

The only way to end the class divide: the case for abolishing private schools

The continuing gap between state and private education is reinforcing privilege and harming the prospects of another generation. The only solution is integration. By

Main image: Photograph: Dan Chung for the Guardian

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Unlikely as it might sound, one of the most electric political meetings I have ever attended was a lecture on the Finnish educational system given by Pasi Sahlberg, the Finnish educator and author, in London in the spring of 2012. Sahlberg, who was speaking to a packed committee room 14 of the House of Commons - the most magnificent of a run of grand meeting rooms that directly overlook the Thames - has a rather laconic manner of delivery. However, in this particular instance, his flat speaking style proved the perfect vehicle for an unexpectedly radical message.

Sahlberg described how Finnish education had evolved, in the postwar period, from a steeply hierarchical one, rather like our own, made up of private, selective and less-well regarded “local” schools, to become a system in which every child attends the “common school”. The long march to educational reform was partly initiated to strengthen the Finnish nation after the second world war, and to defend it against Russian incursions in particular.

Finland’s politicians and educational figures recognised that a profoundly unequal education system did not simply reproduce inequality down the generations, but weakened the fabric of the nation itself. Following a long period of discussion - which drew in figures from the political right and left, educators and academics - Finland abolished its fee-paying schools and instituted a nationwide comprehensive system from the early 1970s onwards. Not only did such reforms lead to the closing of the attainment gap between the richest and poorest students, it also turned Finland into one of the global educational success stories of the modern era.

I was recently reminded of this meeting when reading a short pamphlet published in November 1964 by the Young Fabian authors Howard Glennerster and Richard Pryke on “the public schools”. Much of the pamphlet covers the same ground occasionally trod today by the odd brave soul: the social divisiveness bred by a parallel school system for the better-off; the disproportionate access of privately educated pupils to Oxford and Cambridge and then to the top jobs in society; the dispersal of bursaries largely to the cash-strapped middle class; and the numerous canny tax schemes enjoyed by both private school parents and the schools themselves that amount to large state subsidies to the most privileged in society. The pamphlet ended by dismissing the foolishness of those who say that state schools should “catch up” with the private sector.

The answer was integration.

It also quoted the Labour party manifesto of 1964, which promised that “Labour will set up an educational trust to advise on the best way of integrating the private schools into the state system of education”. It also included an extract from a document titled Signposts for the Sixties, which provided a statement of Labour party “home policy” submitted by the national executive committee to the 60th annual party conference: “We are convinced that the nation should now take the decision to end the social inequalities and educational anomalies arising from the existence of a highly influential and privileged private sector of education, outside the state system.”

The Young Fabian authors concluded that “in the future, these statements may be seen to mark a turning point in the development of British education ... now Labour is committed to action, and action there will have to be”. Sadly, it was not to be. As David Kynaston and George Kynaston noted in a long, cogent consideration of the issue published in New Statesman in 2014, the Labour party, if not the wider left, has largely remained silent on the issue of private schools for 40 years.

We urgently need to renew the conversation about the private-public divide, and move beyond the superficial, profoundly apolitical debates of recent years. These have chiefly been characterised by the rolling out of the same information again and again, almost as if the private schools were not human creations but unchallengeable phenomena like the weather or religious deities. Over and over we are told: private schools achieve higher results; their graduates vacuum up the majority of places at the best universities; they take all the top jobs; they dominate the top of society. There is, as a result, a continual stirring up (with the liberal help of a few capital letters) of resentment, envy and panic - “Private pupils are SIX TIMES more likely to get A* grades at GCSEs than those at state schools”; “A third of private pupils score 3 A* grades at A-level compared to one in TEN at state schools” - finely seasoned with a good dollop of hopelessness: “The awful truth: to get ahead you need a private education.”

Moreover, many people today still peddle the line that those prescient Young Fabian authors of half a century ago urged us not to take, which is to implore our often-battered state system to close the widening divide through non-stop “improvement”. During a BBC Radio 4 debate on education in the runup to the 2015 general election, Fraser Nelson, editor of the rightwing weekly the Spectator, argued that what was needed was more visits by the influential and successful to state schools, more internships and mentoring of the disadvantaged. Useful as such initiatives might be, to some individuals, it is hard to see how such stopgap methods will do more than chip away at a yawning structural divide.

