

# “Doomed to Success”: Promoting School Power, Role of the Family, and Inequality on the Way of the Olympiads Winners to University

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**Abstract** The article proposes to consider the preparation and participation in intellectual contests (Olympiads) for schoolchildren for further admission to selective universities as a specific type of tracking, the choice of an educational trajectory. The most part of studies of school Olympiads deal either with issues of methodological training of schoolchildren and teachers, or with a comparison of students who got into universities according to the results of the Unified State Exam or the results of Olympiads. This paper closes a gap related to the involvement of schoolchildren into the Olympiad movement and their choice of Olympiads as an admission strategy. The study was conducted in a qualitative methodology: due to semi-structured interviews with students who entered universities according to the results of the All-Russian Olympiad of Schoolchildren (VSOSH), the individual experience of the Olympiad students is reconstructed. The total number of participants of the study is 61 students who represent different areas of the Olympiads and different regions of Russia (graduates of Moscow schools are not specifically included in the sampling because of the active support of Olympiads in the schools of the capital). The results of the study demonstrate the promoting school power, when students receive additional support and encouragement to participate in Olympiads, the conscious choice of Olympiads as an alternative strategy for the admission to universities, the role of teachers, the community of Olympiad participants, and family members in informing about the possibility of participating in Olympiads, as well as related barriers and inequality of access to information and support.

**Keywords** All-Russian Olympiad of Schoolchildren, intellectual contest, Olympiad winners, inequality, tracking, school promoting power, educational trajectories, school-university transition.

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One participant in our study shared her experience of participating in Olympiad<sup>1</sup> competitions, stating, "I was doomed to success." Her mother had prepared schoolchildren for Olympiads for many years and had similarly prepared her daughter for victory. This notion of "doomed to success," a free or involuntary paraphrase of "a person doomed to happiness" from the novella by Sergei Dovlatov, became a successful metaphor for describing the experience of school Olympiad competitions. These competitions combine personal intellectual challenges, inequality of opportunities, overcoming barriers, and a not always transparent system of entry into the Olympiad movement, which can provide access to selective universities.

Olympiads of schoolchildren are most often studied from a pedagogical and methodological perspective. Current teachers and experts discuss the development of Olympiad tasks for various subjects, the need for comprehensive preparation of Olympiad school students and their teachers [Solomin, Makhov, Ilyinskiy, 2013; Muravyev, Skrytnyi, 2017]. The results of the Olympiads can be studied as one of the indicators of educational quality in a particular city or region [Ekimova, 2014], and the comparison of acceptance rates to universities based on the Olympiad results versus results from the Unified State Exam (USE) can serve as an indicator of demand for educational programs [Poldin, Silaeva, Silaev, 2014].

The comparison of the educational success of students who entered universities based on their results in the Unified State Exam (USE) and those who were admitted based on their achievements in school Olympiads is one of the key research areas [Gordeeva et al., 2011; Peresetsky, Davtyan, 2011], demonstrating higher educational achievements of students who participated in Olympiads. Studies of the socioeconomic status of Olympiad participants and those who entered universities based on the USE results demonstrate how the type of school, the socioeconomic status of the family, and investments in preparation for admission are related to the possibility of entering selective universities through Olympiad achievements [Prakhov, 2015]. Territorial inequality is also observed, with students from Moscow having an advantage due to access to a more serious preparation system and learning from teachers who are familiar with the Olympiad system [Boytsova, Nosov, Torop, 2019].

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<sup>1</sup> The term 'Olympiads' refers to intellectual contests for schoolchildren, with the expectation of various prizes, benefits, and opportunities for university admissions associated with winning.

Furthermore, Olympiads are studied as a managerial resource that allows a school to improve its position in the ranking, to obtain the status of a gymnasium or lyceum, and as a career guidance practice within schools, where certain student is signaled by the school about the possibility or inability to participate in Olympiads [Karnoy, Larina, Markina, 2019].

The last observation is closely related to our study, in which we aim to assess the promoting power of the school and describe the process of preparing for and participating in the Olympiads, with subsequent admission to universities as a separate tracking type. Our study, based on interviews with students who successfully entered selective universities<sup>2</sup>, thanks to the Olympiads, fills a certain gap as we focus on the pre-university rather than university experience of Olympiad participants and view their participation in the Olympiads through the eyes of former schoolchildren, rather than teachers, methodologists, or school administration.

We refer to school students who are actively involved in the Olympiad movement<sup>3</sup> and identify themselves as such, as "Olympiad participants", as well as students entered the universities through scoring the Olympiad results.

We became familiar with the concept of "*school promoting power*" [Borman et al., 2003] through the study of so-called resilient schools. The promoting power of the school is understood as "the ability of the school to provide the longest possible academic trajectory for its students, i.e. the transition to a higher level and orientation towards admission to a university" [Pinskaya et al., 2018. P. 201]. We propose to apply this theoretical framework to describe how the school involves students in the Olympiad movement, supports and encourages them.

