



STUDENT ASSESSMENT AND SCHOOL ACCOUNTABILITY

SELECTIVE SCHOOLS UNIT

YEAR 7 PLACEMENT PROCESS

A DISCUSSION PAPER

This paper is also available on the Internet at:
<http://www.schools.nsw.edu.au>

May 2002

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ISBN: 0731381556
SCIS: 1088858

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SECTION 1 Background

The first government high schools in NSW were established in 1883 at Bathurst, Goulburn and Sydney. These schools were designed specifically for students aspiring to a university education and selective entrance to these schools was through a competitive examination.

In the years since, the state system has evolved to be based on comprehensive high schools and a small core of specialist high schools. Academically selective high schools, with entrance based on testing, remained an important part of the system.

Since the late 1980s, a number of new specialist high schools have been established in NSW. Entry to all of these is determined by achievement in entrance tests combined with a report provided by the student's primary principal.

Agricultural high schools are selective high schools that emphasise the study of agriculture; schools with the residential sections give some priority to isolated students.

Each year approximately 15 000 applications are received for selective school entry. For the 2002 school year there were 15 343 applicants for placement in Year 7 in selective high schools; 51% of applicants were boys and 49% of applicants were girls.

There are now 21 fully selective schools, including the 4 selective agricultural high schools and 7 high schools with selective classes (two of these cater for Years 7 to 10 and one caters for Years 11 and 12).

A Department of Education and Training internal review of the process for Year 7 entry into selective high schools was completed in January 2002. The review recommended changes to the selection process, taking into account the concerns raised by principals, parents and peak groups. This discussion paper reflects the recommendations from that review.

Issues raised have included:

- the current selection procedures
- relevance and content of tests
- the impact of coaching on the selection process
- community participation and support
- the composition of student cohorts.

SECTION 2 **Current Selection Procedures**

- Students compete academically with all other candidates for Year 7 placement to each selective or agricultural high school. Academic merit is determined mainly by the combination of the results of the Selective High Schools Test in English language, mathematics and general ability, together with the primary school assessments of student performance in English and mathematics. The school's assessment of student performance in English includes a component for writing.
- Principals are required to provide school marks for English and mathematics, based on the student's performance in Years 5 and 6. The school marks are moderated (scaled) according to the performance of all other students from the school in the English-language and mathematics tests. Moderation of school marks makes them comparable statewide and gives school marks and test marks in English and mathematics equal value.
- In addition to the tests, information can also be provided by parents and/or principals to support the application and is considered at the discretion of the selection committee. Comments are invited on outstanding achievements, performance specifically in English, mathematics and performance in other areas, as well as comments on issues that may be relevant to school and test performance.
- The external tests currently contain a total of 145 items: 60 general ability; 45 English; and 40 mathematics. In the final scores each component is equally weighted; that is, each component is worth 100 marks.
- The moderated school and scaled test marks are then averaged and converted to a standardised mark out of 100. The total score possible is 300.
- A contract is awarded by tender each year to externally set and mark the Selective High Schools Test, that is the English-language test, mathematics test and general ability test (GAT).
- All placement decisions are made by selection committees and appeals panels. Selection committees generally comprise the District Superintendent as chairperson, the selective high school principal and a parent representative.
- Students must be Australian citizens or permanent residents to be eligible for selective high school entry. Where two students have equal results, a student with a family placement claim will be given priority. Parents may apply for up to four selective high schools, regardless of their residential location, as selective high schools are de-zoned.
- In determining academic merit, consideration may be given to students with sensory or physical disabilities and to students of Aboriginal/Torres Strait Islander background or students with a non-English-speaking background (NESB¹), if it is considered that the marks do not reflect the true abilities of students.
- The current selection procedures allow NESB students, who have been educated in English for less than four years, to elect to sit only for the English-language and mathematics tests, but not the GAT, and for their total to be adjusted accordingly.

¹ NESB refers to any student who answers yes to question 18 (Is a language other than English spoken at home) on the selective high school application form.

- Placement offers are made to students based on their profile score, however, the procedures also allow selection committees to give consideration to students with special needs where appropriate.

Listed below are all selective high schools operating in 2002

Baulkham Hills High School

(coeducational, fully selective)

BAULKHAM HILLS

Caringbah High School

(coeducational, fully selective)

CARINGBAH

Chatswood High School

(coeducational, partially selective)

CHATSWOOD

Farrer Memorial Agricultural

(fully selective, boarding and day students–male)

TAMWORTH

Fort Street High School

(coeducational, fully selective)

PETERSHAM

Girraween High School

(coeducational, fully selective)

GIRRAWEEN

Gosford High School

(coeducational, fully selective)

GOSFORD

Hornsby Girls High

(fully selective)

HORNSBY

Hurlstone Agricultural High School

(fully selective, boarding and day students–coeducational)

GLENFIELD

James Ruse Agricultural High School

(fully selective, day students, coeducational)

CARLINGFORD

Macquarie Fields High School

(coeducational, partially selective)

MACQUARIE FIELDS

Manly High School

(coeducational, fully selective)

