

PRIVATE SCHOOL SECTOR CLAIMS: FACT CHECK



**Common claims about Britain's
private schools and reform**

Private School Policy Reform

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Introduction:

The year 2019 saw an escalation of heated debate about whether private schools should be reformed, or even nationalised.

A number of claims were reported and repeated in the media, usually stemming from private school leaders. While many contained an element of truth within them, closer scrutiny in relation to the available evidence demonstrates some also played fast and loose with the facts.

After the Conservative government's re-election with a large majority, the private school industry in general no longer feels under quite such an existential threat. Yet the desire for reform from various quarters (including from within the private school sector itself) remains, crosses ideological and party lines and is unlikely to go away.

Private School Policy Reform has elsewhere set out a range of potential proposals for change¹, and new ideas for reform continue to be generated.

This booklet aims to set out concisely the academic evidence and other evidence-based arguments surrounding these common claims, which are sometimes used to denounce reform policies, using links that anyone can consult.

If the same claims are made in the coming years, readers will find here a starting point for considering them dispassionately.

We will have a much better debate about reforms, on all sides, if we can work with all of the evidenced facts in our future national conversation on this topic.

Francis Green, professor of Work and Education Economics at UCL Institute of Education and co-founder of Private School Policy Reform (author)

Private School Policy Reform (PSPR) is a thinktank whose purpose is to further public debate and policy around private schools in the UK, as a platform for research, reports, opinion and panel events.

PSPR is pro reform of the private schools sector, on the grounds that poor and middle-income pupils should be able to access similar opportunities and resources as their wealthiest peers. The group does not propose one particular position and seeks to research legal, practical and sustainable solutions to the resources and opportunity gap.

¹ <https://www.privateschoolreform.co.uk/publications>

Claims:

1. Social diversity

Claim: Private school pupils are socially and economically diverse

Fact check: Most private school parents come from the very top income bracket

Press and publication examples:

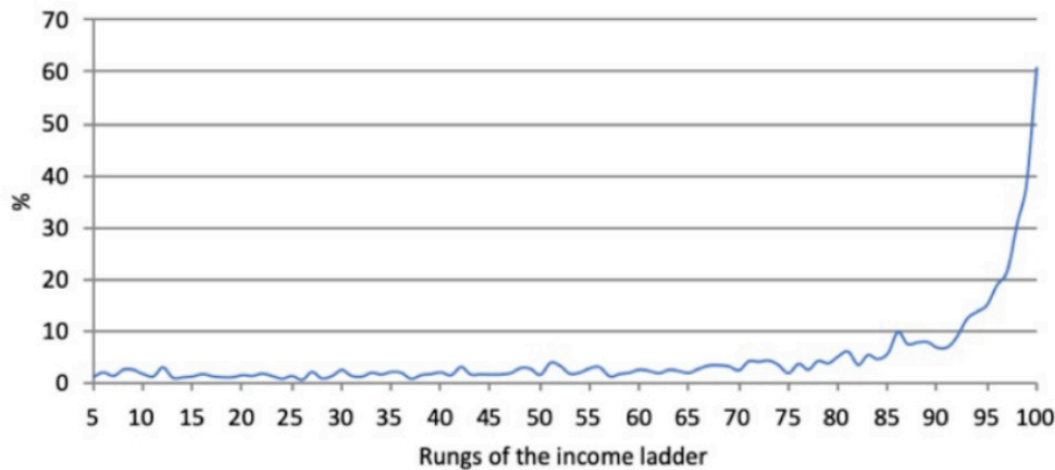
- *Private school pupils 'come from a wide range of socio-economic backgrounds'*¹
- *'School type is not a proxy for social advantage'*²
- *'Most schools are not particularly rich, and neither are the families that choose to spend their money this way'*³

The claim of social diversity is often used by the private schools sector to counter the accusation its schools are socially exclusive. Means-tested bursary provision is often cited as evidence in support of the sector's social inclusivity.

