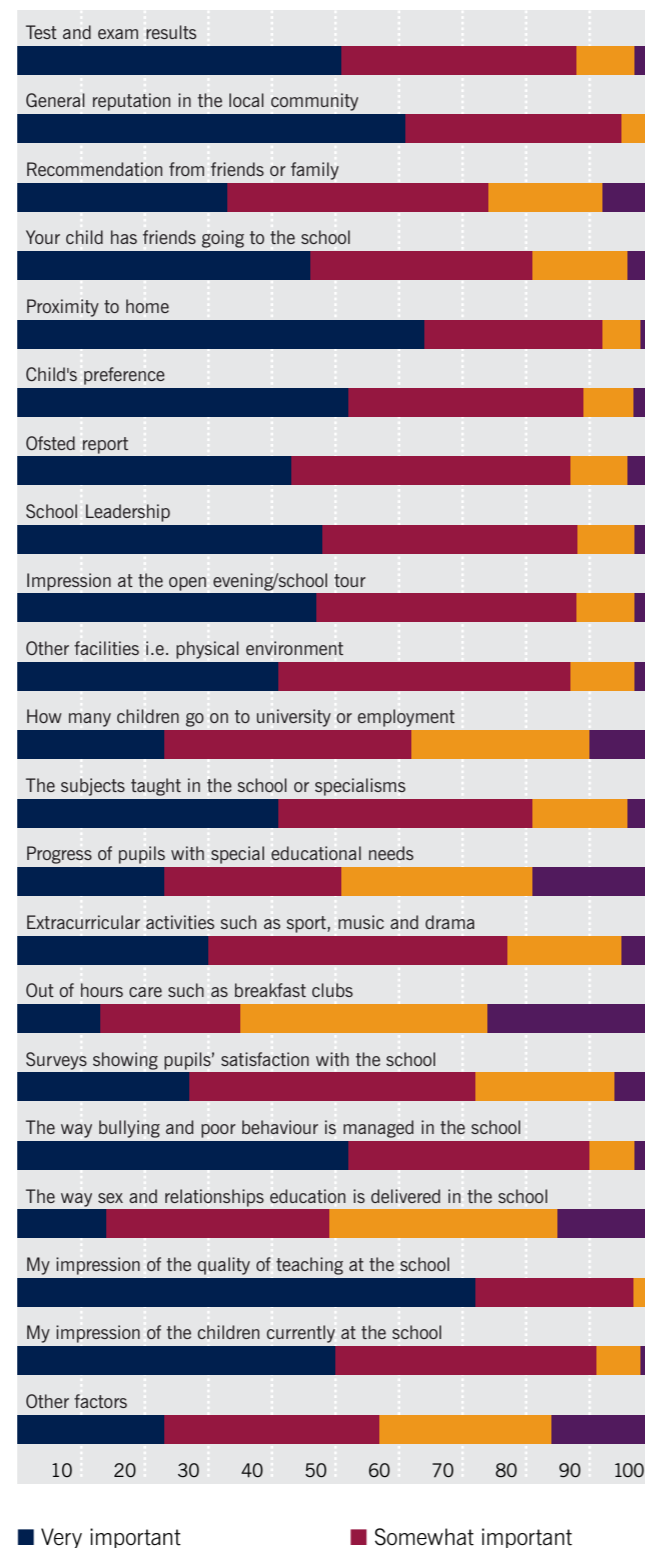
In practice though, this hard data is balanced against the word on the street, opinions of friends, neighbours and crucially their own personal impressions. League tables, test and exam results and inspections are only one part of a process which involves weighing up a complex range of published data, other evidence and opinions, their chances of success then lacing it with a large dose of gut instinct.

Julia, a mother of three from the West Midlands explained: *“It was partly geographical – we moved to be in the area because we knew the schools were good. We researched them, I went to look round quite a few schools – I wasn’t going to just go by looking at their SATs results and OFSTED and stuff, I actually went to look at the schools. I chose through my gut feeling. I felt the school I chose was a very happy school; I felt the children all seemed really content. It was quite an arty school and didn’t have a uniform, although that has now changed because they’ve got a new head.”*

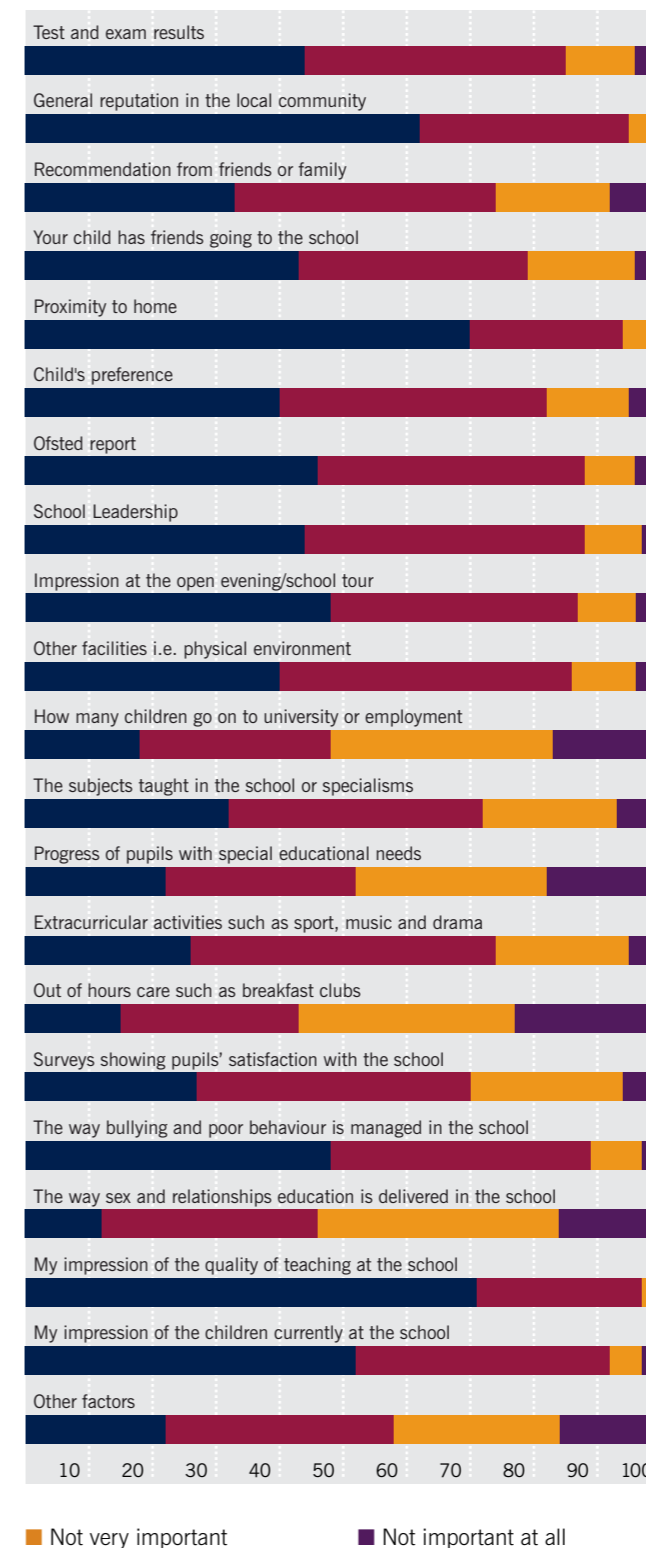
Nadya, a mother of five from West London was even more proactive: *“I don’t look at the league tables. I read the OFSTED reports, I went to the schools, spoke to many, many parents, went to open days, I sat outside in the car and observed the children, how they came out of school, how they behaved. I saw if there were police there, if there weren’t police there; saw how the teachers interacted with the children, that is what I did.”*

The most important factors to parents when choosing a school were ranked as follows: the impression of teaching quality (97% thought this very or somewhat important), general reputation (95%), proximity (92%), impression of children currently at the school (90%), the way bullying and behaviour was managed (90%), test and exam results and Ofsted (87%).

