

August 2017

Privately failing their pupils?

A comparative analysis of leading private
schools and state schools



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Tom Richmond is a teacher at a Sixth Form College in London.

Before re-entering the classroom in January 2016, he spent almost a decade working on education, skills and welfare policy. From 2013 to 2015, he was a senior advisor to ministers at the Department for Education, including advising on accountability measures and funding for 16-19 education, apprenticeships and qualification reform. Prior to joining the Government, Tom worked in policy development and research across different sectors including roles at Pearson, G4S Welfare to Work and think-tanks such as Policy Exchange and the Social Market Foundation. He is also a regular contributor to the TES magazine on issues affecting schools and colleges.

INTRODUCTION

“A prestige service that secures their children a permanent positional edge in society at an effective 20 per cent discount” was how former Education Secretary Michael Gove described private schools in his excoriating newspaper column in February of this year.¹ For such a high-profile politician – and a Conservative one at that – to call for private schools to be stripped of their VAT exemption (which he labelled “egregious state support”) in a deliberate effort to “soak the rich” was remarkable in many ways, not least for its eschewing of the taboo around discussing private schools in political circles. No-one feels obliged to withhold their opinion of academies, Free Schools, grammar schools, funding issues or teacher recruitment, yet senior politicians from all parties seldom express their views on the role that private schools could or should play in our education system. Sir Michael Wilshaw felt less constrained than others during his time as Chief Inspector at OFSTED, claiming that independent schools were “marooned on an island of privilege”,² yet this was still a rare intervention.

When the Department for Education (DfE) published their consultation on how to create more good school places in September 2016, they were less direct in their criticism of the contribution made by private schools. Nonetheless, the very fact that the consultation floated ideas such as private schools being forced to sponsor academies, set up free schools or offer more bursaries, coupled with the threat of losing their charitable status if they did not comply, was a bold position by historical standards. The re-emergence of these plans in the 2017 Conservative Party manifesto made it clear that the Government is not planning to let this issue lie. The subtext that runs through these proposals is obvious enough: state education would benefit from greater involvement of private schools because private schools are better than state schools. Why else would ministers want private institutions to play a wider role in our education system?

Perhaps unsurprisingly, many private school leaders agree with such sentiments. Last year, the headmaster of Brighton College (where places cost more than £35,000 a year) called for a royal commission into state education because England’s schools are “simply not good enough”. His remarks left little room for doubt about his views on the value of a private education: “we know that a boy or a girl in our [independent] schools is more likely to get top grades; more likely to go to a top university; more likely to get a good job; more likely to earn a good salary; even more likely to play cricket or rugby for England.”³ A damning verdict, and he is not the only leader in the sector to publicly air their views. Julie Robinson, general secretary of the Independent Schools Council (ISC) that represents around half of independent schools in the UK, recently declared that “independent schools offer an outstanding education that prepares [pupils] well for the demands of a competitive economy, a tough jobs market and a global world.”⁴ Moreover, Barnaby Lenon, chair of the ISC, said last year that “private schools are competing against the highest performing state schools – and often winning”, adding that “our results and university entry have never been better.”⁵ Chris King, head of independent school Leicester Grammar, went a step further and slammed critics of private schools, suggesting that they should stop “indulging in toffism” and accept the “positive contribution” that the independent sector can make to education.⁶

Crucially, parents appear to side with private schools on this matter. A recent survey of those who had sent a child to private school found that the most frequently selected factor behind their decision (identified as ‘very important’ or ‘fairly important’ by every single respondent) was “high quality teaching”. 34% of respondents selected this as the single most important factor influencing their choice.⁷ These findings may help explain why the competition for places at some institutions remains as ferocious as ever, with reports emerging of parents applying for 5-10 private schools for their child

as well as paying non-refundable deposits of up to £1,600 for places that their children may never take up.⁸ The ISC reported in April 2017 that over 520,000 pupils now attend independent schools – the highest since records began – and this number continues to rise.⁹

The perception that private schools deliver a better standard of education than state schools seems to be deeply engrained in the minds of aspiring parents and presumably their children too. As a result, private schools have been put on a pedestal by voters and politicians for many years, if not decades. They remain popular and are perceived to be the best source of a quality education by virtue of the standard of teaching that they are thought to offer.

All of this raises a deceptively simple question: are private schools as good as people think they are?

