

# Direct Action or Social Nudge: where are the effective policy levers for helping families select secondary (high) schools?

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## **Abstract:**

**BACKGROUND:** Cross sectional studies suggest a prevalence of mental health problems from the age that children change to secondary schools in England but there are fewer longitudinal appraisals of these problems and which policies can help reduce early onset. Model-based multimethodology offers potential insights for this single, intrinsic case study.

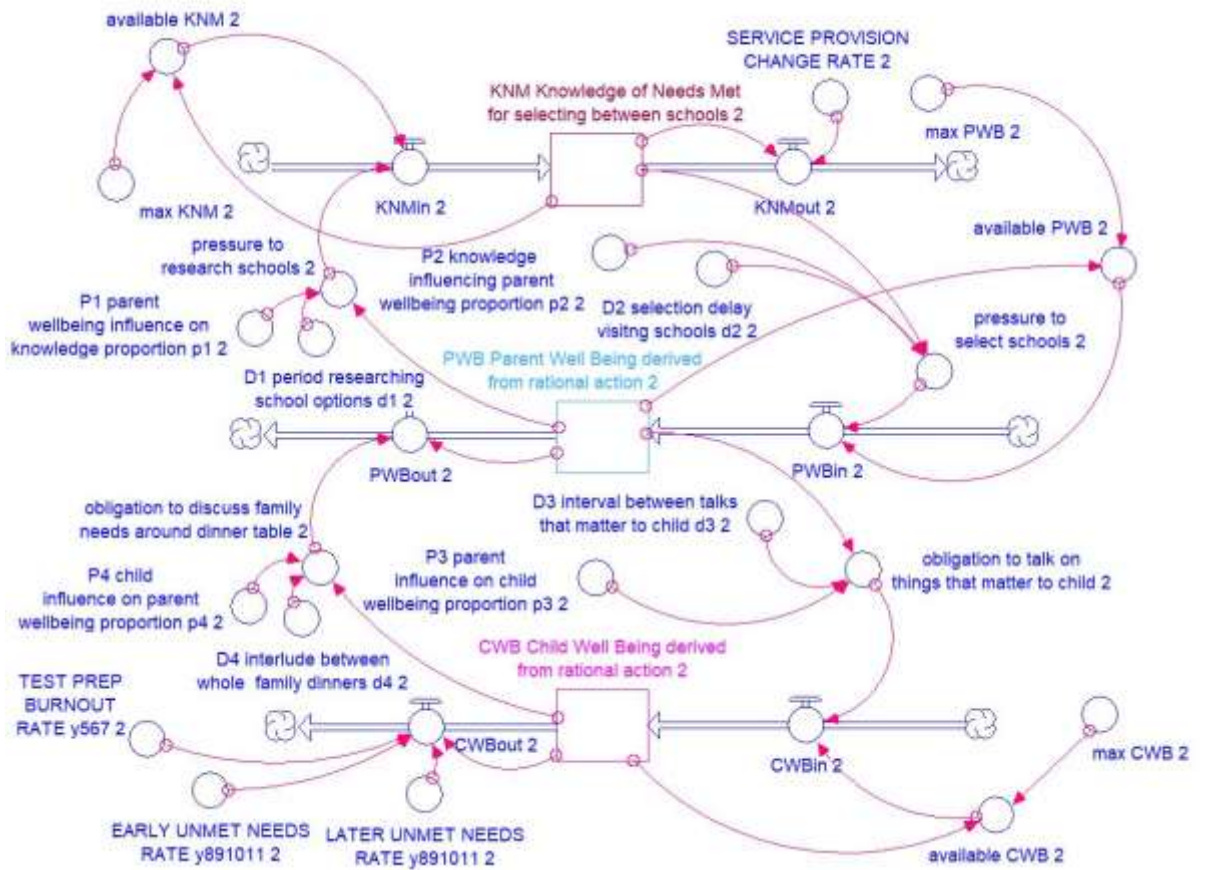
**METHODS:** Using group model building scripts to collect views from a multi-agency group of expert practitioners, the impacts of a competitive urban education were induced to agree a System Dynamics concept model. Parent decision making behaviour was deduced to understand drivers behind school selection. Simulation was employed to abduce system sensitivities predicting long-term socio-emotional impacts before comparing intervention policies suggested by expert practitioners from different agencies.

**RESULTS:** Where families face similar competition pressures in Plymouth's state education when selecting secondary schools, some families may pick providers unable to meet needs of adolescent students. Families at-risk have parents adopting autocratic styles of decision making jeopardising full and regular conversations with their child. Under such circumstances, the simulation model shown in Figure 1, predicts wellbeing-decline for the student and potential for breaching lower threshold resulting in referrals to Child and Adolescent Mental Health services. Directly addressing competition stressors from education or health offers little improvement but exploiting system timing sensitivities illustrated by the System Dynamics model, a gamification policy succeeded in providing a social nudge to families for sharing their requirements to obtain the best fit of school to need.

**CONCLUSIONS:** The modelling multi-methodology induces group views on the problem structures, deduces parental decision bias and abduces policy improvements. Policy simulation suggests that coordinated, multi-agency, social nudge using gamification improves wellbeing response the family

psychosocial system over alternative, unilateral, directed act initiatives aimed at increasing knowledge of competition or eliminating the year 5 stress of tutoring for selective examinations.

Figure 1. Simulation model of family psychosocial system for deciding secondary (high) schools



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