What was the most important factor that made you chose your child’s secondary school?



What was the most important factor that made you chose your child’s primary school?



Proximity was more important to primary than secondary parents – 70% of primary parents said it was very important compared to 54% of secondary parents. It was also more important to state school parents than those in the private sector – 64% of state school parents said it was very important contrasting with 22% in the private sector.

Test and exam results were more important to secondary than primary parents – 61% secondary parents said they were very important, compared to 44% of primary parents.

A second tier of key factors included buildings (88% thought this very or somewhat important) the impression at the open evening (88%), the schools leadership (88%) their child’s preference (86%, although this was more important to parents of children approaching secondary transfer, where their children’s friends were going 78%), the subjects taught at the school (80%), the school’s leadership, extra-curricular activities (77%) and personal recommendations (74%).

A smaller but significant group thought the numbers going on into higher education important, although this was of slightly more interest to parents in upper secondary school and to parents in the private sector. The progress of SEN pupils was of significant importance to about half of all parents. The particular need of parents with SEN children was a running theme throughout all our focus groups as well.

Personal impressions, either of the children on the street, the head teacher and the way the school manages its open days, came up repeatedly. Andrea, a mother of three primary and secondary age children said that when it came to choosing a secondary school, it was proximity first then *“watching the children go up and down our street. They were so polite and well mannered and that was a big thing for me”*.

Martin, father of two had a similar outlook: “For primary we carried on from the Children’s Centre, then at secondary it was seeing how polite and well mannered the children were.”

Some schools clearly still aren’t aware of the importance of their own presentation skills. Several parents talked of their decisions not to choose schools because of poorly organised open days.

Erica, a mother of two secondary age boys from the South West, said: “Open days are really important because you get a feel for the school. You can hear if a school has a good reputation but if you go on the open day you sometimes get a different impression. I remember I went on an open day at a school and it was supposed to end at 3 pm. At 2:30 all the teachers had gone into the staff room for a cup of tea. I had arrived late and had questions to ask and I was looking for people to answer them but I really got the impression that they were not really that bothered. I would have only have got that by going there.”

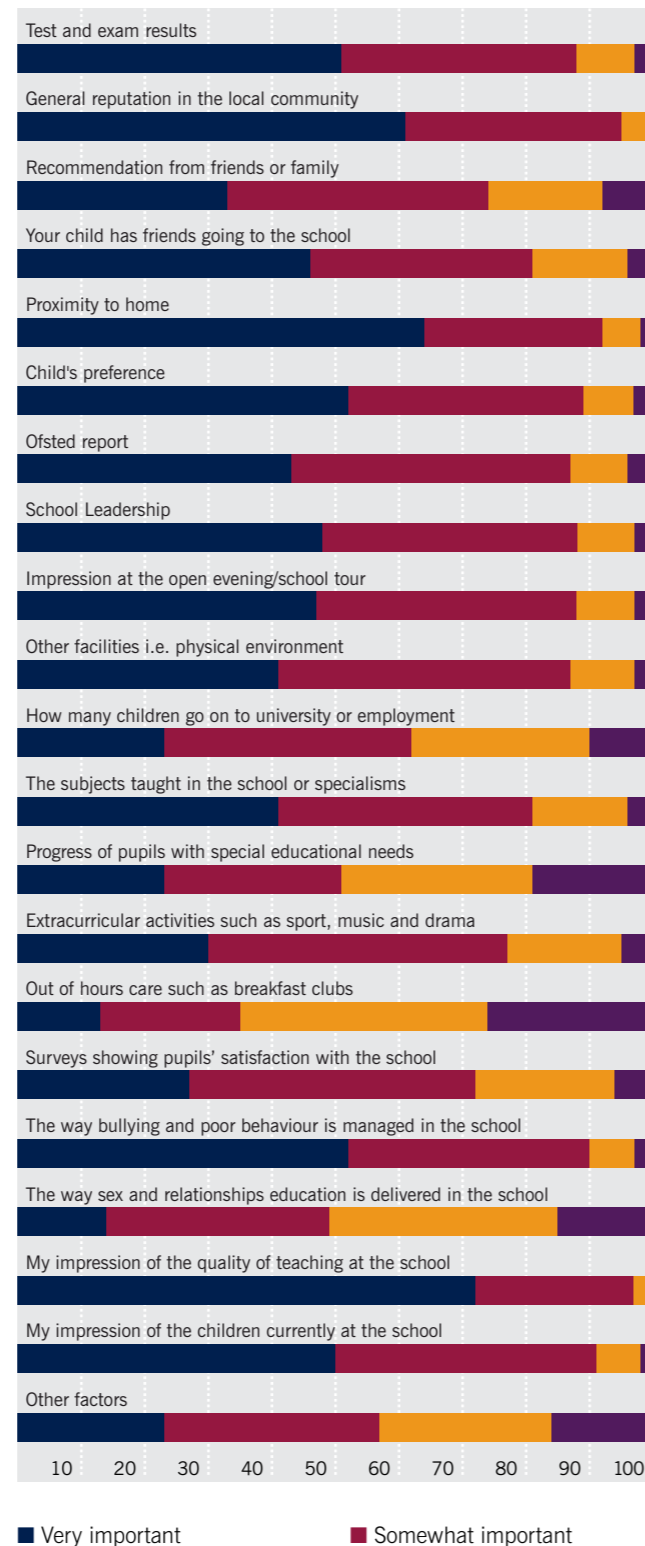
Lisa, another secondary age mother, made a snap decision at the open day: “It was so badly run at the closest school to us that it was a clincher. I thought ‘If this is an example of how the school is then no thanks.’”

Impression at the open evening was also more important to private than state school parents – 63% private school parents said the open evening was very important compared to 47% in the state sector and 11% of state school parents thought it not very or not at all important compared to 2% of private school parents.

When asked the single most important factor in choosing school, proximity, impression of teaching quality, general reputation, the Ofsted report and test and exam results were the most important factors to parents across all school stages.