OPTIONS FOR COMPARING PRIVATE AND STATE SCHOOLS

When analysing the performance of state schools, there is a plethora of data sources available (particularly at secondary level). When it comes to comparing private schools with their state counterparts, the picture is not so straightforward. While OFSTED publish inspection reports on almost all state-funded institutions they are only responsible for inspecting around half of independent schools, so we cannot draw conclusions about the independent sector as a whole from their findings. Independent schools are also not required to enter pupils for national curriculum assessments at age 11 (known as 'SATs'), which poses two problems. First, we do not know how their pupils are performing at the end of the primary phase. Second, we do not have a baseline score for calculating pupil progress from age 11 to 16 – which is the basis of the new 'Progress 8' accountability measure used by the Government to assess the academic performance of state schools. If we cannot use OFSTED reports, SATs exams or Progress 8 to compare private and state schools, where else can we turn?

When Barnaby Lenon staunchly defended the performance of private schools last year, he made an interesting observation that was not given the attention it merited at the time: “newspapers and schools’ guides nearly always judge schools by their raw results. We all know that parents should be more interested in the exam value-added score – a truer measure of the impact of teaching.” This is true. It is well established in the research literature that a school’s performance in national examinations is largely (although not entirely) a reflection of the characteristics of their pupils. For example, schools that have more pupils from poorer backgrounds or more pupils for whom English is not their first language generally do worse in examinations, but this does not necessarily mean the school failed to teach them well. The new Progress 8 measure for state schools aims to get around this obstacle by comparing pupils of the same ability level around the country, meaning that the Government can measure how much ‘progress’ similar pupils make in different schools – thereby giving a good indication of how effectively they are being taught. Although Progress 8 is not without its critics, the emphasis on how much progress pupils make during their time at any given school produces a much healthier dialogue about whether schools are serving their pupils well as opposed to raw examination results that say little, if anything, useful about the quality of a school.

Without Progress 8 data for independent schools it is not possible to make direct comparisons of the progress made by pupils attending private and state schools up to the age of 16. However, the Government also publish data on how much progress pupils make from the ages of 16 to 18 because examinations such as GCSEs and A-levels are sat across all types of institutions. Consequently, this dataset of progress from 16-18 offers what may be the only level playing field in our education system when it comes to comparing private and state schools, and it will therefore form the basis of this analysis.

PERFORMANCE OF PRIVATE SCHOOLS IN EXAMINATIONS

One of the reasons that private schools are held in such high regard is that whenever the summer examination results are published, these institutions utterly dominate the league tables published by newspapers. The following feats were achieved by private schools in A-level examinations last summer:

- Only three schools in the entire country achieved an average grade of **A+** across all their A-level entries. All three were private schools.
- The top 10 institutions in the country, judged by the average points achieved for each A-level entry across all subjects, were all private schools.
- 81 institutions achieved an average grade of **A-** or above across all their A-level entries. 69 of them were private schools.

These are staggering feats by any measure. That said, as discussed earlier it is not necessarily meaningful to look at raw examination results because the majority of pupils attending private school are likely to be relatively affluent compared to state-educated pupils. This means that the performance of private schools could simply be a reflection of the disproportionately wealthy and educated backgrounds of their pupils rather than anything that the schools themselves are delivering. To get around this problem, we can assess the **progress ('value-added') score** for pupils attending private schools and state schools in terms of their academic performance at the ages of 16 and 18.¹⁰

This progress score is calculated using achievement at Key Stage 4 (generally GCSE results) as a benchmark. It is a 'value-added' measure showing the progress made by individual pupils compared with the average progress made by all pupils nationally who had the same level of prior achievement i.e. the same GCSE results. It aims to show whether students in a school or college have made better (positive), worse (negative) or the same amount of progress as the national average. This score is reported as a proportion of a grade above or below the national average. A progress score of zero means that pupils are making progress from their GCSE results to their A-level results in line with the national average for all pupils.

On average, students at private schools across the country have a progress score of **+0.07** compared to **-0.07** for students at state-funded schools and colleges. While this means that students at private schools are progressing slightly better than those at state schools, the gap between them is incredibly small as the additional progress made at private schools is equivalent to just 0.07 of one A-level grade. Bearing in mind that the average fee for attending a private school sixth form is now around £14,500 a year¹¹ - over three times what the Government pays for students to attend a state-run sixth form¹² - this looks like a very poor return.

