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Time for a change [1]

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According to a report [3] in the *Times*, "soaring numbers of parents are lying about where they live to get their children into leading schools." It's hardly surprising. Almost twenty percent of children are denied a place at their first choice of school. In some parts of London, that figure rises to fifty percent. Few things will be as important to a parent as getting their child into the right school, so it's little wonder they are prepared to lie. The tragedy is that we have a system which forces them to do it.

Britain has a severe shortage of good school places, which means children frequently have no option but to be assigned to a school by their Local Education Authority (LEA), even if its quality is low.

There are two reasons for this shortage. The first is the 'surplus-places policy' which prevents popular schools from expanding if there are unfilled places in another local school. That's like the government preventing a good restaurant from laying more tables, because the bad restaurant next door has spare places. The second reason is that it is very difficult for people outside the public sector to establish new schools to meet demand.

Sweden does not have these problems. There, parents can send their children to any school of their choice (whether state or private) and these schools are eligible for government funding on a per-pupil basis. Good schools expand, poor schools close and, crucially, new schools are easy to establish. They just have to meet a few basic requirements: they must not charge additional fees, and must accept pupils on a first-come-first-served basis. The latter requirement rarely has to be invoked, however, since most children now find places in their first choice school.

The UK school system is plainly in need of a radical overhaul. See our report *Open Access for UK Schools* [4] for more.

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