We can’t expect the Conservatives to say much about private education. After all, it underwrites a hierarchical form of social organisation, and philosophy of individual freedom, intrinsic to the party’s philosophy. Labour’s position in the postwar period - from roughly the late 40s to the early 70s - was, as I have indicated, to deplore the divide and promise to do something about it. In 1997, New Labour got rid of the assisted-places scheme, a system of subsidies for private schools. Yet the most marked feature of the post-1997 New Labour years has been the suggestion that state education could benefit from imitation of the autonomy, pedagogy, disciplinary atmosphere, as well as the direct patronage, of the private sector.

Wellington Academy in Wiltshire, an academy sponsored by the public school Wellington College. Photograph: Sam Frost

Under this rubric, two distinct policies were pursued. One was to lure cash-strapped private schools into the state sector, via the academies and free school movement. To date, a handful of private schools have come into state education via this route, but enjoy preferential admissions arrangements and other advantages that some argue have intensified stratification within the state system. The other, much-heralded path - particularly under education secretary Michael Gove and education minister Andrew Adonis - was that of "partnership": the idea that private schools should sponsor struggling academies. Spurred on by a mix of duty, guilt, interest in innovation or a combination of all these, some schools - including Brighton College, Dulwich, Eton, Highgate, King's Canterbury, Wellington and Uppingham - joined the scheme. However, a number subsequently pulled out. As one private school head is reputed to have said: "I take my hat off to these guys who run academies. I wouldn't last five minutes in that environment." Former chief inspector of schools Michael Wilshaw was sceptical of the arrangement, telling a gathering of private school heads that the so-called partnerships amounted to no more than "crumbs off your tables, leading more to famine than feast".

If we are to move the conversation on, then, we need to be clear that the success of private education is not replicable precisely because it offers the already socially and economically privileged superior resources and opportunities that inevitably augment their confidence and capabilities in every sphere. Private day schools now cost, on average, £14,500 a year - more than the annual disposable income of the average English family. Boarding is a great deal more costly. The annual fees of a top private school such as Westminster, which sends more students to Oxbridge than any other school in the country, are around £35,000 a year for boarders. Compare this with the average per-pupil spend in a state secondary school of between £4,000 and £6,000 a year. But the difference is not only in simple resources, for the spread of pupils at many state schools will include those from deprived or struggling families, compounding the pressures on their education and those who teach them, while a private school is in general recruiting from the already affluent, literate and enterprising. Thus, we need to publicly acknowledge that the success of private education is far less to do with character building or autonomous governance than the powerful alchemy of several kinds of advantage.

Now, more than ever, there is a strong moral and political argument in support of integration. At a time of growing divides and damaging inequality, we urgently need public institutions that bring the nation together, not further separate and divide us. For many in the UK, the idea of a unified education system to which all subscribe is too great a leap of the imagination, too daring a proposition - and yet the benefits of a common schooling could be immense.

Finland teaches us not only that state education will never be considered truly first-rate until we give all our children the same high-quality schooling, but also that a country that educates its children together has a better chance of being at ease with itself than one that segregates different parts of the population from an early age. On a more raw political note, the greater the spread of families using a public service, the greater the pressure on politicians to commit sufficient funds to support it. Or as David Kynaston puts it, rather more amusingly: "One only has to witness pushy private-school parents on the touchline to realise that the state sector will never achieve its full capability without them."

It may be that the problem with private education is not that it is too expensive, but that it is too cheap. Certainly, low-level growling about the extent of state subsidy of private schools has a long history. The Charities Act 2006 removed the presumption that charities automatically provide public benefit, and decisions on this question were shifted to the Charity Commission, which, in statutory guidance, “ruled that people in poverty should not be excluded from the services of these ‘charities’; their benefits should be made available to a ‘sufficient’ section of the population, be quantifiable and reported on annually”. Since then, there has been intermittent and testy discussion as to whether the sharing of playing fields and libraries, and the provision of Latin taster classes and so on to neighbouring state schools constitutes sufficient public benefit. In 2014, Tristram Hunt, then Labour shadow minister for education, boldly proposed that private schools should lose some of their business-rate relief if they didn’t form more meaningful partnerships with state schools. There were even rumours, in 2017, that Theresa May would withdraw charitable status from private schools that refused to participate in the sponsorship of academies and free schools.