One possible explanation for these results is that it does not reflect the very best of what the private sector has to offer because it is an average progress score for all private schools rather than the most prestigious and high-achieving institutions that the Government wants to involve more in supporting state education. Let us therefore turn our attention to those private schools who achieved the highest A-level grades.

PROGRESS SCORES OF PRIVATE AND STATE SCHOOLS

The main method used by the Government to judge examination results at A-level is a points-based system, with a maximum score of 60 points for an A* grade in each A-level entry, 50 points for an A, 40 points for a B and so on. The average points awarded for each A-level at a school or college can then be converted into an average grade per A-level entry e.g. A+ is awarded to any institution with an average point score of 52-60, A is awarded for an average score of 48-52 etc.

As mentioned earlier, if you look at the national table of schools and colleges in England the ten highest performers in terms of the average points awarded across all their A-level entries last year were invariably private schools:

NAME OF SCHOOL	GENDER	NUMBER OF STUDENTS TAKING AT LEAST ONE A-LEVEL	AVERAGE POINT SCORE PER A-LEVEL ENTRY (AVERAGE GRADE)
1. St Paul's Girls' School	Girls	105	54.44 (A+)
2. Westminster School	Mixed	191	52.78 (A+)
3. Magdalen College School	Mixed	176	52.46 (A+)
4. Wycombe Abbey School	Girls	92	51.64 (A)
5. St Paul's School	Boys	191	51.61 (A)
6. North London Collegiate School	Girls	118	50.99 (A)
7. Concord College	Mixed	183	50.97 (A)
8. James Allen's Girls' School	Girls	100	50.75 (A)
9. Queen Ethelburga's College	Mixed	149	50.72 (A)
10. Eton College	Boys	276	50.72 (A)

Impressive as this appears, when you place progress scores alongside the raw examination results a very different picture emerges. Remember that these scores compare the progress made by students from their GCSEs to their A-levels against pupils in other schools who achieved the same GCSE results, so we can see whether pupils at these supposedly leading private schools are making better or worse progress than you would expect against the national average:

NAME OF SCHOOL	AVERAGE POINT SCORE PER A-LEVEL ENTRY (AVERAGE GRADE)	A-LEVEL PROGRESS / VALUE-ADDED SCORE
1. St Paul's Girls' School	54.44 (A+)	+0.23
2. Westminster School	52.78 (A+)	+0.06
3. Magdalen College School	52.46 (A+)	+0.31
4. Wycombe Abbey School	51.64 (A)	+0.11
5. St Paul's School	51.61 (A)	+0.24
6. North London Collegiate School	50.99 (A)	-0.09
7. Concord College	50.97 (A)	+0.15
8. James Allen's Girls' School	50.75 (A)	+0.13
9. Queen Ethelburga's College	50.72 (A)	+0.57
10. Eton College	50.72 (A)	+0.17

We can see that some private schools such as St Paul's and Magdalen College appear to be supporting their students effectively as they progress from GCSEs to A-levels because they are achieving about a quarter to a third of an A-level grade higher than the average progress made by similar students across England. What this table also demonstrates, though, is that some high-achieving private schools are performing very close to, or even below, the national average when it comes to the progress of their students from GCSEs to A-levels. For example, the negative progress score achieved by North London Collegiate School means that their students are, on average, performing worse at A-level than students at other schools who achieved the same GCSE results. North London Collegiate School is not the only high-achieving private school to be performing at such a low level - almost one in three private schools in England have progress scores of zero or below, including many that have high average point scores:

NAME OF SCHOOL	AVERAGE POINT SCORE PER A-LEVEL ENTRY (AVERAGE GRADE)	A-LEVEL PROGRESS / VALUE-ADDED SCORE	ANNUAL FEE ¹³
North London Collegiate School	50.99 (A)	-0.09	£19,635
King's College School, London	48.78 (A)	-0.05	£20,985
Tonbridge School	48.43 (A)	-0.04	£29,229
Cheltenham Ladies' College	47.85 (A-)	0.00	£23,910
Badminton School	47.17 (A-)	-0.04	£16,185
Wimbledon High School	46.77 (A-)	-0.04	£18,105
South Hampstead High School	46.33 (A-)	0.00	£17,853
Dulwich College	45.47 (A-)	-0.05	£19,662
The Manchester Grammar School	45.41 (A-)	-0.16	£11,970
Trinity School, Croydon	44.24 (B+)	-0.13	£16,656

These schools charge parents thousands of pounds a term for the education they provide, yet in some cases there appears to be little or no academic benefit for the students concerned. For private schools at the top of the national league tables for raw examination results to be performing so badly that their students may have been better off going elsewhere to complete their A-levels is a truly remarkable situation.