Another important term in our vocabulary for the story of "doomed to success" is "tracking" [Bol et al., 2014], the distribution between trajectories or tracks in education. We propose to consider early orientation towards the Olympiads, the process of preparing for the Olympiads, and the alternative system of entrance exams for selective universities to the Unified State Examination as a separate type of tracking, a subset of the academic trajectory.

The study of Olympiad tracking, particularly its convenience, fairness, and transparency, is an important component of study-

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<sup>2</sup> Olympiad participants primarily choose Lomonosov Moscow State University, St. Petersburg State University, Higher School of Economics, Moscow Engineering Physics Institute, and other selective universities. See the lists of leading universities that have admitted Olympiad participants in the "Social Navigator" project: <https://sn.ria.ru/20180320/1516811171.html>

<sup>3</sup> In this paper, we are referring not to all Olympiads, but rather to the All-Russian Olympiad of Schoolchildren (VSOSH, "Vseros") and Olympiads included in the official list of the Ministry of Education and Science of the Russian Federation ("list-based Olympiads").

ing the patterns of transitioning from school to university and obtaining higher education as a means of accumulating social capital and an indicator of life success. The choice of the educational trajectory is determined by the resources of the family, primarily the education of parents and their income level [Bogdanov, Malik, 2020; Havenson, Chirkina, 2019]. For example, the most prestigious universities (HSE, MSU, MGIMO, etc.) are chosen by families in which parents have a high level of education, socio-professional status, and income [Roshchina, 2006]. Therefore, the study of Olympiad tracking is a significant component of studying the problem of inequality and barriers in education, and entrance to university based on the Olympiad results can be considered both a way to overcome inequality and a way to its consolidation.

In this study, we will not specifically address questions related to giftedness, abilities, intelligence, or academic self-evaluation of Olympiad participants, neither at school nor at university. (Topics that may be interpreted in this way will appear sporadically in individual responses from respondents). Furthermore, by focusing on the promoting power of the school, we leave questions regarding the institutional role of additional education in Olympiad preparation (educational circles and centers, summer schools and camps), and universities as stakeholders in Olympiads, for future research, although historically, it was universities that promoted the idea of creating mathematical schools and conducting Olympiad tests in order to select the most prepared applicants [Kukulkin et al., 2015].

Based on the materials of interviews with Olympiad students, we will demonstrate how they perceive the Olympiad tracking, the alternative to the USE, the promoting power of the school, and the role of the family, as well as barriers arise for those who choose this trajectory.

### **1. Research Context: History and Structure of Olympiads**

The history of the Olympiads dates back to the XIX century when the Astronomical Society of the Russian Empire began to organize "Olympiads for schoolchildren" [Lutsky, 1982]. At that time, there were no Olympiads in other subjects, they had neither a systematic basis nor officially approved prizes and did not provide benefits for admission to universities. To reach the current state, the Olympiads had a path of almost a century.

After the establishment of the initial Olympiad, several stages can be distinguished in the history of the Olympiad movement. In the 1930s, the Olympiads had a point-like character and took place only in Moscow and Leningrad. Since the 1960s, the Olympiad competitions in exact sciences have become the subject of state policy and have covered many regions of the country, not just the capital cities. It was in the 1960s that benefits for Olympiad winners when entering universities were approved. The Olympiad movement en-

tered a new stage of its development with the formation of the All-Russian Olympiad of Schoolchildren<sup>4</sup>, which occupies a priority position among other Olympiads.

Since the 1990s, Olympiads have acquired a systematic character and are held annually in all general education subjects.

In the third period, the Olympiad movement reached its greatest scale and covered all regions of the Russian Federation. At this time, additional projects related to the Olympiads began to actively develop, such as off-site schools, centers for additional education, school clubs, Olympic sessions in summer camps, and a focus on preparing for the Olympiads in independent summer schools. One of the most striking and indicative examples is the activity of the “Sirius” educational center. Another case that emerged during this period, which helped to gather the basis for our empirical research, was the Association of Olympiad Winners (abbreviated as AOW) in Moscow, established in 2016. Within the AOW framework, students who were actively involved in the Olympiad movement in the past become teachers for schoolchildren, including for Olympiad preparation.

The significance of the Olympiad movement is undoubtedly due to the fact that the All-Russian Olympiad of Schoolchildren (VSOSH) and the “list-based Olympiads” provide benefits for admission to universities. The list of Olympiads, whose winners and prize-winners receive benefits, is annually approved by the Ministry of Science and Higher Education of the Russian Federation. Olympiad levels from the first to the third are identified in the list, with the first being the highest. Each university has the right to approve its own abbreviated list of Olympiads that provide benefits and to leave the winners and prize-winners of the other Olympiads listed by the Ministry of Education and Science without any advantages. The university also determines the specific benefit to be given to the winners and prize-winners of the Olympiad, depending on its level.