Evidence:

- Participation in private schooling is concentrated among high-income families:

Table 1: Percentage of children in private school at each rung of the income ladder: %



Source: Data from Family Resources Survey; Green, F., J. Anders, M. Henderson and G. Henseke (2017). *Who Chooses Private Schooling in Britain and Why?* London, Centre for Research on Learning and Life Chances (LLAKES), Research Paper 62

- Three out of four private school children in 2015 came from families where parents are managers or professional workers. This was the same in 2005.⁴
- Half of private school children come from families in the top 10 percent of the income ladder: this was the same in the 1990s and in the 2000s.⁵

1 https://www.isc.co.uk/media/2661/isc_census_2015_final.pdf

2 <https://www.tes.com/news/exclusive-private-schools-boss-condemns-anti-privilege-mood>

3 Citation in Francis Green and David Kynaston *Engines of Privilege*. Bloomsbury, p.184.

4 Green, F., J. Anders, M. Henderson and G. Henseke (2017). *Who Chooses Private Schooling in Britain and Why?* London, LLAKES Research Paper 62.

5 Henseke, G., J. Anders, F. Green and M. Henderson (2018). *The income and wealth concentration of private school attendance in Britain*. Workshop on Britain's Private Schools in the 21st Century. UCL Institute of Education.

- Below the top 10 per cent of the income ladder, families face a fee averaging between half their income and more than twice their income. Most of those who decide to pay must call on their family wealth.
- A bursary can enable a child from a low-income family to attend an expensive school. Yet only one in five private school children receive bursaries.
- Bursaries are not only too scarce, but also too small to make a systemic difference. The value of scholarships and bursaries per enrolled private school pupil is about 4 per cent of the fees, unchanged since the 2000s.⁶
- Just 1 per cent of private school pupils are educated one a 100 per cent free place.⁷

A few schools have generous bursary provisions, and [some aspire to scale this up](#), but there is no academic evidence of the impact of this yet.

6 As above.

7 Calculated from data provided in the annual ISC Census

2. Parents' sacrifice

Claim: Parents are making a big sacrifice to choose private schooling

Fact check: Private school families on average still spend more on holidays and other luxuries than state school parents

Press and publication examples:

- *'Many of the parents who choose to send their children to an independent school do so at considerable personal sacrifice: foregoing expensive holidays or new cars'¹*
- *'Many parents just ordinary people who value education over everything else, making big sacrifices'²*

A variation of the "social diversity" story, this is the idea that private school pupils are mainly from normal families with ordinary means.

Here, we are asked to accept that the families of private school children are the same as other families, but just more willing to sacrifice their holidays and other luxuries.

Evidence:

Expenditure on a private education means that same money cannot be used for something else.

However evidence demonstrates that private school families have, on average, significantly more money to spend.

After paying their school fees, what's left over is on average still greater than the average state school family's budget.

- Even among families with middle incomes, those with children at private school still manage to outspend those with children at state school on luxuries.

They spend 26 per cent of their income on 'recreation, culture, restaurants and hotels', as opposed to just 20 per cent for state school families (see Table 2 below).

Table 2

	Private school families on average	State school families on average
Spending (£ per week at 2015 prices)	£179	£136
Proportion of disposable income	26%	20%

Source: ONS, Living Costs and Food Surveys, 2004–2015.

1 <https://www.scotsman.com/education/how-snp-tax-raid-private-schools-will-affect-state-system-murdo-fraser-1410710>

2 <https://www.newstatesman.com/politics/politics/2012/06/you-dont-raise-school-standards-skewing-them>

- These private school families in the middle income range can afford to meet the fees without spending less on luxuries, because they (or their extended family) have more wealth.
- Family wealth in Britain has grown along with school fees for the last 30 years, while incomes have not kept up¹.
- Relatively few private school families are, however, in the middle income range.
- The large majority are from the higher income range and can afford it mostly from their incomes. Leaving aside a small minority, paying for private school is a choice, not a sacrifice of holidays or other luxuries.

1 Atkinson, A. B. (2018). Wealth and inheritance in Britain from 1896 to the present. *The Journal of Economic Inequality*, 16(2), 137-169.

Parsons, S., Green, F., Ploubidis, G., Sullivan, A. and Wiggins, D. (2017) 'The influence of private primary schooling on children's learning: Evidence from three generations of children living in the UK', *British Educational Research Journal*, 43(5), pp. 823-847.

3. Partnerships

Claim: Partnerships between state and private schools are mitigating social injustice

Fact check: Most partnerships are too minor to make a difference

Press and publication examples:

- *'Five minutes wasn't long enough for head teacher Marion Gibbs to outline all the valuable partnership work her school is doing in her local community.'*¹
- *'Hundreds of independent schools like mine and others in HMC open up the opportunities we offer to a wider range of young people. Social mobility? Most certainly for those who benefit.'*²
- *'It is understandable that some view private schools as part of the problem of social inequality. However, it is possible to view them as part of the solution. Almost all private schools are engaged in supportive partnership work with state schools'*³

For the last five years and more, statements like these have regularly appeared in newspapers and magazines. Some private school leaders urge colleagues to expand their partnerships.

