

New Admission Arrangements at The Skinners School

I look at the appeal situation further down in this article.

The Skinners school, Tunbridge Wells, has changed its Admissions Policy for 2019 entry. Its aim is to widen its previous super selective policy which offered all 150 places, after those set aside for Looked After Children (as required by law), to those applicants with the highest aggregate scores in the Kent Test in two categories: (a) up to 10 boys on Free school Meals; (b) all other applicants irrespective of residence.

There is little rationale provided by the school for changing this to a new scheme, outlined below, that has produced considerable controversy. It notes in the introduction to the new scheme that:

We do not believe this will change the opportunity to get into the school for those living in the West Kent area. The qualifying score is virtually the same as before so we expect all in that area getting 360 in the Kent test to get into the school.

Clearly, if you live outside the West Kent area, given that there are fewer places available, distance will be a more critical factor. However, it is worth noting that we traditionally take about 20 pupils from Sussex: we are offering 20 places in the Outer Area, based on distance and we are under three miles from the Sussex border.

Boys will be divided into five forms of 32 pupils.

Unfortunately, outlined below, the expectation in the first paragraph proved false.

You will find the new rules in full [here](#), which you must consult if making decisions on admissions or appeals but, in summary they give priority to:

- 1) Children in Care;
- 2) Up to 140 places for boys living in West Kent
 - (i) Siblings
 - (ii) Up to 8 places to boys in named parishes in West Kent on Free School Meals, with the highest aggregate score in the Kent Test
 - (iii) sons of staff with aggregate scores of over 360
 - (iv) other boys with aggregate scores of over 360, living nearest.
- 3) Up to 20 places for boys living elsewhere in the United Kingdom
 - (i) Siblings
 - (ii) Up to 2 places to boys on Free School Meals irrespective of residence, with the highest aggregate score in the Kent Test
 - (iii) sons of staff with aggregate scores of over 360
 - (iv) other boys with aggregate scores of over 360, living nearest.

There are also additional divisions if there are insufficient numbers in any category.

Both Skinners and The Judd School are run by the Skinners Company, one of the twelve major London Livery Companies. On the Skinners Company website there is a clue as to the explanation of the scheme, with an [outline](#) of a proposed:

'new Sixth Form study centre, new classrooms to house the English department, and a new School Library..... We are very grateful to Kent County Council for supporting the project'.

As happened with expansion at The Judd school, it appears that Kent County Council is supporting the scheme in exchange for a change in admission criteria to favour more local boys in order to meet the shortage of boys' grammar school places in West Kent.

However, I doubt that KCC is in any way responsible for this flawed procedure. In the event, whilst in 2018, there were 53 boys offered places from outside Kent, including 20 from East Sussex and 15 from Bromley for 2019 the figure dropped to 18, including 15 from East Sussex, even though the Planned Admission Number rose by 10 to 160. The number of Kent pupils offered places rose from 97 to 142! So that aspect has worked.

Unfortunately, *the expectation that all boys in West Kent scoring 360 or more would be offered places* was misplaced, as [the furthest distance](#) that places went out was only 10.099 miles, cutting out for example high scoring boys in North Sevenoaks and along the A25 westwards who traditionally have looked towards Skinners and Judd. The 20 high scorers (excluding siblings and Free school Meals) outside West Kent live nearer than this (!) at less than 8.694 miles, cutting out parts of mid-Kent, Bromley and towards central London for boys often with very high aggregate scores.

There are two main causes of the problem. Firstly, siblings were not given priority under the previous scheme (not allowed for schools offering places to the highest scorers), but now effectively all siblings who have reached the cut off score of 360 will have been offered places first. Secondly, the new rules appear to have given many more families encouragement to apply to Skinners, with confidence if they lived more locally of being awarded a place. There is therefore an increase of 54 grammar qualified boys placing the school in first preference, over the figure for 2018, taking it to 234, the second highest increase in the county to Dartford Girls' Grammar, with Judd coming third.

This has all caught out a considerable number of boys who would have expected under the previous rules, to have been offered places, including some very high scorers, as the school has stepped away from its 'super selective' status and headed towards the schemes operated by Maidstone Grammar and Simon Langton Boys.

Appeals

For years, [Skinners](#) has seen its Independent Admission Appeal Panel uphold an average of five appeals, which neatly brings its class size up to 31 boys. The school states that for 2019 '*Boys will be divided into five forms of 32 pupils.*' This would leave no room for ANY successful appeals unless the school is willing to increase class sizes further, or move to an extra class, and suggests the school will fight strongly to oppose any extra boys being added in. The alternative, which is to allow up to a whole extra class being added, using those new classrooms being built for the English Department (see above), but only if they are additional space and not replacements. It would then have to cope with temporary accommodation in the interim. Remember, that if an extra form were to be added in, setting a precedent, this would have massive implications for this school on its limited site in terms of space, as it would need to plan for at least seven extra classrooms, not one, to cope with all year groups. None of this is suggested anywhere.

If the latter is not possible, it is difficult to see what sort of strong case would overcome the school's objections to admitting extra boys and convince the Appeal Panel.

Appeals will tend to come in a number of categories if they are to stand any chance:

- Special circumstances leading to underperformance (probably inside the cut off distance, both Inner or outer).
- Strong alternative evidence to show the boy should have achieved an aggregate score of 360 (probably inside the cut off distance, both Inner or outer).

- Special circumstances showing why a boy who has scored 360 or more but lives outside the cut off distance (inner or outer) should have a places at Skinners (this could include very high scores)

That is a least six possible sets of arguments. I do not envy a Panel that has to decide which are most important if it decides, as is likely, that there are very few places if any it can offer.

Sorry.