NORTH CURL CURL

Merewether High School

(coeducational, fully selective)

BROADMEADOW

Normanhurst Boys High School

(fully selective)

NORMANHURST

North Sydney Boys High School

(fully selective)

CROWS NEST

North Sydney Girls High School

(fully selective)

CROWS NEST

Penrith High School

(coeducational, fully selective)

PENRITH

Ryde Secondary College

(coeducational, partially selective)

RYDE

Sefton High School

(coeducational, partially selective)

SEFTON

Smiths Hill High School

(coeducational, fully selective)

WOLLONGONG

St George Girls High School

(fully selective)

KOGARAH

Sydney Boys High School

(fully selective)

SURRY HILLS

Sydney Girls High School

(fully selective)

SURRY HILLS

Sydney Secondary College Balmain Campus

(coeducational, partially selective, Yrs 7–10 only)

ROZELLE

Sydney Secondary College Blackwattle Bay Campus

(coeducational, partially selective, Yrs 11–12 only)

GLEBE

Sydney Secondary College Leichhardt Campus

(coeducational, partially selective, Yrs 7–10 only)

LEICHHARDT

Sydney Technical High School

(boys only, fully selective)

BEXLEY

Yanco Agricultural High School

(fully selective, boarding students only – coeducational)

YANCO

SECTION 3 Discussion of Issues

3.1 The range and scope of the external tests

Students currently sit for three separate tests in mathematics, English and general ability. There is some concern and some evidence that the mathematics and general ability tests have a degree of overlap. This might give a slight bias towards mathematical ability over English-language ability.

Academic ability includes a range of learning areas, including mathematics, language (English), languages, science, and social studies. Currently the external tests concentrate predominantly on mathematics, English and general ability.

A redesign of the test components could eliminate both the overlap and the skew in favour of mathematics ability and incorporate elements from other learning areas relevant to the identification of academic ability.

Other processes may help to identify academic giftedness, including authentic tasks or tests, as it is these activities that students will actually be engaged in. The inclusion of a writing task is widely supported as it would add another distinguishing rather than convergent component to the tests.

The inclusion of a writing task would also mitigate the skew towards the mathematics and general ability components of the tests. Certainly the assessment of writing would add an authentic task to the testing procedures.

Should a writing test be included in the external test, careful consideration would need to be given to the impact on NESB students. Evidence from a trial writing test conducted in 2000 indicated minimal impact on NESB student representation.

3.2 The extent to which the English-language and mathematics tests assess achievement rather than aptitude

Tests are developed to be as unrelated to the syllabus as can be devised. This allows ability and aptitude rather than achievement to be measured. Items that are too directly related to the syllabus may lead to incidences of ‘teaching to the test’ or an increase in parents seeking additional coaching for their children.

The English-language test is fundamentally a comprehension test. Although the items are consistent with the curriculum they have been designed to be as syllabus-free as possible. Items are highly inferential and require students to demonstrate highly developed thinking and reasoning skills.

In contrast, the mathematics test appears to have a closer alignment with the NSW Mathematics K–6 Syllabus. Items without a direct link to syllabus objectives look more at mathematical thinking and problem-solving techniques. These questions test mathematical ability and aptitude.

3.3 Coaching

There is anecdotal evidence that many students participate in out-of-school coaching classes to prepare for the Selective High Schools Test. Although actual numbers are not known, there is agreement that the practice is widespread. There is a community perception that performance on the tests can be improved by coaching. This phenomenon is not unique to Australia.

The most benefit to be gained from coaching is in practising the test type. Given the widespread acceptance of coaching within the culture of education, particularly around high-stakes examinations, it is unlikely that any changes to the selection components and process will have a significant impact on the practice of coaching.

In 2002 in order to ensure greater fairness for uncoached students and greater transparency for the test in general, applicants were provided with a sample test paper as part of the application package. This process received considerable support and will continue for 2003.

Copies of Selective High Schools Application Information documents can be downloaded from the Internet at:

<http://www.schools.nsw.edu.au/schoolfind/types/selectiveschools.php>.

3.4 Provision of school marks by students attending non-government, interstate and overseas schools

Currently, many students attending non-government, interstate and overseas schools do not, or are not able to, provide school marks as part of their application. Where primary school marks are not available, applications may be considered at the discretion of the selection committee on the basis of the selective high schools test and/or other relevant information. Interstate or overseas students (Australian citizens or permanent residents temporarily living interstate or overseas) who are unable to sit for the Selective High Schools Test will be considered by the selection committee through the interstate/overseas procedures. Applicants are required to arrange for individual and standardised testing of students by a registered psychologist or other qualified practitioner.

The provision of school marks is an essential component in the selective high schools entry procedure and should be a requirement for all students.

3.5 Gender balance

There is a requirement that all test items must be free of any gender bias. This factor is carefully considered at all stages of the test design and development and in the trialling of test items.

While changes to the external test may help to redress a slight gender imbalance that favours boys, other factors are contributing to a greater proportion of boys gaining and taking up places in selective high schools.

Fewer girls in total apply for selective school placements; girls apply for fewer schools, and have a lower acceptance rate than boys. In addition, there are more places available to boys through the agricultural high schools of Farrer and Yanco.