Guidelines for a successful partnership are available from government, and case studies are promoted.⁴

James Allen's Girls' School in south London, for example, has a long-established fruitful partnership with other schools in Southwark. Collectively, these activities are claimed to be helping to alleviate the inequalities in our education system between private and state schools.

Evidence:

In 2016 private schools were stung by an accusation from the then-Ofsted chief inspector that most partnerships with state schools were "a way of meeting the demands of the Charity Commission and not much else".⁵ What are the facts?

- By 2020, 85 per cent of the schools affiliated to the Independent Schools Association were in a partnership.
- But the important details about these partnerships are hidden: in particular, the amount of resources and money devoted to them.
- It is likely that few such partnerships involve a significant transfer of resources, when compared with the huge expenditure per child in the private sector (around £18,000 on average), roughly three times what is spent on state school children.

1 <https://www.isc.co.uk/media-enquiries/isc-blogs/the-impact-of-independent-schools-on-the-british-economy-house-of-lords-reception/>

2 <https://www.tes.com/news/private-schools-want-do-more-boost-social-mobility>

3 <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2017/apr/24/private-schools-can-help-social-mobility>

4 <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/setting-up-school-partnerships/guide-to-setting-up-partnerships>

5 <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2016/mar/09/ofsted-chief-criticises-independent-schools-lack-of-help-for-state-schools>

- Not that many schools are involved in partnerships likely to involve substantial resources. For example:
- There are only 25 cases of a private school (co)sponsoring an academy state school, and even for these the resources devoted are hidden from view. Just 184 private schools assign teaching staff to any state school duties (again, it is not clear how often).
- Many more schools (534) invite pupils to attend drama classes or performances, while many more (644) dispatch staff to serve as governors at state schools.
- Some (327) allow state schools to use their swimming schools, though whether this is charged for is not revealed.⁶

If private schools would like to claim they are making a much larger transfer of resources than is apparent, they could be challenged to produce the figures and thereby be more transparent.

There are certainly school leaders in both sectors who rightly hold that partnerships between schools can sometimes be helpful for both parties. But the then-chief inspector was right to draw attention to the limitations of partnerships, particularly in terms of pupil outcomes.

4. Economic impact

Claim: Private schools have a large economic impact

Fact check: The meaning of ‘economic impact’ and the estimate of the contribution to economic growth are both questionable

Press and publication examples:

- *‘The economic benefits that independent schools bring to Britain are striking. ...ISC schools make an annual contribution to UK GDP of £11.6 billion.. ... If ISC schools had not existed during the past 70 years, UK GDP could be around £62 billion per annum lower’¹*
- *Claim made in the House of Lords of a huge ‘impact’ from private schools on the British economy.²*

Evidence:

There are two parts to this claim.

- First, we must examine the word “impact”. The estimated size of the private school industry, including all the money flowing directly and indirectly from employing teachers, and buying materials and facilities, is called “impact”.
- This term is then flipped in meaning to suggest that if schooling was funded by the government this “impact” would somehow be lost, and that the economy would become smaller.
- It is true that the private school sector is a sizable industry. Indeed, its income from fees is considerable.
- However, if all schools were to become government funded (to take a radical reform example), this economic contribution would not vanish: teachers, materials and facilities would still make up a sizable part of the nation’s economy, financed and used in a different way.
- The second part of this story – the £62 billion which private schools supposedly added to UK GDP – is a baseless claim. It purportedly derives from the gap between the average scores of Britain’s private and state school children in school tests for 15-year-olds. The report predicts that this gap gives rise to an impact on economic growth. It is dubiously estimated that, if hypothetically there had been no private schools since 1948, Britain’s economic growth would have been 0.07 per cent lower every year since 1978.
- However, much of the test-score gap arises because of the high prior attainment levels and affluent family backgrounds of the private secondary school children – a fact known from many scientific studies and surprisingly overlooked by the report. To ignore the different circumstances of private school children is an obvious mistake.

The exaggerated claim of such an enormous impact on economic growth suits the public defence of private schooling. It would be more transparent of the sector to submit their analysis to an academic economics journal and see if it passes anonymous peer review. From the available evidence, it wouldn’t.