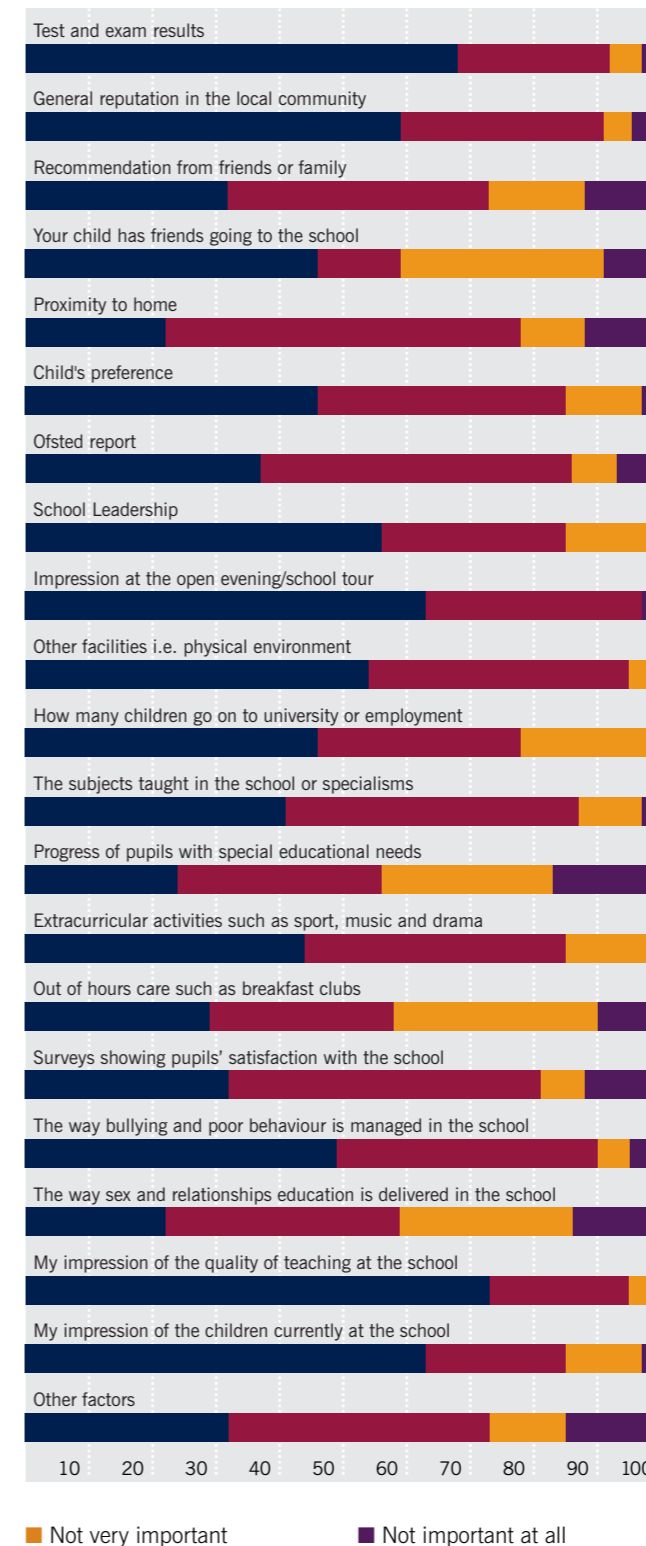
What was the most important factor that made you chose your child’s school?

State sector parents

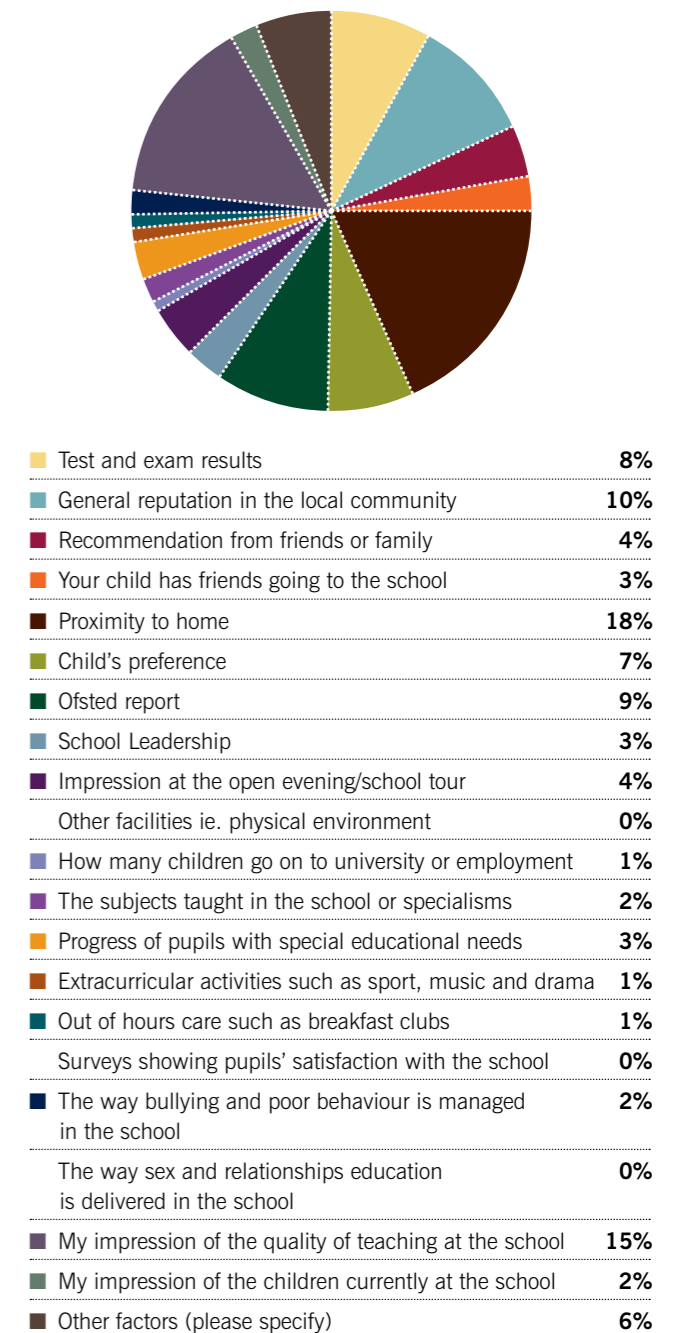


What was the most important factor that made you chose your child’s school?

Private sector parents



What is the single most important factor that made you chose your child’s current school?



However a larger proportion (24%) of private school parents chose impression of teaching quality as the most important factor), test and exam results and impression at open evening were ranked equally (12%), but fewer than 5% thought the other factors matter.

For state secondary school parents the impression of the teaching quality was ranked highly by a smaller proportion (14%) then test and exam results and proximity to home (12%), child's preference (11%) and general reputation (8%).

