

CASE *briefing*

A Briefing from Campaign for State Education

PRIVATE SCHOOLS

Introduction

Private schools are schools which, although they may have to work within a legal framework determined by the state, are not financed directly from taxation.

In the UK private schools are alternatively referred to as "independent" schools or, in the case of some very famous institutions, "public" schools.

Junior schools which specialise in preparing children for the better known senior schools are often known as "prep" (preparatory) schools.

There are over 2,500 private schools in the UK, ranging from very small junior schools to very large and world famous institutions, such as Eton College. Many of the latter are also boarding schools. The majority of private schools are single sex but this situation is changing. Many, but by no means all, are foundations belonging to Christian churches.

Some private schools have specialist functions: for example, the famous Cheetham's School in Manchester, which educates children of outstanding musical ability, or the various choir schools attached to great cathedrals.

Others exist to promote unorthodox styles of education or to do specialist work with children for whom the state system cannot always adequately provide. The great majority, however, offer a conventional education.

Private schools have to be financed by charging fees. These can range from quite small amounts, in the case of small and little known schools, to very large amounts indeed.

For example, full boarding fees at Eton are now approaching £33,000 per annum, which is more than the annual earnings, before tax, of two thirds of the UK population. Moreover, the fees do not include all the "extras" required to

participate fully in school life, such as musical tuition and examination entry fees.

Wealthy foundations are able to find ways of reducing the fees and other costs through scholarships and bursaries but by no means all private schools are wealthy. Many lead a very precarious existence and often go out of business, especially in times of recession.

Some private schools, such as those in the *Cognita* chain, attempt to run at a profit but the great majority are registered charities and so are able to offset some of their costs against taxation.

Around 6.5% of UK children attend private schools, a figure which has remained fairly constant for many years.

When foreign children are added, the total rises to around 7% of the school population. Pupils are overwhelmingly drawn from the wealthiest sections of society.

Moreover, of those children in receipt of scholarships and bursaries, without which their parents would be unable to afford the fees, nearly all are from educated, middle-class backgrounds.

Although private schools are to be found in most developed countries, there are few countries in which they collectively enjoy the same power and prestige as in the UK.

Historical background

During the 19th century, while the idea of education for the masses was being resisted by an alliance of industrialists and land owners, the same people ensured that their own children, sons especially, would be well and, more importantly, exclusively educated.

Quite early in the 19th century, the great "public" schools - so called because their mediaeval founders had intended them to cater

CASE believes in a full comprehensive, locally accountable and democratic education system.

for all social classes above the rank of pauper - began to transform themselves into national boarding schools, charging high fees.

Although those children for whom the schools had originally been founded continued to be admitted, they were soon greatly outnumbered by the fee-paying children of the rich and the schools then began to discriminate against their "foundationers", with the aim of eventually getting rid of them.

These practices were endorsed by the government-appointed Clarendon Commission of 1861 and the subsequent Public Schools Act of 1868, an endorsement which resulted in an explosion of similar schools, including many new fee-paying schools for girls.

The Clarendon Commission made no bones about the fact that these schools should be exclusive in their intake and that their purpose was to produce "manly gentlemen" (or wives for the same) to run Britain and its growing empire. Although some foundations tried to make provision for the children of the "genteel poor", such as the daughters of poorer clergymen, entry to the great majority of "public" schools was effectively restricted to the children of the nobility, the gentry and wealthy industrialists.

By the time that the Education Act of 1870 introduced a system of national education, the country's governing classes already had a powerful and coherent alternative and saw no need to use public provision for their children, a situation which has obtained ever since.

The impact of the private sector upon state provision

Even though they are attended by a relatively small proportion of children, there are several ways in which private schools collectively undermine state provision.

This briefing paper will focus upon the issues of **resources, status, social cohesion** and **social mobility**.

1. Resources

As well as income from fees, private schools are able to raise huge sums of money from wealthy parents and former pupils. The oldest and most affluent foundations also have income from land holdings and other investments.

In the state system such wealth would be used to benefit pupils of all backgrounds but in the private sector it simply feeds back to the already advantaged.