Analysis of applications for the 2002 placement process showed that 22% of all students who applied were placed. Of the boys who applied, 24% were placed and of the girls who applied, 19% were placed.

3.6 Identification of students from equity groups

It is often the students from minority groups who are under-represented in gifted and talented programs. It is believed that this may be a consequence of identification procedures being culturally biased or insufficiently inclusive.

It would appear that selection processes for NSW selective schools are addressing these concerns. The representation of various groups is close to and in some cases above the total representation of the group within the total population. Of the NESB students who applied for Year 7 placement in a selective high school for 2002, 28% were placed and of the Indigenous students who applied, 16% were placed.

Principals report a shift in the cultural mix of their intakes with an increasing proportion of NESB students in recent years. In some schools the current Year 7 intakes are predominantly NESB and are significantly different from the current Year 12 cohort.

There are several possible reasons for this shift in the cultural mix of students. NESB students apply for selective places in much higher proportions than their representation in the broader school community; they apply for more schools; their omit rate (the percentage of students who failed to complete the test) is much lower than English-speaking-background students; and their take-up of offers is higher than the overall cohort.

While the success rate of NESB students is high, it includes all NESB students, most of whom have been in Australia for more than four years, many born in Australia, and some of Australian-born parents. Analysis of 2002 applicants indicated of all students who were placed for Year 7 in a selective high school 46% had a non-English-speaking background.

Currently students who have been studying most of their school work in English for less than four years do not have to take the general ability test but must take the English-language and Mathematics test. It may be better if NESB students, sat for all components of the external tests, but at the same time the items that were highly verbal were flagged, so that a special profile score, excluding these items, could be generated.

SECTION 4 Options

To strengthen the current practice, it is believed that a number of modifications should take place.

For the purpose of this paper, the recommendations of the DET internal review are presented as a ‘model’ on which submissions might be based. For each of the items 4.1 to 4.7, the current practice in the selective process is listed, followed by the DET recommendations.

General comments are sought on:

- external testing
- internal school assessment
- provision of school marks by students attending non-government, interstate and overseas schools
- additional comments from parents and school principals
- exemptions for NESB students
- an appeals process
- an opportunity for all candidates to experience a sample test
- whether regulation of coaching colleges in relation to testing is warranted.

4.1 The external testing process

Current practice

There are externally set and marked tests for English, mathematics and general ability.

The current testing procedures allow for some students to elect not to sit for the general ability test.

DET review recommendation

All aspects of the external test should apply to all students. External test items should be free of gender and cultural bias and should include:

- a written test of 100 items based on aptitude. This test should combine general ability, English, mathematics and some items drawn from other learning areas
- a writing component.

The test should be administered within the current testing schedule, therefore not increasing students’ time-on-test.

4.2 The internal school assessment

Current Practice

Principals are required to provide school marks for English and mathematics, based on the student's performance in Years 5 and 6. The school marks are moderated (scaled) according to the performance of all other students from the school in the English-language and mathematics tests. Moderation of school marks makes them comparable statewide and gives school marks and test marks in English and mathematics equal value.

DET review recommendation

There is no change recommended from the current practice

4.3 Provision of school marks by students attending non-government, interstate and overseas schools

Current Practice

Many students attending non-government, interstate and overseas schools do not or are not able to provide school marks as part of their application.

DET review recommendation

All students, including those attending non-government, interstate and overseas schools should be required to provide school marks as part of their application.

4.4 Additional comments from parents and principals

Current practice

Additional comments are sought by the Selective Schools Unit (SSU), DET.

There are no specific guidelines supplied by SSU.

DET review recommendation

The ability to supply additional comments should be retained.

To assist principals in this task, SSU should provide principals with specific guidelines as to the identification of students for whom additional school-based information may form a critical component in the selection process. The SSU should provide principals with the types of information that is the most useful in identifying academically gifted students.

4.5 Exemptions for NESB students

Current practice

The current selection procedures allow NESB students, who have been educated in English for less than four years, to elect to sit only for the English-language and mathematics tests, but not the GAT, and for their total to be adjusted accordingly.

DET review recommendation

That all students are required to sit for a combined written test.

4.6 The appeals process

Current practice

Appeals can be made against a decision of the selection committee if it is believed that there were special factors which may have prevented a student from gaining a higher school or test mark.

DET Review Recommendation

There was no change recommended from the current practice.

4.7 Sample papers

Current Practice

In 2002 applicants were provided with a sample test paper as part of the application package.

DET Review Recommendation

This practice should continue for 2003.

SECTION 5 Submissions

Responses to these proposed changes are invited from schools and the broader community. Submissions should be received no later than Friday 26 July 2002.

Submissions should be sent to:

Selective Schools Unit

NSW Department of Education and Training

Postal address: PO Box 6109, Milperra DC 1891

Fax: (02) 9707 6265

Email: ssu@det.nsw.edu.au

<http://www.schools.nsw.edu.au/schoolfind/types/selectiveschools.php>

SECTION 6 Selected Reading

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