“With my first child there was the excitement of knowing they were starting school, but then the reality is you have to get through all of this bump and read through all this information, you've got to understand what the whole system is about. I started by looking at the league tables. I'm from a Christian background, so I looked at those kinds of schools as well, and then also where they're located, the reality that distance is important. Discipline also matters. I looked around the schools to see if children were quiet and well behaved.” Yvette, mother of two

State primary school parents ranked proximity to home (25%) as the most important factor, then impression of teaching quality (15%), general reputation (12%) and Ofsted (11%).

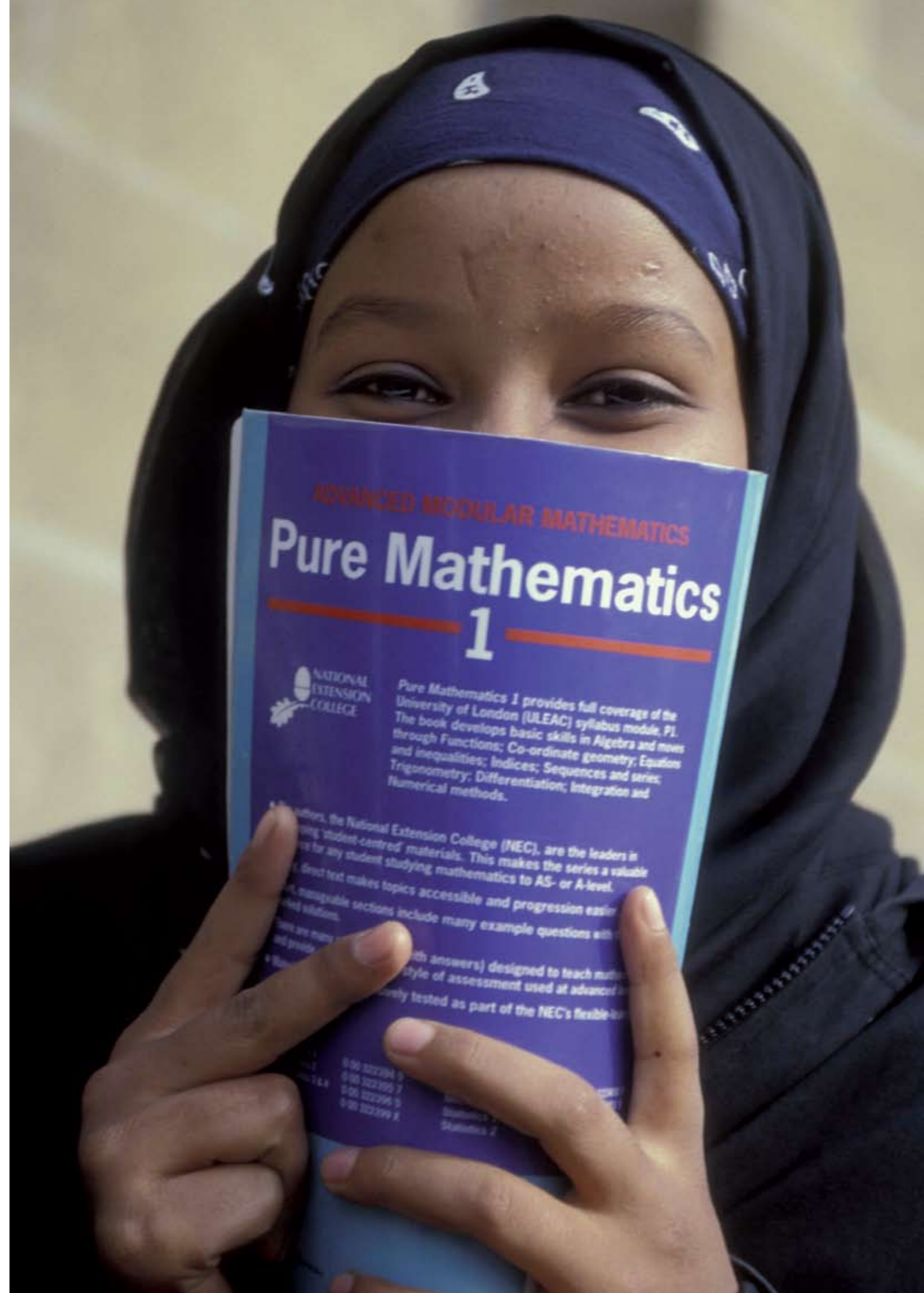
Many of the parents in the focus groups talked of their desire to hear the views of other parents either to help them choose schools or to judge the performance of the schools their children were already attending. Sam, the father of a boy and a girl at secondary school in the East Midlands, believes that schools should have the confidence to behave like many companies in the private sector.

“Brave companies make a Facebook page and people can comment – good, bad or indifferent. When someone has a complaint they respond, address it and are seen to be addressing it publicly. It would be great if we were choosing a school for a kid and could have a look at what everyone is saying and see what the school is doing about it. Social media has changed the world dramatically and will change the world even more in the future. A brave school will face the world and let people comment.” Sam, father of two

Parents are using a wide range of objective and subjective criteria when it comes to choosing schools. Test and exam results matter a great deal, as does proximity, especially to primary school parents but other factors such as the general reputation of the school and the quality of teaching are extremely important.

More information should be available about these two factors. Teaching quality is currently judged internally by schools but there is no obligation for them to share that with parents who may not get an objective judgement on this issue until schools receive an Ofsted inspection.

Schools should update parents more regularly about the quality of teaching in their schools. They should also consider 'safe' ways (possibly using the school website) of sharing the views of existing parents within the school community and to those who are choosing schools for their children.



Communicating school and pupil performance

Test and exam results are an indispensable feature of school choice for parents, but when we probed the wider range of factors weighed up by parents when choosing a school it was clear that academic performance is balanced against other factors not included in the league tables.

Moreover the school's "global" results may not help parents understand their own child's progress, unless the school communicates the performance of each individual child effectively.

We wanted to know what more information parents would like about both the schools they are choosing and those their children currently attend.

Information about test and exam results is highly valued, especially results in English and Maths. Sixty percent of primary school parents wanted information about test results in English and Maths and 57% wanted to know A*-C grades including English and Maths in secondary schools. However information about pupil progress was even more important; 68% wanted information about progress in primary schools and 60% in secondary schools.

A significant minority of primary school parents wanted more information about results in other subjects like history and geography. Just over 52% of secondary parents wanted detailed information on results in all subjects. Just under 50% wanted to know GCSE and A level passes including vocational, practical qualifications and a significant minority (37%) wanted to know good GCSE subjects in academic subjects only.

Asked about other information they would like to see in the public domain – parents in the focus groups and the poll mentioned wanting a more 'holistic' view of school performance across a wide range of areas. There were repeated calls for more data

on bullying, behaviour, exclusions, pupils' social and emotional development, children's happiness and well being, the background and professional qualifications of both teachers and the head, more information on support for and progress of children with SEN and the views of existing parents and pupils.