Currently the private sector employs 14% of the teaching force to teach less than 7% of the pupil population, ensuring that classes are small enough for pupils to have plenty of individual attention.

Private schools also find it easier to recruit specialist teachers in shortage subjects, such as physics, and the well-established ones tend to have better qualified teachers than do state schools.

This imbalance comes about because private schools are able to use their wealth to offer better salaries and better working conditions, such as smaller classes and longer holidays.

As teachers are educated and trained very largely at public expense, this represents a subsidy from the taxpayer. Private schools are able to offer their pupils much better standards of accommodation and equipment than is available in most state schools. This is particularly marked in such curriculum areas as sport and the arts. The wealthiest private schools are also able to offer tuition in specialist fields that most state schools cannot afford.

2. Status

The private sector's exclusivity, together with its long association with the rich and powerful, automatically confers high status upon it. Opinion polls regularly confirm that over half the parent population would choose a private school for their children, if they could afford it.

The state system, although used by the overwhelming majority of parents and paid for by all citizens, is seen as second best, a perception regularly reinforced by those private sector Heads who praise wealthy parents for "making sacrifices" for the sake of their children.

This perception has also been reinforced by successive governments, especially since the Education Reform Act of 1988 began to encourage both parents and society at large to be critical of, rather than supportive towards, state schools. High status in itself acts as a powerful motivator for pupils to learn and succeed, while low status demotivates them.

3. Social cohesion

Private schools effectively segregate the children of the wealthy from those of everyone else. Children who meet only wealthy children are likely to develop an extremely distorted view of social reality, a point effectively illustrated by the 2010 Channel 4 film, *Rich Kid, Poor Kid*.

Many of these children will go on to occupy important positions in society, including positions

of political influence and within the judiciary, but may have little understanding of the nature of most people's lives.

4. Social mobility

In 2008 the Sutton Trust gave evidence to the Milburn Commission, set up to inquire into apparently declining levels of social mobility in Britain.

Among its key findings was that the majority of those at the top of the leading professions were educated in independent fee-paying schools which remain largely closed to the majority of the population. This includes most of the leading judges (70%) and barristers (68%), as well as a majority of the partners at top law firms (55%) and leading journalists and medics (both 54%).

While the representation of those from independent schools has generally declined over the last twenty or so years, there are some signs from the legal profession that more recent recruitment has resulted in an increased proportion of students from fee-paying schools.

More recently, a unique research project at the LSE has found that, even within the already privileged private sector, those who attend one of the original public schools examined by the Clarendon Commission are much more likely to achieve an elite position in society than those who attend other private schools, even though many of the latter are academically superior to the "Clarendon" schools.

The mechanism by which access to the professions is made much easier for those who are privately educated consists of two major elements. One is that the private sector enjoys much better access to prestigious universities, especially Oxford and Cambridge, than do the majority of state schools.

The other, particularly true of the "Clarendon" schools, is the existence of a powerful network of former pupils already occupying senior professional positions. These people are only too willing to recruit applicants from their former schools.

A good example of the importance of Oxford and Cambridge as a route to the top professions can be seen in the educational background of lawyers: 82% of barristers, 78% of judges and 53% of solicitors working in the most prestigious firms went to one of these two universities.

Currently, around 40% of undergraduates at Oxford and Cambridge have attended private schools, a figure which represents a considerable improvement upon the early post-War years but

which is still higher than it should be, given that private schools are responsible for only 30% of A-level entries.

The wealthiest private schools have always enjoyed close links with "Oxbridge" colleges and also have the resources and expertise to provide their pupils with the specialist preparation needed to apply for a place.

Other "Russell Group" universities frequently offer places to pupils rejected by Oxbridge, which leads to private school pupils being over-represented in these universities also.

In recent years, an additional factor in enabling privately educated students to have better access to sought-after professions has been the growth of unpaid "internships", especially in the media.

Access to these is easier for graduates who have the "right" social contacts and, crucially, whose parents can provide the necessary financial support.

What all this amounts to is that the power of the private sector effectively prevents **downward** social mobility, ensuring that those currently in positions of power and influence are able to pass on these positions to their children.