¹ <https://www.hmc.org.uk/facts-figures/economic-impact/>

² <https://hansard.parliament.uk/Lords/2015-03-04/debates/15030478000198/IndependentSchoolsVarietyAndDiversity>. For a full criticism of this report, see F.Green and D. Kynaston *Engines of Privilege*, Bloomsbury, pp 176–180.

5. Alternative inequalities are worse

Claim: Private school inequalities are minor compared with inequalities within the state schools system

Fact check: Inequalities within the state schools sector are less significant than the resources gap between the private and state sector

Press and publication examples:

- *‘Buying homes near good schools is ‘worse than going private’*¹
- *“The major sponsor of inequality in Britain is unequal education, the fact that within the state system that educates 93 per cent of children the poor get so much worse outcomes than the rich. I think that’s outrageous and I can’t work out why there isn’t more anger at this [...] instead of discussions about education, you get onto this obsession with state versus private.”*²

Evidence:

This claim is made when a defender of private schools wishes to point out there are other forms of educational inequality in Britain.

The issue is then set up as a morality competition between choosing to pay fees or to move house to gain advantage from inequalities within state education. But what are the facts behind this?

It must be recognised that there is a need to reverse the funding decline in Britain’s state schools, and to reduce inequalities within state education, including between rich and poor areas. Policies must also be developed for reducing wider regional inequalities.

However, arguments for good regional policies or policies on state schools are not substitutes for addressing the private/state divide in our school system. The alternative inequalities story amounts to a diversion.

- In terms of resources, the differences between state schools deriving from the government funding formula are miniscule compared with the gap between private and state schools in per capita funding – roughly a factor of three.³ Mostly this is because average private school sector fees have risen so high.
- We do not know how many people move house expressly for the purpose of gaining access to a better-performing state school. Yet there is evidence of how much people are prepared and able to pay for this purpose. Prices are higher nearer schools with good GCSE results, as surveys show.⁴ However, this is in part due to the neighbourhoods themselves rather than the supposedly high quality of the schools.

1 <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/buying-homes-near-good-schools-worse-than-going-private-z550sdps0>

2 Fraser Nelson, editor of The Spectator: BBC Radio 4 Across the Red Line (10.3.2018)

3 Green, F. and D. Kynaston (2019). Engines of Privilege: Britain’s Private School Problem. London, Bloomsbury; pp102–4. See also pp 191–195 for further discussion.

4 <https://www.savills.co.uk/insight-and-opinion/savills-news/207612/top-schools-add-up-to-25--to-house-prices>

- The differences attributable just to the schools' performance, rather than other factors, are not so large when compared with the cost of private schooling for one or more children.
- Moving from an average to a high-performing primary school⁵ (as measured by the educational gains of all its pupils) would have cost an extra three per cent on house prices, equivalent to 2.5 years of private schooling for just one child in 2007 – according to the best estimates from the London School of Economics. While house prices and fees have both risen much since 2007, the proportionate effects have probably not changed all that much – **however, further research in this area is needed.** Those moving for the purpose of schooling can also recoup their investment by moving elsewhere after their children leave school.

Sometimes, the alternative inequalities story is extended to a form of fatalism: any reform of private schooling, it is argued, would be nullified as the rich would simply increase inequalities among state schools. However, this is speculative and almost certainly exaggerated if not wrong: no government that is committed to education and meritocracy would be allowed to get away with funding some schools at three times the rate as others.

5 By 'high performing' is meant being at one standard deviation above the average value-added score.

6. Model of excellence

Claim: It makes no sense to reduce, significantly reform or limit a sector which is a model of educational excellence

Fact check: Selection and greater resources are being confused with excellence

Press and publication examples:

- *'Independent schools provide educational excellence'*¹
- *'The independent sector, both prep and senior schools, continue to stand out as centres of academic excellence'*²
- *'Striving to 'abolish excellence' is no solution for an unequal education system'*³

Evidence:

Shaky claims often contain an element of truth that shrouds their overall falsehood, and here is an example. Britain's private schools on the whole do provide a good education.

At every stage of education⁴, private school children on average make modestly better progress than their state school peers -- even when allowance is made for their generally wealthy home backgrounds.

And these advantages add up. Private schools also provide a rich variety of extra-curricular educational activities, including sporting, cultural and practical training.