Only 37% of parents had made direct use of the Department for Education's performance tables and of those that had, almost 40% said it was hard to find the information they were looking for. The focus groups reinforced the polling evidence that parents would like to make more use of individual school websites. Justine, a mother of four from the Midlands said: *"The DFE tables are not very clear and need to be presented differently. I think schools should present all this information individually on their websites and then you could go into each site and compare."*

There was interest in, but very low awareness of, the new data sets showing detailed information about school budgets and school performance in individual subjects.¹⁰ In one focus group in the Midlands, we spent half an hour with a laptop trying to find the new data sets on the DFE site, so we could give parents an idea of how they were presented, but gave up with no success. They are in fact presented as Excel spreadsheets as an addendum to the main performance tables but hard to find without expert help.

There was also a strong sense in the focus groups that results alone couldn't be trusted because schools were perceived to coach pupils to meet targets and so results may not actually reflect either the standards of teaching or quality of education. Parents talked about the 'unnecessary' optional SATS which primary children do in Years 3, 4 and 5. Others talked about children having their childhoods "stolen" because of the need "to publish statistics".

Only a quarter of the parents polled had heard of the new English Baccalaureate, which ranks schools according to the numbers of pupils achieving five good GCSEs in Maths, English, science, history or geography and a modern or ancient language. None of the parents in our focus groups had heard of it and many confused it with the International or French Baccalaureate. While all recognised the value of good academic qualifications, when the "EBacc" was explained to them, nearly all expressed concerns about what might happen if their children proved not to be academic.

Mark, father of secondary age children, said: *"There are going to be some children who are not good at those academic subjects and they need to have those other choices still. You like to think all children will excel in something but it isn't always going to be those academic subjects. It may be something more creative to build their confidence."*

"It is really important to develop children's creative side." said Kate, a mother of two primary boys. *"What happens if you aren't any good at the five academic subjects? You are then a failure."*

Stephen, a father of two, said: *"I think vocational qualifications are important. You could get someone who might be brilliant at car mechanics, go on and start their own business and make a million but not be very good at geography. You need to have a measure of that range, so you can pick a school that is more linked to their skills and talents."*

A clear majority (84% to 16%) wanted to know how their schools were performing in relation to other schools although there was more interest in comparisons with other local schools than schools nationwide.

But parents are aware that they need clear and consistent information about their own children, as well as the global performance of the school, if they are to be effective at holding those schools to account. A significant minority wanted more information than they were currently getting from the schools which their children attended.

Between 40 and 45% wanted more information about their child's happiness, academic progress, social and emotional development, about the way bullying and poor behaviour was managed, the quality of teaching in the school and overall pupil satisfaction. Around a third wanted more information on SRE (Sex and Relationship Education), extracurricular activities, the numbers of pupils going into work and university, pastoral care and subjects taught. 24% wanted more information on the progress of pupils with special educational needs.

Jessica, a mother of four from the North of England felt that she was often fobbed off by teachers with information about how the class was doing and the size of the class *"I don't want to hear that they have 30 in the class. I want to hear that they are setting the work to my daughter's individual ability and they are trying to move her and every individual child on. Their job is to move every child on no matter what level they are at."*

And Claudia, mother of three children in primary and secondary schools in the Midlands, felt that pupils' views were vital: *"I would be interested in hearing more about the pupils' views but would want to know they hadn't been doctored in any way. If you are the head and 60% of the pupils say they are unhappy are you really going to be happy putting it out in public."*

¹⁰ <http://www.education.gov.uk/rsgateway/DB/SFR/s000985/index.shtml>

If I thought it came directly from the children I would be really interested in having that information. I think the head should be too, and want to do something about any issues that arose.”

There was strong support in all the focus groups for online forums where parents could read and share views, but clear agreement that these forums should be properly regulated.

“Teachers shouldn’t feel threatened if they are working hard and could get rave reviews.” Clare mother of three, West of England.

Abasi, a father of one primary and one nursery child from North West London said: *“Parents’ forums may be too risky. Any parent could hack into them and place difficult comments. You would need to know who the comments come from – they must be identified. Not everybody should have access. Parents at the school would need an individual password.”*

Clare, mother of three, from the South West, also expressed the need for impartial moderation and clear guidelines: *“Parents – we are odd creatures aren’t we? Some parents at my daughter’s school really get a bee in their bonnet about some things. I suppose we are all like that if there is something really bugging us. But one parent can really like a teacher and another*

might not. But the teacher is the teacher and doing the best they can but if you are the parent who doesn’t like the teacher you can find fault in anything so we would need to guard against individual parents dominating.”

Mark, father of two, suggested an online chart mapping the opinions of parents, pupils and ex pupils. *“When I was at school in the sixth form we used to have a staff student advisory committee where we would sit down with the Principal and discuss lots of issues to do with the school. These days with all the social media etc that could become a representative body of what is actually really going on and the school would therefore be accountable because the kids would be having a say.”*

Most parents in the poll were satisfied (49%) or very satisfied (37%) with the frequency with which they received reports about their own children’s performance. Most felt it was very easy (50%) or somewhat easy (36%) to contact their child’s school if they had a problem or wanted to discuss a certain issue and there was a slight preference for termly reports sent electronically by e-mail, text, or via the school website although some non working parents pointed out that they didn’t regularly check e-mails.

How often and how would you like to receive reports about your child’s performance via the following means?

	By email	By text	On a secure website that you have a password for	By letter
Every year	17%	41%	20%	22%
Every term	35%	25%	32%	47%
Every half-term	22%	14%	17%	20%
Monthly	19%	14%	18%	9%
More frequently	6%	6%	13%	3%

A significant minority (42%) of parents said they received regular information about their school’s performance, although a higher percentage of parents in the private sector (61%) than the state sector (42%) felt they received regular information. Around a fifth said they rarely received any information and only 9% of private school parents selected this answer.

However in the focus groups, clear distinctions emerged about the ways in which parents in different schools receive information in spite of extensive research pointing to the value of parental involvement in their children’s education.

Other Family Lives’ research, conducted in partnership with the Teacher Support Network, shows that where parents are engaged in supporting their child’s learning, the outcomes for that child are better. Improving the communication between a school and its pupils’ parents can boost attendance, behaviour and attainment¹¹. The research made recommendations for how schools could remove some of the barriers that some parents face in working with the school to support their child’s education.

Yet we found parents in the same regions, often in schools that were only miles apart, were experiencing very different types and frequency of communication from their children’s schools.

At one end of the spectrum parents like Sarah, a mother of two from the North East, were only getting annual reports and parents’ evenings. *“I haven’t heard anything from the school about my elder son, not for a whole year. Nothing. He gets a report at the end of the year and that’s it. And then they have this stupid parents evening, so you go a whole year of not speaking to a soul and then get a report and parents evening within a month.”*

Simon, a father of two from the South West, had a similar experience: *“I remember once there was a parent consultation at the beginning of the year and at the end of the year he had made no progress at all in one particular area (handwriting) but by that time it was too late. I thought it was a bit odd a whole year gone past and we had not had a chance to work on it.”*

Others like Caroline and Jessica with children in the same Midlands secondary school were being sent monthly ‘scans’ of their children’s progress. *“That tells us what level they are at in each subject and what level they should be at and also provides new targets. I feel as though the teachers really know and understood my children and it gives me the confidence that my child will be picked up if he or she is falling behind.”* explained Jessica.

