

Why Britain's private schools are such a social problem

Private schools tend to be richly resourced and expensive, so those children lucky enough to attend them normally receive a good education, with academic advantages enhanced by a range of extra-curricular activities. But while this might be great for private pupils these schools pose a serious problem for Britain's education system and society.

- 5 Britain's private schools are very socially exclusive. The scale of bursaries is far too small to make a difference – just 1% of children go for free.

The exclusivity stems from the enormous price tag of private schooling. Fees average £17,200 a year per child, and are much higher for boarding schools. The famous Eton College in Windsor, which charges up to £14,910 per term – with three terms per academic year.

- 10 **Some question whether the schools offer much in return for this parental investment: “Let them waste their money” writes one contributor to the Dadsnet internet forum – convinced from his experience that the quality of a private education is nothing special. But research indicates otherwise.**

- 15 Large-scale studies confirm the clear academic advantages to be gained from going to a private school in Britain. This holds true, even after allowing for children's prior abilities and for the fact that children tend to come from affluent family backgrounds. At each stage of education the progress made by the privately educated is modestly but significantly above that of state-educated children on average.

- 20 Privately educated children also enjoy the many extra-curricular activities on offer. And they get all the guidance and advice they need to “work the system” in order to improve their chances of getting into a top university. The privately educated are twice as likely as similar state-educated children to achieve a place at one of Britain's elite universities.

Educational advantages naturally give Britain's privately educated a huge helping hand in the labour market. Put bluntly, going to a private school gets you a job with higher pay. How high depends on age, gender and time period. Some estimates of the premium are as much as 35%.

- 25 Only 9% of the overall population in the UK are privately educated, but they occupy an especially high proportion when it comes to positions of public influence: a third of MPs and top business executives, half of cabinet members and newspaper editors, three-quarters of judges — the list goes on. This disproportionate influence on society detracts from Britain's democracy.

- 30 This is enormously unjust in a world where education is so important to people's life chances. Indeed, 63% of those recently contacted in a poll agreed it was unfair that “some people with a lot of money get a better education and life chances for their children by paying for a private school”. Only 18% disagreed.

In his recent book *Engines of Privilege*, historian David Kynaston states the case for reforming these schools. Some proposals he sets out would discourage parents – reducing the advantages of paying for private education. Other proposals would seek to partially integrate the private and state sectors to help change the social composition of private schools. Either type of approach would make a real difference.