The All-Russian Olympiad of Schoolchildren is held annually in all general education subjects and consists of four stages: school, municipal, regional, and final. All stages are held in-person, except during the pandemic period, within the academic year in the period from September 1 to April 30.

In the 2021/2022 academic year, the quotas for the winners and prize-winners of the final stage of the Olympiad did not exceed 45% of the total number of its participants, and the number of the winners of the final stage of the Olympiad in each general education subject<sup>5</sup> should not exceed 8% of the total number of its partici-

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<sup>4</sup> The Appendix contains the VSOSH structure compiled by the authors of the study [Chernenko, Romanenko, 2021a].

<sup>5</sup> The Order of the Ministry of Education and Science of the Russian Federation dated November 27, 2020, No 678: [https://base.garant.ru/400411428/53f89421bb-daf741eb2d1ecc4ddb4c33/#block\\_1000](https://base.garant.ru/400411428/53f89421bb-daf741eb2d1ecc4ddb4c33/#block_1000)

pants. Quotas for participants, prize-winners, and winners are approved by the decision of the central subject-methodical commissions and therefore may vary from year to year.

Participants of the school stage of the Olympiad are allowed to perform Olympiad tasks developed for older grades than those in which they are studying. If they advance to the subsequent stages of the Olympiad, they perform Olympiad tasks developed for the grade they chose at the school stage. The correspondence between the direction of study and the profile of the Olympiad is determined by the university.

In the federal cities of Moscow and St. Petersburg, the municipal stage of the Olympiad is conducted with regard to the established peculiarities of local self-government in these regions of the Russian Federation.

The privileges granted by the diploma of the winner or prize-winner of the final stage of the VSOSH gives (choose only one) include:

- admission to higher education institutions without entrance exams;
- 100 points on the Unified State Exam in the subject in which the Olympiad was won;
- the maximum score on additional entrance exams.

For the winners and prize-winners of the final stage of the All-Russian Olympiad of Schoolchildren, the right to a privilege is valid for four years. The confirmation of the result by the USE is not required<sup>6</sup>.

It is also important to note that the school is directly associated with the All-Russian Olympiad of Schoolchildren. A student enters the Olympiad through the school (first) stage, and then represents his school at the Olympiad. However, the list-based Olympiads are not related to the school, and the student registers for the first stage of the Olympiad on his own, which usually takes place online, and participates regardless of the school. As it was important to understand the role of the school for Olympiad participants and various strategies for inclusion in the Olympiad movement, interviews were conducted specifically with the winners of the VSOSH as part of the empirical study.

## **2. Methods and Data**

In the study, we consider the All-Russian Olympiad of Schoolchildren (VSOSH) as the most relevant and homogeneous in comparison to

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<sup>6</sup> The Order of the Ministry of Education and Science of the Russian Federation dated October 14, 2015, No 114 “On Approval of the Admission Rules for Educational Programs of Higher Education — Bachelor’s Programs, Specialist Programs, Master’s Programs”.

other list-based Olympiads. Our respondents were prize-winners and/or winners of the regional and/or final stages of the VSOSH. Our choice is due to the fact that it is the regional and final stages that provide benefits for admission to universities (surpassing the benefits provided by other list-based Olympiads and the USE), and especially distinguish respondents from all other students.

To form a database of potential respondents who are willing to provide detailed reflection on their experience, we used access to the data from employees of the RPO "Association of Olympiad Winners" (AOW)<sup>7</sup>, who are prize-winners and winners of the VSOSH. The data were collected in August 2020. The search and selection of respondents were limited when it became clear from the obtained data that we had enough information for analysis on the topics of interest, and that additional interviews would not enrich the research picture. As a result, the total number of study participants was 61 persons.

To implement the target sampling strategy and understand the diversity of the participants' experience in Olympiads, respondents were selected according to the following criteria:

- a relatively equal gender ratio (28 females and 33 males);
- residents of different federal districts and subjects of the Russian Federation (represented by 8 federal districts, 38 subjects of the Russian Federation, and 48 settlements);
- different disciplines in which the Olympiads were won;
- the status as a winner or finalist of the regional or final stage;
- students in the first (2 persons), second (25 persons), and third year (33 persons) of the university. As an exception, one fourth-year student is included in the sample, with the clarification that he has a clear understanding of school preparation for Olympiads, which has not changed since his education. (The course mentioned is the one the respondents had completed by the summer of 2020.)

The last selection criterion is important, as it is necessary for respondents to maintain a perspective as fresh as possible on their learning experiences, while also forming a critical distance between their university and high school experiences.

Olympiad participants who graduated from schools in Moscow were intentionally not invited to participate in our study, even though a significant portion of all participants and winners of Olympiads are students from Moscow schools. There is active preparation of schoolchildren for the Olympiads in Moscow, so the data

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<sup>7</sup>Website of the RPO "Association of Olympiad Winners": ano.pф (Accessed on May 1, 2022).

from Moscow Olympiad participants would significantly distort the overall picture in such aspects as involvement in the Olympiad movement and encouragement for participation and victories.