Yet the claim of excellence in Britain's private schools is misleading: what it really reflects is greater resourcing and heavy intake selectivity.

- Better average performance is to be expected, given the enormous resource gap.⁵ For example, in 2021 state secondary school pupils will have a base minimum of £5,150⁶ spent on them, while fees for private school pupils averaged £15,000.⁷ So private schools can deploy more teachers and support staff in smaller classes, often with better facilities inside and outside the classroom.
- Sometimes it is argued that private schools' successes are due to their independence from government, allowing them to be better managed. 'At the heart of the success of the best independent schools - and the best state schools - is freedom for the headteacher', declared Michael Gove in 2014⁸, when secretary of state for education. A UCL study shows⁹, however, that state schools overall are managed as well as, and in some areas better than, private schools (except in the area of record-keeping, where private schools scored higher - however this area was not linked to better pupil outcomes).

1 <https://www.isc.co.uk/sector-info/>

2 <https://ie-today.co.uk/Article/2019-in-independent-education/>

3 <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2019/sep/23/head-of-eton-hits-back-at-labour-plans-to-abolish-private-schools>

4 <https://discovery.ucl.ac.uk/id/eprint/10081809/>

5 Better average performance is to be expected, given the enormous resource gap

6 <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/every-pupil-in-england-to-see-another-rise-in-funding-in-2021>

7 https://www.isc.co.uk/media/6686/isc_census_2020_final.pdf

8 <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/michael-gove-speaks-about-securing-our-childrens-future>

9 <https://discovery.ucl.ac.uk/id/eprint/10043059/>

- Meanwhile, state schools in Britain also already enjoy more independence from government than in many other countries, and not all that much less than Britain's private schools.¹⁰
- By 2017 Gove was calling for taxes on private schools to boost spending in state schools.¹¹ The advantage for private schools lies not so much in their freedom to choose how to spend their budgets, as in the wherewithal to spend three times more.
- Of course, there are variations in private schools' affluence and in the efficiency of their management. Some schools in both state and private sectors are very well led. Others, however, are poorly managed, and a significant number of small private schools fall short of expected standards in Ofsted inspections – yet remain open.

By claiming excellence, the private schools sector indirectly promotes the view that the state sector is second-rate, without acknowledging their financial and, for the majority of ISC schools, academically selected pupil body, nor three times on average resources. Nor studies showing they are not better at managing budgets than state schools. The claim of excellence therefore verges on an insult to the state school sector. Meanwhile, for state schools to emulate private schools, their budgets do not need to be trebled but they would undoubtedly require a lot more money.

10 See Green, F. and Kynaston, D. *Engines of Privilege*, Bloomsbury, pp 111-115.

11 <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/put-vat-on-school-fees-and-soak-the-rich-fmpjv2zd9>

7. Reformers are destroyers

Claim: Reformers are vindictive or misled in their calls for change

Fact check: Many reformers are seeking to build an education system for children which more closely matches the UK's twin principles of meritocracy and equality of opportunity

Press and publication examples:

- *'Any attempt to remove charitable status and associated tax advantages from private schools, or even worse, to abolish them, would be a phenomenal act of vandalism'*¹
- *The Scottish Government's decision to require private schools to pay business rates in full from September 2020 is a 'vindictive attack on education'*²
- *Shutting down private schools would be 'based on ignorance and the desire to damage'*³ or *'an act of national self-harm'*⁴

Evidence:

Proposals to reform Britain's private school system, whether modest or radical, are derided by private school defenders as careless, misled, irresponsible and even malicious.

If the UK holds itself, wherever possible as far as possible, to strive to uphold the principle of meritocracy and equality of opportunity, then the following reforms regarding the private school sector would be considered successful:

- significantly opening up private schools to make them far less socially exclusive
- reducing substantially the resources gap between private and state schools

A completely successful reform would make the schools open to all on a just footing, not related to familial background; and remove the resource gap altogether in the quest for equality of opportunity between children.

A partially successful reform would go some way to these goals.

Reform does not mean straightforwardly schools being closed, buildings abandoned or bulldozed, or mass redundancies of teachers. It is clear that some private schools are already finding they are financially unviable and closing.⁵ However reform efforts are seeking not to close schools, but to deploy the resources and places in private schools more efficiently and widely across communities.

