

How children can jump the school queue if they have been abused

By GLEN OWEN - 9th June 2007

Children who have been visited by social workers or suffered abuse are being given priority in the fierce contest to win places at one of Britain's best State schools.

The school uses a controversial points system to whittle down the 750 or more applications it receives every year for just 90 places.

The system takes into account such factors as religious faith and distance from the school, but also awards extra points to pupils who can prove they may have been abused or needed counselling, or have serious problems.



The controversial points system is to be dropped as of next term

Critics said schools should be admitting pupils on educational grounds rather than forcing parents to compete with each other "based on who has the worst problems".

Pupils at the school – Lady Margaret CoE for girls in West London – achieve an average A-level score of ABB, putting it in the same class as many private schools and well above the performance of comprehensives in the area.

Understandably, parents are desperate to get their daughters into the school, which reserves places for pupils in three bands of ability – top, average and bottom – and tests applicants to see which band they fall into.

They are then given a score out of 90, with points awarded for church attendance, ability to benefit from the school's ethos and the distance they live from the school. But controversially, a further ten points are available on medical and social grounds – four if the family is having help from social workers, six if the child has been abused, eight if the child is seriously ill and ten if the child, or a parent, is terminally ill.

The school has previously experienced problems with parents manipulating evidence to win the fight for places.

Two years ago, Margaret Gillespie, the deputy head of a nearby primary, gave her address as the caretaker's flat at her school – when she lived several miles away.

She had been trying to secure a place for her daughter but was found out during spot checks on applicants' addresses.

The points system was devised before the school's current head teacher, Sally Whyte, took charge and it has now been decided to move to a new system of allocating places randomly from next year.

Alan Smithers, professor of education at Buckingham University and a Government adviser, said the 'social' element of the school's points scheme opened up a new front in the war for places.

"Places should be awarded on educational grounds," he said. "Lady Margaret has worked hard to broaden its intake without diluting its strong traditions, and the points system is a way of managing that.

"But if you invite parents to compete in terms of the problems they have had, you are asking them to put in the shop window things they would rather keep hidden.

"In the name of seeking fair admissions, schools end up selecting on the grounds of all sorts of extraneous factors."