In the study, we used semi-structured interviews to identify the assessment of respondents on several substantive dimensions regarding preparation for the Olympiads in the schools where they studied. All interviews were conducted over the phone and recorded. Respondents were informed of the recording and gave their consent. Respondents' names are not mentioned, the gender of the respondent, the subject of the Olympiad, and the place of residence at the time of graduation from school are indicated when cited<sup>8</sup>. The interview guide contains questions about the experience of participating in Olympiads during the school period — from initial information and involvement to encouragement (or its absence) for victories, as well as about the school, preparation practices, school teachers, and respondents' families.

The analysis of data on the practices of preparing for Olympiads and the ways of support and encouragement for participation in Olympiads by schools has already been presented in the publications of the authors [Chernenko, Romanenko, 2021a; 2021b]. This paper discusses the involvement of schoolchildren in the Olympiad movement, the significance of the socioeconomic status of the family, the relationship between preparation for the USE and the Olympiads, and the perceptions of Olympiad participants about the role of family, school, and their own efforts in the Olympiad success.

It is important to note several limitations of this study during the data collection and interpretation stages. Firstly, our study was focused only on the All-Russian Olympiad of Schoolchildren, as it is more homogeneous than the list-based Olympiads, which is approved annually and includes about a hundred Olympiads in various subjects. Secondly, the sample in our study is limited to the database of contacts of the RPO "Association of Olympiad Winners", which could potentially lead to greater social desirability bias in expressed judgments, as the study participants simultaneously collaborate with the AOW and are also being studied by the AOW, and there could be some reframing of the answers: for example, as teachers for new generations of Olympiad participants, the AOW participants may pay more attention to the role of their own teachers in their success. Thirdly, the study participants only include successful members of the Olympiad movement, and respectively, we have no information about those who started participating in the Olympiads and stopped or did not respond to the invitation to par-

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<sup>8</sup> For more information on the settlements represented by the study participants and their subject specialization, see [Chernenko, Romanenko, 2021a].



ticipate — hence, we have no information about the role of family and school in this process. Fourthly, the study participants were already university students in the summer of 2020, and therefore, their data cannot be used to judge the specificity of the Olympiad track and changes in the Olympiad movement after the transition to distance learning and testing formats due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Finally, it is important to consider that we asked university students who entered universities through Olympiads about their past, rather than current, experience. To mitigate this limitation, we selected respondents who, on the one hand, had recently graduated from school, but on the other hand, were already independent from it and, therefore, less susceptible, in our opinion, to distortion of information.

For the analysis of the interview data, we applied procedures developed within the framework of the grounded theory of qualitative research by A. Strauss and D. Corbin [2001]. We worked with the initial stages of analysis, without creating our own theory based on the data, but using techniques of coding and further grouping of codes. For example, the subcategory providing information about the role of the school includes the codes such as “school is involved” (2), “provide free attendance/exemption” (2), “tradition of participating in Olympiads / default Olympiads / mandatory participation” (9), “school sparked interest in competition” (1), “school organizes Olympiads” (1), “teachers told / gave options / if not for school, I wouldn’t have known / teacher formed a team / teachers forced” (11), “teacher said” (4). The number of code mentions is indicated in parentheses.

The analysis of strategies for entering the Olympiad movement, the significance of the socioeconomic status of the family and the role of school, family, and the student’s own efforts in achieving success is based on inductively derived broad categories that correspond to the key factors of the “school-to-university” transition identified on the basis of research literature. The quotations presented in the “Results” section serve an illustrative function.

### **3. Results**

#### **3.1. “Betting on Olympiads”: Olympiads as an Alternative Way of Admission**

We argue that preparing for and participating in Olympiads is becoming an alternative way of admission to universities. A massive system is being developed that unites tutors, summer schools, individual efforts of school teachers to educate high school students, and at the same time ranks schools based on Olympiad results, which leads to an alternative way of admission to universities. It is indicative that information about the Olympiads, primarily as a way of admission, regularly appeared in response to the question of how Olympiad participants learned about the Olympiads.

A classmate told me that his acquaintance won the “list-based Olympiad” and got a budget place (a girl, Saratov, computer science).

I found out most of the information on the websites of university admission committees (a young man, Omsk, law).

Access to information about the Olympiads can be the first barrier when choosing this track, as not all schools inform students about the Olympiads or only inform certain groups of schoolchildren. All students who choose to study at a university know about the USE as a way of admission.

Many respondents (17 in our sample) mentioned that they would not have been able to enter the chosen university based on their results in the USE alone, and only achieved their desired outcome through participating in the Olympiads, since the USE scores required for admission to the universities where they ended up studying were very high. The respondents highlighted specific subjects that were necessary for the USE, but which they did not prepare for because they “bet on the Olympiad” (a young man, Ufa, computer science).