Even if some high-achieving private schools are not delivering a good standard of education, this could potentially be the case for high-achieving schools in the state sector too. Given that some state-funded schools are selective, the fairest approach is to compare the progress made by pupils at three types of schools for 11 to 18-year-olds: **independent**, **state selective** and **state non-selective** (essentially comprehensives).

The table below shows the average A-level point score for the 10 highest-achieving schools within each institution type (in terms of average points per A-level entry) as well as the average progress score for those same 10 schools in each category.¹⁴

TYPE OF INSTITUTION	AVERAGE POINT SCORE PER A-LEVEL ENTRY FOR TOP 10 SCHOOLS	A-LEVEL PROGRESS / VALUE-ADDED SCORE FOR TOP 10 SCHOOLS
Independent	51.71	+0.19
State (selective)	47.69	+0.14
State (non-selective)	41.29	+0.26

As you might expect independent schools have the highest average point scores at A-level, while state selective schools outperform state non-selective schools. However, the progress scores tell an entirely different story. When you compare the highest-achieving private schools, state selective schools and state comprehensive schools on the amount of progress that pupils make, it is the comprehensive schools that deliver the most progress for their pupils – equivalent to a quarter of an A-level grade more progress than the national average. Although leading private and state selective schools also produce progress scores above the national average, their performance is not as impressive as that of the leading comprehensives.

To ensure that this is not a statistical quirk produced by only focusing on the ten highest-achieving schools, the same comparison can be made for the top 20 and top 50 highest-achieving schools within each type of institution:

TYPE OF INSTITUTION	A-LEVEL PROGRESS / VALUE-ADDED SCORES FOR HIGHEST-ACHIEVING SCHOOLS WITHIN EACH TYPE OF INSTITUTION		
	TOP 10	TOP 20	TOP 50
Independent	+0.19	+0.17	+0.15
State (selective)	+0.14	+0.10	+0.06
State (non-selective)	+0.26	+0.26	+0.20

One might argue that private schools get better examination results than state schools so they have less ‘room at the top’ for achieving high progress scores. To address this, we can compare the different types of institutions at a level where they all registered the same examination results and then assess their respective progress scores. As no state non-selective school achieved higher than an average grade of B+ in their examination entries last summer and only a handful of private schools achieved an average grade of D+ or lower, the fairest point to compare the different types of school is to focus on those that achieved an average grade of a B or C and then look at the progress scores across the three types of institution:

TYPE OF INSTITUTION	A-LEVEL PROGRESS / VALUE-ADDED SCORES FOR SCHOOLS ACHIEVING SPECIFIC AVERAGE GRADES (NUMBER OF SCHOOLS)	
	B+ / B / B-	C+ / C / C-
Independent	+0.14 (302)	-0.06 (146)
State (selective)	+0.02 (108)	-0.05 (51)
State (non-selective)	+0.19 (80)	0.00 (1162)

This table demonstrates that when you compare different types of schools that produce the same examination results, the students at state non-selective schools have made the most progress yet again. This is another strong indication that the quality of teaching and learning taking place in state comprehensives is better than that being offered in the independent sector and indeed in state selective schools too.

In summary, the pattern is clear: the top state comprehensives deliver more progress for their students than the top private schools and state selective schools – and they deliver this additional progress without charging parents thousands of pounds a term.

CONCLUSION

An aura of rigour and quality has surrounded private schools for many years. This has subsequently become embedded in the minds of parents, politicians, pupils and no doubt many others. When the state sector is deemed to require additional support, it is the private sector that politicians turn to for their supposed expertise and knowledge. In light of this, it seems prudent to ask whether private schools deserve their reputation for high-quality teaching. Seeing as the chair of the ISC declared last year that “parents should be more interested in the exam value-added score – a truer measure of the impact of teaching”, this paper has taken his advice and used the Government’s value-added data to analyse the impact of teaching in the leading private schools and state schools.