In other words, the private sector makes a major contribution to the perpetuation of a governing elite, while much of the potential of the rest of society is wasted.

Commonly rehearsed arguments

The best way to reduce the number of wealthy parents using the private sector is to improve state schools.

This is unrealistic, at least as far as the most powerful and prestigious private schools are concerned. No matter what improvements are made to state schools (and CASE certainly believes that there is much room for improvement), the sheer concentration of wealth in the private sector will always enable it to outspend the taxpayer.

For example, during the last 40 years private school fees have actually **doubled in real terms**. Although this has prevented the sector from expanding, it has maintained the sector's exclusivity and enabled it to continue to outstrip the state sector in terms of resources.

There is nothing wrong with trying to get the best for your own children.

In academic terms, at least, it is questionable that private schools overall provide “the best”. Repeated research by the Sutton Trust and the NFER has established that, among students with similar A-level grades on entry to university, the best degrees are routinely obtained by those who have attended comprehensive state schools.

The advantages that most private schools confer are more social than academic and these advantages are being purchased at the expense of society as a whole. While it is natural for parents to seek advantages for their own children, it is not necessarily a form of behaviour that society should encourage.

Parents who pay school fees are saving the taxpayer money.

Leaving aside the unquantified damage that such parents inflict on society, this argument assumes that additional resources would have to be found from taxation if private schools did not exist. In fact, the only cost to the taxpayer would be the salaries of those teachers currently employed in private schools. Against this has to be set the huge increase in resources and status that would accrue to state schools if they were patronised by the rich and powerful.

Our private schools are the envy of the world and should be valued as beacons of high standards.

This statement does not necessarily apply to the majority of private schools and having a few rich and famous schools does not result in high standards for our education system as a whole. In tables of international comparisons the UK does not do particularly well. The most successful countries are those which have a more even spread of resources, most notably Finland among European countries and Canada among English-speaking countries.

Entry to private schools is not confined to the children of the rich because nearly all schools offer scholarships and bursaries to offset the fees.

The economics of private education mean that these forms of assistance can only be offered to a small minority and, even then, most parents cannot afford the fees and associated extras. Also, state primary schools are hardly ever in a position to prepare children for the competitive examinations which have to be passed in order

to be eligible for assistance, whereas private “prep” schools specialise in this field. Even if it were possible to expand the provision of bursaries to a significant level, this would have the effect of reducing the social advantages for which wealthy parents may believe they are paying.

Such parents may also resent the idea that a proportion of their high fees is being used to subsidise the children of others.

What CASE thinks

CASE is opposed to a private school system which enables wealthy parents to purchase social and economic advantages for their children. Although, in a free and democratic society, it would be difficult, if not impossible, to legislate private schools out of existence, there is no reason why the UK could not follow the example of Finland and make it illegal for any school to charge fees.

However, CASE also recognises that any such legislation would be pointless if it were not part of a long-term package of reform designed to bring our public education closer to the more successful models to be found in some other countries.

CASE believes that, in the meantime, Government should extensively develop and expand current initiatives to increase access to the most sought-after universities and the most sought-after professions for children who attend comprehensive schools.

Private schools should also be stripped of charitable status and its associated tax advantages. Those schools which cater for children with exceptional needs could be exempted from this limitation. Government should also develop policies for promoting state schooling, instead of both implicitly and explicitly encouraging the general public to denigrate state schools.

Above all, CASE believes that education is essentially a public good and that the provision of high quality education benefits society as a whole. Fee-paying inherently commodifies education, turning it into a private good for which parents must compete on behalf of their children in order to secure their place within an essentially hierarchical structure. This cannot be anything but detrimental to the development of a mature democracy.

What is CASE? Campaign for State Education CASE began in the 1960s as a group of parents pressing for comprehensive education and the involvement of parents. Funded entirely by members’ contributions, CASE works with other campaigning organisations to further this work. Our motto is “Only the best - for every child”. If you would like to help us in our work please go to www.campaignforstateeducation.org.uk/JoinUs.html or write to CASE c/o 11 Wilderton Road, London N16 5QY.