Paradoxically, austerity may have played a part in ratcheting up the pressure on private schools. In early 2017, Taunton Deane council in Somerset initiated conversations with its three local private schools on how those schools could contribute more to the “community benefit” of the area, suggesting that they donate 10% of their business-rates relief. According to Steve Ross, an independent councillor, private schools in the district received a tax discount of £868,060 in 2016-17, of which more than £340,000 would normally have gone to the council through the business-rates system.

“We recognise we have to give the schools business-rates relief,” Ross argued, “but we considered the time was right to seek better engagement with the schools and see whether their delivery of public benefit could be aligned with tackling local priorities ... In an area with national pressure on education, plus county pressure on children’s services and libraries, and our borough having deprived wards in which literacy is identified as a barrier to families accessing services and employment, we need to look at, and beyond, the current arrangements.”

The mood music is changing. In the runup to the 2017 general election, Jeremy Corbyn proposed that VAT should be charged on private school fees in order to subsidise free lunches for all primary school children. In December of that year, the Scottish government accepted the recommendations of the Barclay review that Scottish private schools should lose their business-rate relief, with the exception of some specialist and special-needs schools.

Robert Verkaik, author of the recently published *Posh Boys: How the English Public Schools Ruin Britain*, calculates that “the UK spends more on private education than any other country in the developed world”. Private schools could have been expected to pay £1.16bn in business rates between 2017 and 2022. As charities, he argues, they will pay just £634.26m, equating to circa £522.31m in savings. Eton, for example, will save an estimated £4.1m in business rates over the next five years. Yet state schools, which are not charities and do not receive fee income, must pay the full rate. Verkaik also investigates the manner in which private schools, as charities, are exempt from UK tax on most types of investment income, and do not pay corporation tax, which means every penny of profit a public school makes is tax-free. If this income were taxed, it could raise up to £500m a year. He has also highlighted the considerable sums of money used to subsidise private education for the children of military families. By removing some forms of public subsidy, and perhaps taxing school fees (a report by the Fabian Society in 2010 suggested that introducing VAT on private school fees could raise around £1.5bn annually), private education might start to become more like a luxury brand, encouraging a significant proportion of parents to choose the state sector.

Imposing further taxes on school fees is just one of several reforms that could bring us closer to a more integrated system. Proposals for outright abolition are likely to raise an unproductive political outcry followed by years of legal wrangling over the rights of parents to pay for their children’s education, in whatever form. The Sutton Trust has proposed an open-access scheme, under which the state would subsidise 25% of places at top-performing private schools to those on low or medium incomes, with places allotted on a selective basis.

The West London Free School, which opened in 2011. Photograph: Matthew Lloyd/Getty Images

A number of leading private schools have already indicated a willingness to participate in the scheme. However, given the overwhelming evidence concerning the social discrimination inherent in 11-plus-style tests, such a plan would exclude the genuinely poor, further deprive state schools of motivated and high-attaining pupils, justify selection at a time when it is seriously being questioned in the state sector, and bestow an additional, and wholly unjustifiable, moral halo upon private education. Earlier schemes of a similar nature, such as the assisted-places scheme, ended up largely subsidising the already educationally advantaged on moderate or low incomes.

A more radical approach might be to compel private schools to take, as their 25% quota, children who have been on free school meals for an extended period of time, children who have been in care, or children who struggle to reach basic levels of attainment. Any money that the state channelled to private schools in the form of subsidies for pupils such as these would amount to a form of redistribution of which few could disapprove, while finally returning the private schools to their original mission - lost in the mists of pragmatic time - to educate the genuinely needy.

Given the considerable and sustained advantage that private-school students currently enjoy in terms of access to top universities, and from there to the most influential and well-paid jobs, there is also a case for an increase in contextual admissions criteria - ensuring that universities take into account economic and educational contexts when offering places, particularly at so-called top universities.