I did not take some of the exams necessary for admission to university precisely because I took the All-Russian stage (a girl, Saratov, Russian language).

I probably would not have been able to enter university because I did not prepare for similar subjects in the USE, specifically history and English (a girl, Krasnodar, social studies).

It cannot be said that the USE is more difficult than the Olympiads, however, winning the Olympiad does not necessarily equate to obtaining high scores on the USE in the same subject. Furthermore, Olympiads are considered a more difficult and significant test than the USE, based on the benefits granted during university admissions: a prize-winner or winner of the VSOSH final stage automatically outranks a student with a 100-point score on the USE. There are schoolchildren who, despite having the same level of awareness as their classmates and a similar support system, choose Olympiads as a strategy for organizing their education and admission to universities.

As a conscious strategy, Olympiads become an alternative to the USE. The egalitarian system of the USE, which equalizes university applicants, is bypassed “from the bottom”, namely through the “school — college — university” track [Alexandrov, Tenisheva, Saveleyeva, 2015; Maltseva, Shabalin, 2021], and “from the top” through participation in Olympiads.

3.2. “I Would Not Be Able to Study for a Fee at All”: the Role of Family Socioeconomic Status

Family socioeconomic status is a key predictor of educational success and admission to selective universities [Prakhov, 2015], so it can be expected to be significant in the choice of the Olympiad track. Due to the sensitivity of direct questions about the family socioeconomic status, it was not asked during the interview. Instead, it was assessed indirectly based on the answers to questions about preparation for the All-Russian Olympiad of Schoolchildren (VSOSH) and the possibility of studying at a university in a commercial place.

Only three respondents from the entire sample would be able to afford to study for a fee at their current university if they had not become winners or prize-winners of the Olympiad.

I could afford it, my parents could pay for it (a girl, Naberezhnye Chelny, mathematics).

I could study. I would have gotten in on the same faculty on a fee-paying basis. Well, I would have had a discount, and I would still be studying (a young man, Kazan, computer science).

Mainly, the Olympiad students explained that they would not be able to study at the place where they are now because their families do not have the financial resources, or because it would be psychologically impossible for them to accept such help.

I come from a not-too-wealthy family, and we probably would not have the financial opportunities because, as far as I know, tuition costs more than 200 thousand a year. This is still a very large sum for our family (a young man, Nevinnomyssk, mathematics).

No, I definitely would not be able to. I would not be able to study for a fee at all because initially I understand that my parents... It would be very, very exhausting for my family (a girl, Veliky Novgorod, literature).

I don't think I would even apply there psychologically because, as far as I know, the cost of studying at my faculty last year was 380 thousand (a young man, Chelyabinsk, social studies).

Thus, the Olympiads represent an opportunity for high school students whose families see the need for higher education but lack the means to pay for university tuition to gain admission to selected universities. The financial barrier is the most significant obstacle to obtaining a higher education, as confirmed by both the results of the Monitoring of education markets and organizations [Chirkina, Guseynova, 2021] and interviews with Olympiad participants. In this context, Olympiads are viewed as a tool for leveling economic inequality.

Among the practices of preparation for the Olympiads mentioned in the interviews with participants are paid options, including off-site schools, additional classes, preparatory courses, and private school education. If the region does not cover the cost of travel to the VSOSH final stage, these expenses also fall on the family. Parents seek not only to invest not just in their children’s education, but also in its more rigorous academic version.

These options were paid, yes, but at a reasonable cost, that is, comparable to preparatory courses in any school. Well, at that time, in principle, I did not deal with this issue, at least my parents said that there was practically no barrier (a young man, Izhevsk, geography).

We paid for the camp package, and I remember there was some fee, roughly speaking, for souvenirs, for some prizes, but essentially, you paid for your stay there, and not additional fees for teaching (a girl, Belgorod, mathematics).

It is the most inexpensive private school in Krasnodar, so, in a way, it is private, but nominally (a girl, Krasnodar, social studies).

The choice of this family appears logical as the VSOSH winning grants the right to study on a state-funded basis, therefore, even incurring financial expenses for preparing for the Olympiads can be considered an important investment for subsequent obtaining a state-funded place at the university.

At the same time, respondents point out the low cost of these paid practices. This may be interpreted as a justification or a desire to demonstrate that their own success did not come at significant expenses to the family. Nevertheless, the mere existence of these paid practices indicates parental involvement and the value placed on higher education within the family.

These data also highlight the issue of inequality that arises from the difference in socioeconomic status: for example, children whose parents cannot afford additional preparation for the VSOSH do not have access to these educational services and may be at a disadvantage in obtaining high-quality preparation for the Olympiads, unless they take advantage of free preparation, particularly within the framework of the school.