“They also had to send an individual report, it was immense, about 5 pages long and I’m thinking, my goodness my child’s really good! But it was amazing; they must have known him backwards to write that amount. I was quite impressed.” said Caroline.

Some secondary school parents had passwords which allowed them to log onto school websites and access information about their children whenever they wanted. *“I just log on and find out my daughter’s progress via a password whenever I want.”* said Anne, a mother of four.

Stephen, father of two from the South West, said *“I can log on and see my son’s progress, homework and detentions. I don’t log on as often as I should but on average once a month. I think a lot of parents would be interested. It is OK to rely on teacher contact up to a point but a school’s concerns are not going to be the same as a parents.”*

¹¹ <http://familylives.org.uk/sites/default/files/Beyond%20the%20School%20Gate%20Report%20February%202010.pdf>

Several lone parents had specific issues with accessing information about non-resident children: *“I’m divorced and my daughter stayed with her Dad and I didn’t get any information until I asked and then they did send me copies of the reports and everything.”* said Hayley, mother of one secondary age daughter from the Midlands.

Parents want more information about school performance than is currently available. Threshold measures which show the proportion of pupils reaching a particular benchmark at 11 or 16 only tell a partial story. Information about pupil progress, behaviour, bullying, exclusions, child well-being, happiness and parents’ views should be widely available and reproduced on the schools’ own websites.

Schools, local authorities and Ofsted inspectors already have access to more detailed analysis of school data showing the progress of different groups of pupils, (known as RAISEonline¹²). This information should be made available to parents in an easily accessible format.

Schools should be obliged to provide regular termly reports either by post, e-mail or using a secure online webpage about each child’s progress. Some schools currently fulfil the minimum requirement of an annual report while others go to great lengths to provide regular, even constant online reporting. Parents should be entitled to the same amount of information about their children, regardless of where they live and which school their children attend.

¹² <https://www.raiseonline.org/News.aspx?NewsID=303>



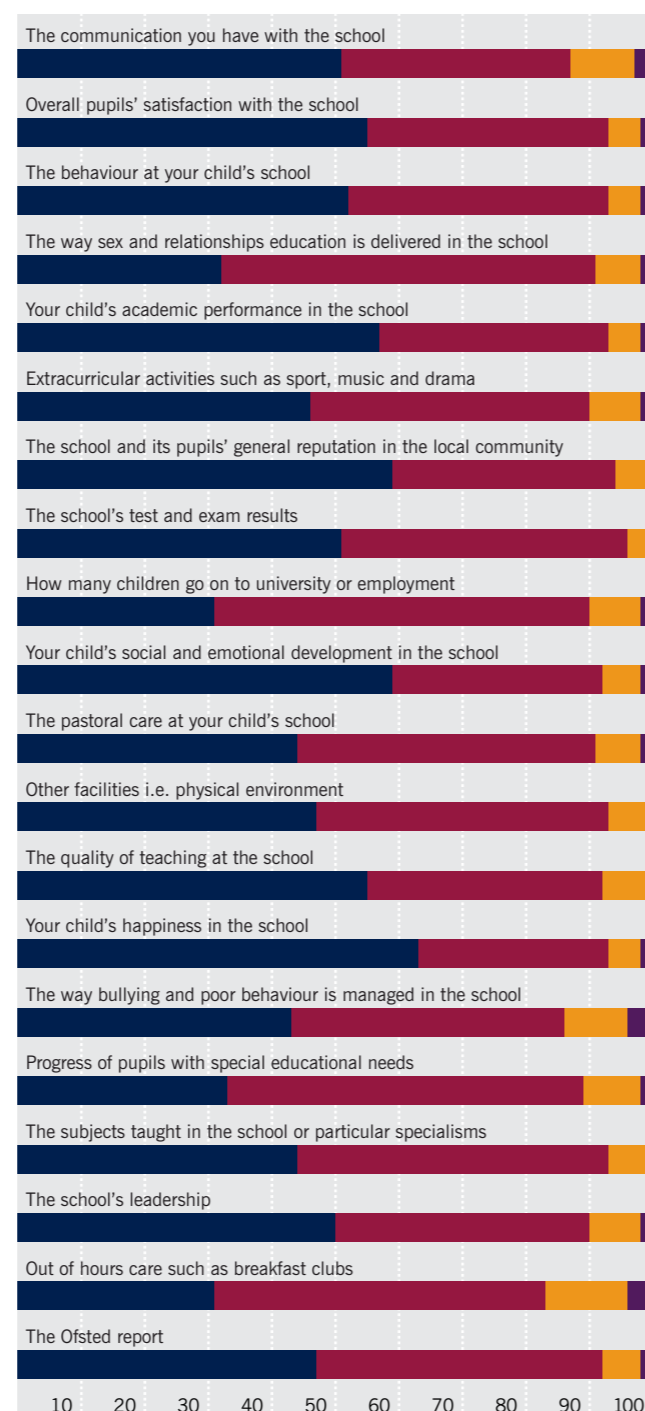
What to do if you don't get what you want

Greater school accountability, including regular inspections and league tables showing performance in test and exams results, was introduced not simply to encourage choice. More openness about school performance was also intended to help Government, local authorities and parents hold schools to account, to expose failure and to put pressure on head teachers and governors to drive up standards. We wanted to know how parents dealt with concerns about their schools and how parents' views could be incorporated into the accountability measures.

"It would be too disruptive to move my child unless I had very serious concerns. They've got all their friends and they've got used to how it works. I would rather move the head than the child." Jane, mother of two, from the North East

We found that most parents are generally happy with their children's schools. Asked to rate satisfaction with a range of issues, over 90% of parents were very or somewhat satisfied with test and exam results, general reputation, the Ofsted report, school leadership, other facilities, subjects taught, progress to HE or work, overall pupil satisfaction, quality of teaching, academic performance, their child's social and emotional development, happiness in school, pastoral care and behaviour.

How satisfied are you with the following factors regarding your child's school?



Very satisfied (dark blue), Somewhat satisfied (maroon), Not very satisfied (yellow), Not satisfied at all (purple)

Over 85% were very or somewhat satisfied with the progress of SEN children, (although a smaller proportion were very satisfied than satisfied), with the way bullying and poor behaviour was managed, communication with parents, extracurricular activity and after school clubs. There was virtually no difference in these satisfaction levels across social class background or regions although a slightly higher proportion of parents are 'very' satisfied with local provision in the North of England.

Where parents did have concerns, or when their schools appeared to perform less favourably to others, the majority said they preferred to try and improve things at the school either by talking to the school (49% said this would be their preferred course of action) or working with other parents on the Parent Teacher Association or on the Governing Body (35% said they would try this).

Just under a third said they would consider moving to another school and only 6% said they would consider starting their own school under the Government's free school policy.