“Potential” is always a tricky quality to judge. In a recent blogpost headlined “Making Oxbridge entry matter less”, the education researcher Rebecca Allen described a period she spent conducting admissions interviews at an Oxbridge college. “The experience completely revolutionised my view that university admissions were efficiently selecting students by ability ... Those who performed exceptionally well at interview often didn’t seem to turn out to be genuinely interested and motivated by their subject.” (Allen knew this because she also worked as a supervisor of first-year students.) In other words, confident self-presentation may not always indicate authentic passion; in a reverse manifestation of the same question, one state-school head told me that some of his most brilliant sixth-form students were not - yet - able to translate their passions into an acceptable form of fluency, but could be taught to do so.

Allen also noted that accompanying “thinking skills” tests were clearly not tutor-proof, and confirmed that disadvantaged students were often not prepared for the demands of the interview. In the long term, we need a fresh approach to teaching and learning that will produce greater numbers of intellectually confident and questioning pupils. In the short term, given that exam results determine entry to all universities, there is a strong case for lower entrance requirements for those who have had a less well resourced education, especially since research shows that state-school students admitted to highly selective universities with the same A-level results as their private-school peers outperform the latter.

Lady Margaret Hall in Oxford has recently set up a free, fully funded foundation year for students usually “underrepresented” at Oxbridge, to give disadvantaged students a taster of demanding courses at an elite institution and aid applications to university entrance proper. While some might question the sensitivity of such a publicly visible separate track for those from more modest backgrounds, it is an indication of a new determination to shift entrenched inequalities.

The point is that if private-school attendance were no longer associated with a smooth transition to a top university, there would be less incentive for parents to pay fees in order to educate their children separately.

Within the state sector in England, there is a less daunting transition to be managed in terms of selective education. Kent, Lincolnshire and Buckinghamshire have fully selective systems, pretty similar to those operated in the postwar period. In Birmingham, to take one example of how selection operates in the big cities, eight grammar schools cream off the most motivated and high-achieving students and make secondary transfer for all Birmingham’s parents a complex, messy and socially unfair business. While there are only 163 grammars in England - many of which are expanding fast under this government - it is estimated that the secondary education of one in 10 children nationwide is affected by the nearby presence of a selective school.

We know the negative impact that grammars have on other local schools. Expensive private coaching, beyond the reach of most families, is a crucial part of winning a place at a selective school. While some ethnic groups do better than others in selective systems, grammars disproportionately exclude children from minority backgrounds. Selective schools are more likely to be rated outstanding as other local schools suffer, their pupil intake out of balance in terms of the proportion of disadvantaged, disengaged children - many of whom are demoralised by having failed the 11-plus and told that they are not up to the mark - or those with special needs. It is often hard to recruit and retain teachers. These de facto “secondary moderns” - a term no modern politician will go near, with its reference to the now widely discredited system of the postwar period, which divided children into grammar and secondary modern schools, largely along lines of class - are more likely to be judged “inadequate” or “failing”. And thus the vicious circle is complete.

Stephen Gorard and Nadia Siddiqui of Durham University have examined data for every cohort of pupils in England in 2015. They conclude: “This kind of clustering of relative advantage [in grammar schools] is potentially dangerous for society ... [taking] measures of chronic poverty and local socio-economic status segregation between schools, [we use] these to show that the results from grammar schools are no better than expected, once these differences are accounted for. There is no evidence base for a policy of increasing selection ... The UK government should consider phasing the existing selective schools out.”

Lobby groups as politically diverse as Comprehensive Future, a cross-party campaign group committed to phasing out selection and supporting fair admissions policies, and Bright Blue, a conservative thinktank, agree with this conclusion. Comprehensive Future proposes that we slowly open grammar schools up to a fully comprehensive intake: ensuring local populations can decide the best means of transition, what use to make of existing grammar-school buildings, and how to prepare teachers in the selective sector to teach all children to the highest level.

Such a move would complete the reforms that occurred across much of the UK in the 60s and 70s. Change is still happening today. In 2016, Guernsey, a small crown dependency, voted to transform its school system, converting the island’s single grammar school and three secondary moderns into a unified system. For decades, campaigners against selection have been patiently arguing their case, putting forward the evidence and attempting to persuade others. Finally, they won. From 2019, Guernsey will have a fully comprehensive secondary school system, joining some of the most successful and modern education systems in the world. It is time England did the same.

This is an edited extract from [Life Lessons: The Case for a National Education Service](#) by Melissa Benn, which will be published by Verso on 4 September. To order a copy for £7.64, go to guardianbookshop.com or call 0330 333 6846

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