3.3. “One’s own Individual Schedule”: Practices of Preparation and Encouragement of Olympiad Participants at School

The key actors of the Olympiad movement are schools that promote the involvement of schoolchildren in Olympiads and help prepare for them, both at the level of school administration policy and through the efforts of individual teachers. The previous papers by the authors [Chernenko, Romanenko, 2021a; 2021b] have addressed to the analysis of the practices of preparation for and encourage-

ment of participation and victories in the Olympiads. These practices are interpreted as the “promoting force of the school” with regard to involvement in Olympiads, and through them — in admission to selective universities.

Summarizing the data from various interviews, the main practices used by the school to support Olympiad participants include: informing students about Olympiads; cooperation between schools and universities; additional classes after and during regular classes; summer schools and training camps; providing a free or individual educational trajectory; informational, methodological, psychological and financial support (scholarships, one-time payments, payment for travel to the VSOSH stages, informal meetings with the school administration, certificates, gifts, encouragement in the form of high grades).

At the regional stage of the Olympiad, each participant develops one’s own individual schedule, where you may choose not to attend certain classes if you have good academic performance, and instead of these subjects, you receive additional classes in your chosen subject with various teachers, including those invited from universities (a young man, Chelyabinsk, social studies).

If someone travels somewhere for the Olympiad, the school covers the travel expenses (a girl, Yekaterinburg, computer science).

I won a Governor’s scholarship. Winning a Governor’s scholarship is a prestigious achievement in Krasnodar region, but it is a one-time award given for outstanding performance in the Olympiad. And I was told about it at school (a girl, Krasnodar, social studies).

Then, when you have already brought the result, you are invited to the office of our Headmistress, who gives you a chocolate candy and says: “You are well done!” (a girl, Stary Oskol, law).

Here is my history and “society” teacher — if you participated in the regional stage and achieved something, she would simply give you a top grade in her subject. Just like a “well done” (a young man, Vladikavkaz, English language).

Thus, an infrastructure for the preparation and support is being built around the participation of high school students in the Olympiads. This system is closed — there is no statistics on the first stages of the Olympiads, it is not regulated and systematized, and it varies from school to school and from region to region, working with students individually, i.e. the school sends a certain signal to certain schoolchildren about their participation or non-participation in the Olympiads.

Differences in the readiness of schools to engage in the preparation and support of student participation in Olympiads, as well as individual teacher attitudes, can also serve as a barrier to joining the Olympiad movement: not all students have the opportunity to change schools, and a school with good free training may be inaccessible to students.

Half of the respondents indicate that the school is involved in initiating their participation in the Olympiads. This may be due to the fact that the first stage of the All-Russian Olympiad is school-based, i.e. it is conducted and organized by the school. It is important to note, however, that such a distribution of responses suggests that schools inform their students about the Olympiads. The other half may also learn about the Olympiads from the school, but either do not associate the start of participation specifically with the school, or associate it with individual teachers, not equating them with the initiative of the school as an institution.

I really distinguish between the school and a specific teacher, meaning that the school itself is rather, no, absolutely not involved. I had a teacher who noticed my interest in a subject. She simply advised me in council mode: “Try to go there”. There was a local private Olympiad, which was the start of my English studies (a girl, Kursk, English language).

Olympiad participants consider the school to be involved in their success due to the above-described practices of preparation and encouragement, as well as existing traditions or obligations to participate in Olympiads.

The school is certainly involved, because from the seventh grade, we were told that it was a tradition, that we should participate in all Olympiads, that our class should focus solely on mathematics, and in no other way, that we should try to excel (a young man, Efremov, mathematics).

In reality, the collective in which you reside in this regard is very important. Perhaps I would not have devoted so much time on Olympiads if my teacher did not believe it was very important, and if I did not study in an environment where Olympiads were the norm. People perceived the Olympiads as a way of life, considering it normal to participate and be passionate about them (a young man, Kirov, mathematics).

The very fact that our school directly organized many Olympiads meant that we, even as fifth and sixth grade students, saw

students from other schools come to us and write something (a young man, Stary Oskol, history).

Therefore, the school, through individual teachers and school administration, fulfills the function of informing and supporting the Olympiad movement. The promoting power of a school may consist of creating a norm or value shared by all members of the school community for participating in Olympiads — financial incentives, special classes, and even providing Olympiads with a flexible schedule are used for this purpose.

3.4. “My Parents are Teachers”:  
Entry into the Olympiad Movement due to Teachers, Acquaintances, and Relatives

When we received an answer to the question of how our respondents learned about the opportunity to participate in the Olympiads, we found that their stories often feature a certain guide, a gatekeeper in the Olympiads (by analogy with gatekeepers in social research, who help enter the research community). In most cases (at least 44 people clearly articulated this), a subject teacher becomes such a gatekeeper, who notices the student’s interest in the subject and invites him to participate in the Olympiad at the school stage and further, or even insists on such participation.

We had good teachers who advised us to go to math Olympiads, starting from the youngest grades (a young man, Krasnoyarsk, economics).