1 <https://www.ft.com/content/f0e7b158-deb7-11e9-b112-9624ec9edc59>

2 <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/past-six-days/2019-03-27/scotland/vindictive-rate-reforms-set-to-cost-private-schools-millions-of-pounds-5gkdndjf0>

3 <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-49857748>

4 <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-7495247/Private-schools-warn-Labours-bid-abolish-ILLEGAL.html>

5 <https://www.tes.com/news/mass-closure-and-other-covid-threats-private-schools>

There are various types of reform:

- Some reforms would work by reducing the demand for private education. These include a tax on school fees, possibly supplemented by removing the benefits of being a charity. Alternatively, there could be “contextual admissions” to higher education, whereby access to universities is made easier for state school pupils. Either would induce some families and some private schools to join the state sector or close if their standards were found wanting. But the remaining, smaller private sector would be still more exclusive.
- Other reforms would involve directly bringing children together, who would otherwise be separated. Either a total or a partial integration of private and state schools, or perhaps a game-changing massive expansion of means-tested bursaries not linked to selection. But even with the radical case of total integration or mass conversion to the state sector – which could be regarded as a form of nationalisation – no demolition of buildings or facilities is envisaged. What are now private schools would still be there in the future after reform, but as academies or local authority schools.

Each road to reform has its pros and cons. Readers may consult PSPR’s first publication⁶, which goes into several possible options and their likely impacts. Though none is picked out as a favourite, one point is clear: reformers are seeking solutions to an issue of equality of opportunity and meritocracy that, when polled, the majority of the UK public believe is “unfair”.

8. The financial cost of reform

Claim: Reform will be prohibitively expensive for the government

Fact check: The expense is exaggerated and reforms also have the potential to raise money

Press and publication examples:

'Fee-paying schools' save the tax-payer £20 billion.¹

Headlined on the front page of the Times on April 26th 2019, this claim was repeated in the Sun² and The Daily Mail³. Later that year The Express⁴ stated that 'Labour private schools plot could cost taxpayers £7.5bn a year'.

Following investigation by the fact checking charity Full Fact⁵, the figure was reduced to £3.5 billion, though no correction reached the Times front page. These "savings" amount to a rough estimate as to how much extra it would cost the government if all schools were to become state schools.

To put this £3.5 billion figure in context, in 2017-18 the government spent £39 billion on the state schools budget. That made up 58 per cent of total government education spending in England. The government has announced £2.6 billion more for schools in 2020-21 alone, so it appears capable of spending more billions on state schools when it needs to. The state can afford this. Some suggested reforms even bring in money.

Evidence:

It is true that some reforms will involve additional spending. If a successful reform of private education comes about, there will be more pupils in the state education system. This will require a higher budget for the Department for Education.

Yet it is incorrect to imply that all reforms of private schooling will cost the Exchequer so much that it is an unabsorbable cost. Indeed, some reforms would bring in extra money.

- One widely discussed reform is that the government should levy VAT on school fees. This tax reform would reduce the demand for private school places, but not so much as to put more than a minority of private schools out of business. Rather than costing the taxpayer, after subtracting the cost of educating the estimated 30,000 pupils who would move to the state sector, this reform brings the Chancellor some £1.75 billion extra to play with.
- An alternative reform might involve tougher "contextual admissions" to universities. If restrictions made it more difficult for private school children to access places in prestigious universities, more children would switch to state schools. These extra places would add to the cost of the state education budget, without bringing in extra revenue. So: some additional cost for the Exchequer, but the extra is limited because admissions criteria could not be

1 <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/fee-paying-schools-save-billions-for-the-taxpayer-c8xzkf9ph>

2 <https://www.thesun.co.uk/news/8942594/private-schools-save-taxpayers-20billion/>

3 <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-6961855/Private-school-save-public-20bn-year-s-claimed.html>

4 <https://www.express.co.uk/news/politics/1186703/jeremy-corbyn-labour-party-general-election-policy-abolish-private-schools-taxpayer-cost>

5 <https://fullfact.org/education/times-front-page-error-independent-schools/>

loaded too far against private schools.

- The government spends at least £90 million a year⁶ paying for boarding school places in private schools for children of military and diplomatic staff. These children could be educated in state boarding schools at a fraction of the cost, bringing millions into the Exchequer (such as might go, for instance, towards the £170 million budget for feeding hungry pupils in the 2020 Christmas holidays.)
- If we are considering a wholesale nationalisation of private schooling across Britain, the ISC's figure of a net additional £3.5 billion per year across the UK is closer to the truth. PSPR's estimate is that the rough cost would be £2.3 billion in England per year – though there remain some unknowns because the wealth of private schools is not transparent.