Test and exam results	very satisfied 51%	somewhat satisfied 45%
General reputation	very satisfied 59%	somewhat satisfied 35%
Ofsted report	very satisfied 47%	somewhat satisfied 45%
Leadership	very satisfied 50%	somewhat satisfied 40%
Other facilities like buildings	very satisfied 47%	somewhat satisfied 46%
Progress to HE or work	very satisfied 31%	somewhat satisfied 59%
Subjects taught	very satisfied 44%	somewhat satisfied 48%
SEN progress	very satisfied 33%	somewhat satisfied 56%
Extracurricular activities	very satisfied 46%	somewhat satisfied 44%
State parents were less likely to be satisfied than private school pupils – 59% very satisfied compared to 45% of state parents, and 0% very dissatisfied compared to 2% of state parents.		
Out of hours clubs/after school care	very satisfied 31%	somewhat satisfied 52%
Overall pupil satisfaction	very satisfied 55%	somewhat satisfied 38%
Way bullying and poor behaviour managed	very satisfied 43%	somewhat satisfied 43%
Way SRE taught	very satisfied 32%	somewhat satisfied 59%
Quality of teaching	very satisfied 55%	somewhat satisfied 37%
Communication with school	very satisfied 51%	somewhat satisfied 36%
Primary pupils slightly more satisfied, with 53% very satisfied compared to 47% of secondary, and 11% not very or not at all satisfied compared to 15% of secondary.		
Child's academic performance	very satisfied 57%	somewhat satisfied 36%
Child's social and emotional development	very satisfied 59%	somewhat satisfied 34%
Child's happiness in the school	very satisfied 63%	somewhat satisfied 30%
Pastoral care	very satisfied 44%	somewhat satisfied 47%
Behaviour at school	very satisfied 52%	somewhat satisfied 40%

The school attended by three of Julia's children had a disappointing Ofsted but she and her husband James saw that as a positive experience:

"I went in to the Ofsted website and read the report early because I was keen to see how it had come out of the inspection. And in fact it had dropped in quite a few areas since they've had this new head, which I thought would happen. But I think that is good, it should make him pull his socks up a bit. He's having all these parents' forums now, so things are improving. He is trying really hard to get things where that they were before so that has reassured us."

And Tracey, mother of four primary and secondary age children from the South West, said she had dealt with all her concerns directly with the head teacher or the deputy and found they were acted on. *"It would have to be something really major for me to move the child. I don't even know what I would class as really major. I suppose if my child was really unhappy and didn't want to be there and you couldn't get to the heart of the problem. But then where do you move them to and how would you know the same thing wouldn't happen there? It is more important to me to see how my child is doing than the whole school. It could be the worst school going but if your child is achieving well why would you move them?"*

Tia, mother of two, arrived in the UK in the middle of the school year so failed to get her first choice of school: *"This school was not my first preference. There was another school that was nearer to where we lived but we got offered this first. I asked my son what would happen if we then got an offer from our preferred school, which would be easier for me because it is closer, but he said "No I am happy here" and that is the most important thing for me."*

The only examples we found of parents having moved their children was when the child was very unhappy. Elaine, mother of three said: *"It was important to change him because he didn't want to be at that school. I was a bit dubious because he was 13 when he moved but he came out with two handfuls of GCSEs."*

Stephen's eldest son was moved to a different primary school because his parents didn't feel the school was addressing a bullying issue. *"We found it quite easy. It solved the problem now he has met up in secondary school with the lad who was bullying him and they get on very well!"*

Inspections by the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) give parents an opportunity to express their opinions about their schools, and also to flag up concerns. While Ofsted reports are ranked very highly by parents choosing schools for their children (87% parents said the Ofsted report played an important or very important part in their final decision to choose a school) there was cynicism about the extent to which what the inspectors saw was a true reflection of the school and about whether parents had an adequate opportunity to feed in views.

We heard several comments like: *"Too many schools prepare and put graces on for Ofsted."* or *"Before Ofsted they are on red alert. They redecorate and are on best behaviour so I don't think it is a true reflection of what is going on."*

"My youngest' school reckons he was told what to say by his form teacher when they come to speak to them. The children are primed to behave well. It is almost the same as saying we will give you a lolly." said Kate, mother of two from the Midlands.

There was a sense that Ofsted should do spot inspections because otherwise everything, right down to the school uniform, would just be staged. A number of parents said there should be NO warning.

"They shouldn't have 24 hours. They should be on spec and with no notice. From a parent's point of view I wouldn't be too fussed if they just turned up even if I couldn't feed my views in", said Tracey, mother of five *"Although schools will hate that!"*

We also found doubts about both content and effectiveness of the questionnaires that are sent to parents once an Ofsted inspection has been announced, and have to be returned within 48 hours. Parent said they would be more likely to fill them in if they felt they were designed to elicit honest answers, if there was a clearer guarantee of confidentiality and if they felt their concerns would be acted on.

"Everyone should have to do them online so people can't see which child has handed them in." said Sally mother of two, from London.

Claudia, mother of three, felt the questions were both restrictive and unclear: *"The form didn't really allow me to say what I wanted. One question was 'Are you given information about your child? The answers were like 'never', 'often' or 'yes' or 'no' but I found I couldn't really say what I wanted to say because of the categories. I had been to a parents' evening the week before so the answer was clearly 'yes', but I still didn't feel I had been given enough information"*.

The majority of parents thought they should have more opportunities to communicate with inspectors either through regular surveys, face to face meetings with inspectors, by contacting them directly (which is possible under the current framework although

not many parents seem aware of that) or by allowing parents to view a sample of lessons online and comment.

"It would be great if there could be a meeting either the night before the inspection or the night after. Get parents along to an open forum and ask what they think" suggested Nick, a father of three from the South West.

"Or do a spot check, find strengths and faults, then have a meeting with the parents and put together a report that is fair. Not everyone can make a meeting and not everyone will fill out the form so both should be available."

A new Ofsted framework will come into force next year. A recent consultation on the proposed changes set out plans for school inspections to focus more specifically on four key areas; achievement, quality of teaching, quality of leadership and management and the behaviour and safety of pupils.¹³

"If they have more than so many complaints about the school they should have to come in and inspect." Mark, father of four, East Midlands

A school's ability to work productively with parents will be judged as part of the new "leadership and management" judgement, although there is little detail about how that judgement will be formed. The new inspection regime proposes that parents should be able to report directly to Ofsted throughout the year, possibly triggering inspections.

¹³ Inspection 2012: proposals for inspection arrangements for maintained schools and academies <http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/resources/inspection-2012-proposals-for-inspection-arrangements-for-maintained-schools-and-academies-january-2>

There were mixed views on this proposal. Half of all parents didn't know whether parents should be able to trigger an Ofsted inspection. Of those who did believe parents should be able to trigger an inspection, 77% thought an inspection should be triggered because of concerns about teaching quality, 76% because of concerns about child protection, and 69% about falling exam performance, 68% about the schools leadership and 68% over health and safety issues. A significant minority (44%) thought Ofsted inspections should be triggered by concerns about a particular teacher, and 37% about the subjects taught in a school.