This new analysis shows that, while some private schools do a good job of educating children and young people, many do not. Given the Government’s commitment to forcing the private sector to become more involved in assisting state schools, it is somewhat alarming that the top state comprehensives seem to be delivering a better standard of education than the top private schools for a fraction of the cost. When the veil of impressive examination results and league table dominance of private schools is lifted, what you find underneath is an independent sector that contains a substantial number of poorly-performing institutions – including some schools that produce large numbers of top grades at A-level. For these schools to continue charging parents as much as £30,000 a year when the best data available shows that their progress scores place them in the bottom half of schools nationally is verging on scandalous.

It is hoped that the scrutiny provided by this paper shines a much-needed light on the performance of private schools, and in doing so prompts a serious discussion about whether state schools have anything to learn about high-quality teaching and learning from the independent sector. Despite the astronomical fees and enduring reverence that they command, many private schools appear to be failing their pupils and even some of the highest-achieving private schools are being surpassed by the top schools from the state sector. This is an important message for everyone who cares about education in this country. Furthermore, it suggests that our view of private schools may need to change, and change fast.

REFERENCES

- ¹ THE TIMES (2017). *Put VAT on school fees and soak the rich*. Comment article. 24th February. Available at <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/put-vat-on-school-fees-and-soak-the-rich-fmpjv2zd9>
- ² TES (2014). *Private schools contribute almost £12 billion a year to British economy, report finds*. News article. 2nd April. Available at <https://www.tes.com/news/school-news/breaking-news/private-schools-contribute-almost-£12-billion-a-year-british-economy>
- ³ TES (2016). *Government must launch a royal commission into 'failing' state system, says private school head*. News article. 4th May. Available at <https://www.tes.com/news/school-news/breaking-news/government-must-launch-a-royal-commission-failing-state-system-says>
- ⁴ TES (2015). *'There is good reason that the independent sector is in such rude health'*. Comment article. 1st May. Available at <https://www.tes.com/news/school-news/breaking-views/there-good-reason-independent-sector-such-rude-health>
- ⁵ TES (2016). *'Private schools are competing against the highest performing state schools – and often winning. This is nothing new'*. Comment article. 10th February. Available at <https://www.tes.com/news/school-news/breaking-views/private-schools-are-competing-against-highest-performing-state>
- ⁶ TES (2015). *Stop 'indulging in toffism', says private school head*. News article. 6th October. Available at <https://www.tes.com/news/school-news/breaking-news/stop-indulging-toffism-says-private-school-head>
- ⁷ FRANCIS, B. & HUTCHINGS, M. (2013). *Parent Power?*. Report. 18th December. London: Sutton Trust. Available at <https://www.suttontrust.com/research-paper/parent-power/>
- ⁸ TES (2016). *Exclusive: Families spending thousands applying to 'up to nine private schools'*. News article. 11th March. Available at <https://www.tes.com/news/school-news/breaking-news/exclusive-families-spending-thousands-applying-nine-private-schools>
- ⁹ INDEPENDENT SCHOOLS COUNCIL (2017). *ISC Annual Census 2017*. Report. 28th April. Available at <https://www.isc.co.uk/research/annual-census/>
- ¹⁰ The data used in this analysis is from the school and college performance information published in January 2017, which covers examination results from the summer of 2016. This includes the academic progress made by pupils from their GCSEs (or equivalent qualifications) at age 16 to their A-level results at age 18 across England. Qualifications other than A-levels (e.g. International Baccalaureate results) have been excluded for the sake of fairness and transparency when comparing across types of institutions. Special Schools (both state and private) have also been excluded due to their divergent pupil characteristics.
- ¹¹ INDEPENDENT SCHOOLS COUNCIL (2017). *ISC Annual Census 2017*. Report. 28th April. Available at <https://www.isc.co.uk/research/annual-census/>
- ¹² INSTITUTE FOR FISCAL STUDIES (2017). *Long-run comparisons of spending per pupil across different stages of education*. London: IFS. Available at <https://www.ifs.org.uk/uploads/publications/comms/R126.pdf>
- ¹³ Calculated by multiplying the termly fees for day attendance at the senior school by 3.
- ¹⁴ Only schools that educate pupils from age 11/12 to age 18 are included in these tables, meaning that institutions such as colleges and 16-19 Free Schools do not feature because their additional admissions systems at age 16 would potentially distort the comparison. Partially selective state schools and bilateral state schools have also been excluded because their admissions systems fall in between those of fully selective and non-selective institutions, which could similarly distort the analysis. Secondary Moderns have been classed as 'State non-selective'.