Teacher invitations to participate are a key tool for engaging students in the Olympiad movement, and therefore, pathways to alternative admission to universities. Introducing students to the community of Olympiad participants solidifies their position within the system of preparation and participation. If a teacher is aware of the Olympiads, he is very likely to inform his students about it, giving them a chance to join the Olympiad movement. However, even at this stage of the Olympiad path, there is a place for inequality among schoolchildren, as not all teachers in schools are aware of the Olympiads and can motivate their students to participate in them, not to mention providing specialized Olympiad training.

Respondents did not discuss the talents and intelligence of students when presenting their hypotheses about the small number of Olympiad participants in their schools, instead, they focused primarily on issues related to informing students and institutional conditions for preparing for the Olympiads. Olympiad students, retrospectively assessing their school conditions, note that there was a lack of information about the Olympiads in the region or in their school, both for students and teachers.

Not everyone actually knows. I myself, before I won the All-Russ Literature Exam, literally was unaware of what the Olympiad gives, what opportunities for admission, and so on. This was not known to many people. And who knows — this person, of course, participates, tries to pass (a young man, Krasnodar, literature).

In some cases, the school stage of the Olympiad is not held, and schoolchildren already involved in the Olympiad movement raise the question of its organization.

For a long time we had a problem with writing the school stage in less popular subjects, such as law or economics, for example. I was one of those who wanted to write them. I had to somehow specifically persuade, specifically request organizers to hold them (a young man, Syktyvkar, social studies).

Respondents often learn about the Olympics from their acquaintances, for example, by simply observing their participation in events. Some people note that they knew about the Olympiads from elementary school, meaning that participation in the Olympiads became a familiar experience from a young age. When asked to name three words that can describe the Olympiad experience, the study participants often choose words such as “get-together”, “travel”, “connections”, and “friends”, despite high competition among the participants themselves.

I just loved hanging out at the training camps and summer schools, so I didn't give up on the Olympiads (a girl, Dolgoprudny, physics).

I was in the company of Olympiad participants, and wrote Olympiads from the third grade (a young man, Yekaterinburg, English language).

Training with a focus on Olympiads as one of the types of educational trajectory in some cases starts from elementary school or even from the family. A significant role in the inclusion in the Olympiad movement is played not only by teachers or the community as a whole, but also by close friends and relatives — one of the important results of this study.

My parents are teachers, and I knew about Olympiads since high school. As far as possible, I began to participate in them (a girl, Kirov, literature).

My uncle was a fairly good Olympiad participant in chemistry. He infected me with an interest in the subject and participation in



Olympiads. In addition, I ended up with the same teacher who prepared my uncle, and we immediately began to actively study chemistry (a young man, Saratov, chemistry).

My boyfriend at that time got to the final stage in the ninth grade, and earned some money. It was then that I also wanted to try participating (a girl, Yekaterinburg, technology).

My mother was on the jury of the regional stage. She brought me to the educational circle, she taught me, and now she is also teaching other children (a young man, Kursk, mathematics).

I wanted to impress the older sister of my classmate who was in the eighth grade while I was in the seventh. I borrowed her chemistry textbook, read it, and it all seemed clear. I took the ninth-grade textbook from the library and went from there (a young man, Chelyabinsk, chemistry).

My mother is a biology teacher, and she was the only one who had 'All-Russ'ers, and she carried the regional team, so I was "doomed to success" (a girl, Kazan, biology).

Here, we observe a specific example of the manifestation of both primary and secondary effects of inequality [Boudon, 1974]: schoolchildren from academically oriented, although not very well-off families, according to our other data, demonstrate academic success, progress on the academic track, and are supported on this track, including by the efforts of the family familiar with the Olympiad movement or involved in it.

3.5. "Merit of Children": What is the Contribution of the School, the Family, and the Olympiad Participant's own Efforts to their Victory

When interviewing the Olympiad participants about who, in their opinion, deserves the most credit for their achievements, we expected to obtain their assessment of the promoting power of the school, the role of the family and their personal efforts.

In assessing their own contribution to success in the Olympiad, respondents discussed their efforts, motivation, and talents they applied. They prioritized their passion for the subject, leading to attempts to get information on where they could engage in in-depth study of a particular discipline.

I would say that it is the merit of the children more (a girl, Omsk, social studies).

I think it all depends on the student, of course, more than the school (a young man, Kirov, chemistry).

The Olympiad participants attributed the organizational role in building a trajectory for success in the Olympiads to their families.

From the perspective of the final stage, there are more students and their parents involved. These are students who were able to navigate the literature and independently develop a trajectory for how they will prepare. Parents who were able to find tutors who could help with respect to Olympiad preparation. At the final stage, teachers are not very well-oriented (a girl, Stavropol, history).

When asked about the merits of their Olympiad achievements, respondents most often mention teachers. We can conclude that the Olympiad participants study in schools where teachers are motivated to prepare the participants for the Olympiads, and become an important component of the success story.

Exactly thanks to the teachers in many ways. If the children didn't have motivation, of course, nothing would have worked out. But I can say for sure about myself that thanks to my teachers, motivation appeared (a girl, Penza, literature).