Yet full nationalisation is just one of the reforms debated in 2019. It was adopted at the Labour Party conference, but not included in its manifesto for the December election. Other reforms would cost much less, or nothing at all, or bring in extra revenue.

6 <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/tory-ministers-private-school-fees-children-diplomats-military-mod-foreign-office-a9181211.html>

9. The human cost of reform

Claim: The effects of reform on private school children or their teachers make calls for significant reform callous or misled

Fact check: There are clear policy solutions to ensure pupils and teachers in all sectors are protected and can flourish

Press and publication examples:

- *‘Teachers who work in independent schools are considered a legitimate target in an educational shooting match’¹. The same article adds ‘little thought is given to the children that such policies will affect if these additional costs were imposed and schools began to close down.’*
- *In reform proposals ‘children are being drowned out and hung out to dry in the interests of ideology.’²*

With all reforms the interests of teachers and children of course should be considered.

As mentioned, one set of proposed reforms would lead over time to a reduced demand for private education – for example, taxing school fees, eliminating tax subsidies, or requiring prestigious universities to open up access to a wider social composition. Fewer parents would enrol their children at the start of each educational stage.

Under another set of proposals, part or all of the schools’ intake would become a wing of the state education system, with places allocated according to the local schools admissions code. Similarly, a very massive expansion of bursaries not linked to selection would bring in new pupils.

What, then, are the real implications of these reform proposals for private school teachers and children? In fact whatever the route to reform, there is no need for jobs to be lost. Nor will children’s education be disrupted in mid-stream. Under the most radical reform option of large-scale conversion of private schools to non-fee paying academies:

- The transition of the school composition would begin with the first year intakes, and thus be incremental through the school over several years. Some teachers’ jobs will change as they gradually come to teach a broader range of children, and they would need to be offered appropriate professional development opportunities. There is a robust and expanding demand for teachers across Britain.
- There is a pressing need for more school places in many parts of the country, and the Department for Education is struggling to find free school sites. Private schools that convert to the state sector could join a national effort to open their doors and grow in size to offer more children free local school places.

¹ <https://www.tes.com/news/why-wont-unions-defend-private-school-jobs>
² PSPR Manchester panel debate, 19.9.19 <https://www.privateschoolreform.co.uk/events>

- Previously privately educated children would mix with a somewhat different peer group, compared with the pre-reform segmented private sector, and they will enjoy less luxury than is currently afforded in today's average private school. Many children will gain access to good schools not previously available to them, as well as peers and friends from diverse socio-economic backgrounds.

Importantly, all reforms could be expected to have their effect gradually. Meanwhile small private schools already operating on extremely tight profit margins, with no reserves to draw on, are not sustainable long-term, reform or no reform. Talk of the supposedly cataclysmic effects on jobs and children for the average private school can be seen as amounting to scare-mongering.

10. Social engineering and discrimination against private school children

Claim: It is unfair and interventionist if universities favour disadvantaged applicants from state schools

Fact check: Applicants from state schools have had far fewer resources devoted to them

Press and publication examples:

- *'HMC urge universities not to discriminate against private schools',¹ and not to 'rob some students of a future to award it to others'²*
- *'Social engineering', and 'bias against private school pupils' is 'like Jews being discriminated against in Nazi Germany'³*

Evidence:

Claims about anti-private school discrimination in university entrance are long-standing but began in earnest in 2003 with private schools briefly boycotting Bristol University.

The irony of this claim is that for a very long time, in the days when only a small minority went to university, private schools were the guaranteed route to access to university – with some universities even having places earmarked for particular private schools.

This advantage still persists today:

- Research⁴ shows that, among those finishing their A levels in 2008–9, private school pupils in England still had a big advantage in university access: 88 per cent of them went to university, as compared with 67 percent of state school pupils.
- Some of this 21 point gap (see Table 3) arose because of differences in the grades attained and in family background. But even when these are taken fully into account, there is still a private school advantage of eight percentage points when comparing similar students. There is no sign of anti-private discrimination.
- There is also a private-state gap for getting into the prestigious “Russell Group” universities of 6 points.
- As discussed under the Model of Excellence fact check, private schools get more pupils into more prestigious universities because they have more resources to spend on more (including more specialist) teachers.
- When their pupils arrive at university, they no longer have the direct support of their school teachers, and perform slightly worse than their state-educated peers. As a HEFCE report found in 2014,⁵ “for all but those with the very highest A-level achievement, a clear separation in HE achievement between those who entered HE from an independent KS5 school and those entering from a state school”.