There was clear support (70%) for a minimum number of parents expressing concerns before Ofsted could be sent in. Only 17% thought one parent should be able to do this.

"There should definitely be a threshold to trigger an inspection or you would you could just have one grumpy parent and next week the Ofsted SWAT team would turn out." said Karl, father of two from the South West.

"Parents triggering an Ofsted is a really good idea, but you would need a certain proportion so you don't have the ones with a particular gripe or axe to grind." added Vicky, a mother of two.

Most parents' first instinct is to try and work with existing schools if they have concerns, either by communicating with their children's teachers and the head, or by getting involved in the Governing Body or the Parent Teacher Association.

However mechanisms for judging how effectively schools respond to parents concerns and how they communicate with parents more generally are quite weak. Ofsted inspections provide a limited opportunity, but the short notice inspection often precludes parents meeting, or making a detailed response to inspectors. The Ofsted questionnaire is too limited and parents have concerns about confidentiality.

Moreover most schools are only inspected every three years, and there are suggestions that some successful schools should not be inspected at all, unless parents' views trigger an inspection which raises the question of what happens if no-one complains. Does that automatically mean a school is performing well?

Home school communication and work with parents should be a key part of the new Ofsted framework, with clear expectations and guidelines about how regularly schools should survey parental opinion, both confidentially and in the open forum online forums suggested in earlier parts of this report.

Ofsted should be clear about how it will monitor and respond to the new online channels of communication it plans to open for parents and set clear thresholds for the type and volume of parent comments that might justify a new inspection.



No exceptions to the measures

A subtle but clear theme that emerged from our polling and meetings with parents was the need for more information about the progress of children with special educational needs and better communication with the parents of those children.

Ofsted makes judgements on how well schools support children with SEN and the performance tables include information about the numbers of pupils with SEN at the school, but more detailed information is not readily available, unless the school chooses to make it so.

What would help the parents of children with SEN make more informed choices and understand their child's progress in the schools they have chosen?

"When you are choosing a school, you hear about league tables and you get on the computer and start making all these comparisons. I'm not saying none of that matters to me but when you have a child with SEN you need a school that has provision for every different learning need." Yvette, mother of a dyslexic child, London.

Around 20% of pupils in English schools have special educational needs.¹⁴ We found that the parents of SEN pupils are determined, often extremely well informed, used to undertaking a significant amount of personal research about their children's circumstances, often frustrated by a 'one size fits all' accountability systems and conflicted about how to manage school choices for different siblings with profoundly different needs.

"If you could judge a school that said there are special needs here and there are real options for these children to follow, I would have chosen it straight away." Kate, mother of an autistic son, Midlands

Maybe not surprisingly the progress of SEN pupils was a very important factor for 23% of parents when choosing a school, and a further 29% felt it was somewhat important. Fewer parents were very satisfied with the progress of SEN pupils in their children's schools than were very satisfied with the academic achievement of all non SEN pupils.

When asked about what 'other' information parents would like to have about pupil progress and exam results in primary and secondary schools, the numbers of SEN pupils, their progress and more information on how they were supported came up more frequently than anything else.

In our parent focus groups, the reasons why became clear. Yvette, mother of one son at a London primary school, with another in nursery, says that she learned the hard way that when it comes to SEN, the most successful schools in terms of Ofsted and exam results are not necessarily the best for every child.

"My son is at a very good school, they achieve very well and most parents are happy. But I had a gut instinct that something was going wrong. He had an early assessment that wasn't right so I did some research and asked for another assessment and it became clear he was dyslexic. Even though his is a good school, this school isn't meeting his needs. I have learned now that it doesn't matter what the league table looks like – for my particular son it is about the special needs department."

"So I started looking around to see how other schools did things. I had also moved and found another school that was closer to where we lived. When I visited that school I found something totally different going on. I got more information on one 45 minute visit than I had done from the school where my son is a pupil in two years."

"Even though my involvement has woken up the special needs department at his current school the SEN teacher there has another role too. At the second school the SEN co-ordinator just has that one role and is available 24/7 if the child is going through anything traumatic. The whole feel and approach of the school is very different. There is a good after school club and the playground is visually very stimulating. I have now put an application in to the new school, a lot of thought and research has gone into this but I believe his needs will be better met there."

Kate, a mother of two sons, one of whom is on the autistic spectrum felt that schools needed to have clearly differentiated systems of home school communication for children with SEN and ways of recognising and celebrating success for children in mainstream schools, whose special needs may mean they struggle academically.

"There seems to be a lack of communication over what might be nothing at all for a mainstream child but become a big issue for a child with SEN who then brings that problem back home. If the parents aren't being communicated with, that can become a big issue and I think there is a huge gap between the normal communication with parents of mainstream kids and what is needed for SEN children."

"My son is quiet and sweet and has a key worker who doesn't seem to know him even though she has worked with him for two years. She can dismiss something that he thinks is really important but when he comes through the door it is me that has to deal with it and it is difficult if there has been no communication."

"They're all run on targets, aren't they? My elder son is really clever, so they love him, because it's a good school and he's a bright student. They like all the kids that are doing really well. The headmaster knows them all by name and they wear the headmaster's special tie. Whereas I feel they are not really interested in the ones with SEN. My younger son deserves the headmaster's special tie too – he works just as hard and attends just as many days but he doesn't get it. He won't meet those targets or pass many exams but he is capable of something and there need to be options for children like him. You want them to be in the same school for lots of reasons but sometimes the ones with the best result may not be the best for your child."

"I realise now that my SEN son might have been better in a different school where there was a special unit where he would have been encouraged. He was basically just left at the back until I started kicking up. They know about him now but that is because of me."

¹⁴ Special Educational Needs in England 2011 <http://www.education.gov.uk/rsgateway/DB/SFR/s001007/index.shtml>

However Anne, a disabled mother of five, whose eldest daughter has ADHD (Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder) had nothing but praise for the well targeted advice and support she received in choosing her daughters' school.

"The schools were assessed for me because of my daughters SEN. I went to discuss those needs before she started and the school has everything for me. There are presentations, assessments and always a member of staff on hand to speak to. No matter what problem I have got there is someone to talk too and they always phone me back before the end of the day.

"It did cause a bit of a problem with my second daughter. Like most Year 6 children she wanted to go where her friends were – that is like a security net. There were very few going to the school that her sister is at but we sat down and discussed the reasons she wanted to go to that school, and the reasons why I needed her to go to the same school as her sister. She did accept it and is now very happy."

Changes to school performance tables should also include progress of children with SEN and schools do more to explain in some detail how they support pupils with SEN. Parents would welcome more information about the structure and capacity of specialist teaching staff, the physical environment, out of school provision and the extent to which the school culture is "inclusive".

Parents of SEN children should be given an opportunity to feedback their views on how the school supports their children's needs and school websites could also provide space for parents with SEN children to share their experience. This would be particularly helpful to the parents of children with special educational needs who are choosing schools and trying to match up specific provision to their child's needs.



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