Of course, teachers played a huge role. Here we had a wonderful physics teacher who motivated us in every way, helped us in every way (a young man, Nevinnomyssk, mathematics).

It can be argued whether the lack of motivation of the student himself is a barrier to participation in the Olympiads, but family and school can definitely be a potential barrier. If the school, although not in all cases, can be changed, then it is more difficult to initiate parental support. Ultimately, we can see from the data that participation in Olympiads and success in academic competitions is a complex achievement that depends on multiple factors, including the involvement of the family, the school, and the student.

#### **4. Discussion and Recommendations**

In the study, we highlighted the “doom to success” of Olympiad participants who receive a signal from the school about the opportunity to participate in Olympiads, as well as methodological, financial and psychological support from teachers, school administration, the Olympiad community, and their own family (where sometimes teachers, members of the Olympiad community, and family members coincide).

By entering such a complex academic track, sometimes even in elementary school, students enter an alternative system of admission to universities bypassing the USE. This system may be supported by universities as part of their efforts to attract strong ap-

plicants, while also being utilized by high school students and their families who are able to take advantage of these opportunities. The active development of the school Olympiad movement likely reflects the self-protection effect of certain social groups (conditionally referred to as the intelligentsia) in response to the standardization and increasing transparency of the “school — university” transition through the USE.

The Olympiads of schoolchildren have accumulated opportunities for both success and the emergence of inequality — informational, financial, and territorial. This inequality can be identified in several storylines, related both to barriers on the path “school — Olympiad — university” and to Olympiad tracking as a barrier for schoolchildren pursuing the path of taking the USE. The prerequisites for this inequality are:

- the difference in the socioeconomic status of families. Many respondents used paid services such as visiting schools, tutors, etc. Students who cannot afford paid services are automatically cut off from the opportunities created by such services. Paid classes are not always more effective compared to free ones and cannot be considered indispensable, but they can provide additional chances for better preparation;
- the advantage of the VSOSH benefits over the USE and the “list-based Olympiads” when it comes to university admissions. Since the All-Russian Olympiad of Schoolchildren provides more favorable conditions for admission to the university, schoolchildren who did not win or participate in the VSOSH are relegated to second positions and may not be accepted into their desired program or university, as priority will be given to winners and prize-winners of the final stage of the VSOSH;
- the high significance of the teacher’s personality and qualifications in preparing an Olympiad participant. The advantage is given to schoolchildren who study in large cities or in good schools in small settlements, where Olympiads occupy an important place in the learning process and where there are more teachers who are knowledgeable in the subject;
- the absence of guarantees that schoolchildren are aware of the opportunity to participate in Olympiads, as well as how to prepare for the Olympiads, is a significant issue. Some schools and individual teachers are either unaware of the Olympiads or do not place great importance on them. Under these circumstances, students need to independently look for ways to participate in Olympiads on their own, which is particularly problematic in the case of the VSOSH, since participation in it is directly related to the school: students not only represent the school, but also cannot advance to the subsequent stages wit-

hout passing the school stage, which is the first of four stages of the Olympiad.

In the interests of further development of the Olympiad movement and expanding opportunities for participation, we propose a series of recommendations primarily related to informing the students.

It is necessary to create methodological materials that would inform schoolchildren about the Olympiads, thereby taking the first step towards increasing the number of schoolchildren participating in the Olympiads. If for the majority of schoolchildren, being informed about the Olympiads and/or being invited to participate was the first step towards participation, this may indicate that unique abilities are not mandatory for participation in Olympiads, but rather the presence of information itself, and that every school student can test personal knowledge.

The most common way to learn about Olympiads — the first step towards participating in them — is to inquire with one's teacher. This may be attributed, firstly, to the strong connection between the All-Russian Olympiad of Schoolchildren and the school itself (it should be noted that students participate on behalf of their school, and the first stage is held within the school, after which the school sends the lists of participants to the second, city stage); secondly, it may be due to the long-standing familiarity of the subject teacher with the students. This circumstance allows for the creation and dissemination of information about the Olympiads through teachers, for example, in the form of methodological manuals containing detailed information about the holding of Olympiads and preparation for them.

As for the further scientific and practical directions of research, action research could be proposed, by creating verified practices for informing and encouraging schools and families, and then evaluating the results. Academic extensions of this research, in turn, could include the following sections:

- a targeted review of the practices of involvement in the Olympiad movement and encouragement for participation and victories in Moscow schools and their subsequent comparison with the data obtained in this study;
- a study of the Olympiad communities as spaces of socialization, competition, and cooperation among adolescents, as well as an examination of the effect of collaborative learning in such collectives;
- a description of the ecosystem of communities and organizations that prepare for the Olympiads, and an evaluation of their performance over time;

- tracking the educational and professional trajectories of Olympiad participants, not only in terms of their academic success at universities, but also further.

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