1 <https://ie-today.co.uk/Article/hmc-urge-universities-not-to-discriminate-against-private-schools/>

2 <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2020/jan/29/private-schools-criticise-plans-to-get-more-poor-students-into-university>

3 <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/education/education-news/private-school-pupils-jews-nazi-germany-stowe-school-anthony-wallersteiner-a8909351.html>

4 <https://discovery.ucl.ac.uk/id/eprint/10081809/>

5 HEFCE: Differences in Degree Outcomes: Key Findings: Higher Education Funding Council; 2014; p16.

Table 3

	Gap for all those starting A levels (% point)	Gap for students with similar A level grades and background (% point)
Any university	21	8
Russell Group university	19	6

In recent years, pressure for more open access to universities has prompted outreach policies to attract more applications from pupils from poorer backgrounds. Such students may be admitted with lower grades, but judged to be of equal potential.

As yet, such policies are used on too small a scale to counterbalance significantly the inequality in schooling that springs from the private-state gap in educational resources.

If the policies were substantially expanded, at that point prospective parents would have to think even more carefully than now before they enrol their children and commit to high fees.

Meanwhile, defendants of the private school sector who claim efforts to counterweight the advantage conferred by a better-resourced education are refusing to acknowledge the evidence which shows the average private school pupil currently has an easier time getting into top universities than pupils with the same academic outcomes. Such a situation affronts the principle of meritocracy.

11. Critics inciting envy

Claim: Reformers are stirring up envy and resentment

Fact check: Calling for greater justice is not seeking to stir up envy

Press and publications evidence:

- *Politicians [who criticise private schools exclusiveness] are seeking to ‘stir up the politics of envy’¹*
- *Proposing to tax private school fees is to ‘play the politics of envy card’²*
- *Those planning in 2017 to remove a tax subsidy for private schooling in Scotland had a ‘chip on their shoulder’³*

Evidence:

Bearing grudges and being envious of others’ successes and riches in a meritocratic society might well be regarded by some as reproachable. But there is no evidence that the critique of private schools is thus motivated. Rather than envy, a justified resentment can arise when people have been led to believe in a functioning meritocracy but sense unfairness. Indeed, evidence shows that people don’t mind inequality (some people have more than they do), as long as they sense the system is not stacked against them when it comes to bettering their position.

With Britain’s private schooling and education, we are dealing with a particular kind of unfairness.

- The issue is well expressed here in this opinion piece⁴: “Educations are not like cars. Your having a better car than me does nothing to make my car less worth having – except through feelings of envy. But your child’s having a better education than mine really does make my child’s education less valuable for her. Like it or not, much of the value of education is competitive ...’ In other words, the value of education is relative to what others have.
- When asked by survey company Populus, three in five agreed or strongly agreed with the statement ‘it is 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’. Fewer than one in five disagreed.
- There is less agreement on ways to reform private schools, but perhaps this is unsurprising given decades in which discussion of private schools and reform ideas has been rare and undeveloped.

Meanwhile some critics, whose own circumstances are quite well off or who went themselves through a private education, could have no personal reason to be envious of the rich or of the educationally successful. But the moral argument does not stand or fall on critics’ own circumstances or the choices they make for their families.

1 <https://www.hmc.org.uk/blog/top-private-school-headmaster-attacks-politics-envy/>

2 <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/debate/article-4388774/DAILY-MAIL-COMMENT-education-comes-holidays.html>

3 <https://www.heraldsotland.com/opinion/15783255.letters-chip-on-the-shoulder-behind-attack-on-independent-schools/>

4 <https://www.privateschoolreform.co.uk/opinion/adam-swift>

Columnist Frances Ryan regards ‘the politics of envy’ as a ‘retro’ accusation⁵. We agree with her assessment that: ‘In an era in which the damage of inequality is ever clearer and the movements to tackle it are growing stronger, those who cannot comprehend a desire to make life fairer for other people’s children sound increasingly out of touch’.

We would also urge that the other 10 recurring claims discussed above could now be set aside, and that a rational debate could ensue.

5 <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2019/sep/19/private-schools-britain-labour-unjust>